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## **HEARING THE VOICE OF WOMEN WORKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**By M.C. Cloete**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Early childhood development (ECD) has the potential to change society. Researchers globally recognise the importance of early intervention on children's overall well-being and development, impacting their personality and social behaviour. When developing policies to support early childhood development, some questions arise regarding the implementation's practicality. The National Integrated Development Plan for Early Childhood Development in South Africa aims to transform ECD service delivery in South Africa to address critical gaps and ensure comprehensive, universally available, and equitable early childhood development services. Providing quality places for care and education for children between the ages of 0-7 years is emphasised as a critical component of the overall plan toward eradicating poverty. Research indicates that the lack of quality ECD learning environments is one of the critical challenges impacting negatively on achieving the intended transformation.

This research paper explores the experiences of the principals and teachers of a selection of 8 ECD centres situated in Outerwest eThekweni. The research is conducted through a theoretical lens of spatial justice for ECD children and their teachers/carers in South Africa. The study is framed within the ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner, providing an understanding of the complexity of their context. The research design follows a constructivist approach of interviews and participation, enabling voice to a marginalised group within an interpretive/transformational paradigm. The research findings expose the multiple levels of inequality and the resilience of the women who serve the ECD sector in South Africa.

**KEY WORDS** Women's Voice, Early Childhood Development, Learning Environment, Spatial Justice

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector in South Africa is severely underserved, with several challenges contradicting the high ideal set by the Integrated Development Plan for ECD (2015) (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Atmore et al., 2012b). This paper explores the problem from the women's lived experiences committed to transforming society through child development. The study includes two high socio-economic and six low socio-economic ECD centres in the Outer-West of eThekweni (Durban), in KwaZulu-Natal. The research aimed to gain a deeper understanding through the voice of women in the ECD sector towards impacting the quality of their learning environment.

The research problem considers how the learning environment in which children spend most of their time away from home impacts the quality of their childhood development (Dudek, 2005; Day, 2007; Hertzberger, 2008; Cleveland and Fisher, 2014; Barrett et al., 2019). Children in their early years are at the height of the perceptual experience placing a greater need to consider how these experiences can contribute positively to their growth and development (Berti et al., 2019; Christopher Day & Midbjer, 2007). However, the way the policy framework in South Africa requires the ECD provider to establish the infrastructure on their own without government funding leaves these centres in a precarious position to source funding. The government's limited understanding of the role of the learning environment (LE) in their drive towards the transformation of early childhood development is a cause for stunting rather than growth in the ECD sector (Atmore, 2023) and through a rights based perspective could be defined as discrimination (Fredman et al., 2022).

This research paper extracts one component from a more extensive study investigating the quality of the LE of these eight ECD centres. The study included a range of methodologies from an architectural survey, environmental

quality assessment and class observations following internationally recognised approaches to LE research (Barrett et al., 2015; Matthews & Lippman, 2016). The findings indicate how the policy framework is continuing inequality of the marginalised groups. The women articulated a clear understanding of the critical role of ECD and their role in the drive towards transformation. The findings further present how the women are frustrated with the limitations posed by the policy and limitation to resources. However, it is evident how they become innovative and resourceful in overcoming the challenges they face. The ECD sector are hanging in the balance as they depend on the support and resources the NGOs, NPO and faith-based organisations to continue providing ECD services. The findings indicate how the status of ECD centre LE does not support Inclusion for all the children of eThekweni.

## 2. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Learning Environments (LE) are the milieu or place of education and describe the spaces where formal education is provided. In the case of early childhood development, this would include children's care and development. In his seminal text, Canter (1974) argued that child development is critical in the design of the built environment. He provides two perspectives: the difference between children and adults and the requirement for buildings (environments) to support the various ways the developing child can be kept in their journey toward adulthood. Day (2007) builds on the same argument regarding the difference between children and adults. Architectural researchers relating to architectural design for children work within the assumption that the environment a child finds themselves in directly impacts their development. (Dudek, 2005; Hertzberger, 2008; Lippman, 2010; Nair & Fielding, 2005)

Earlier research by Wilson (1997) considers Place's role in children's development. Critical to his views is

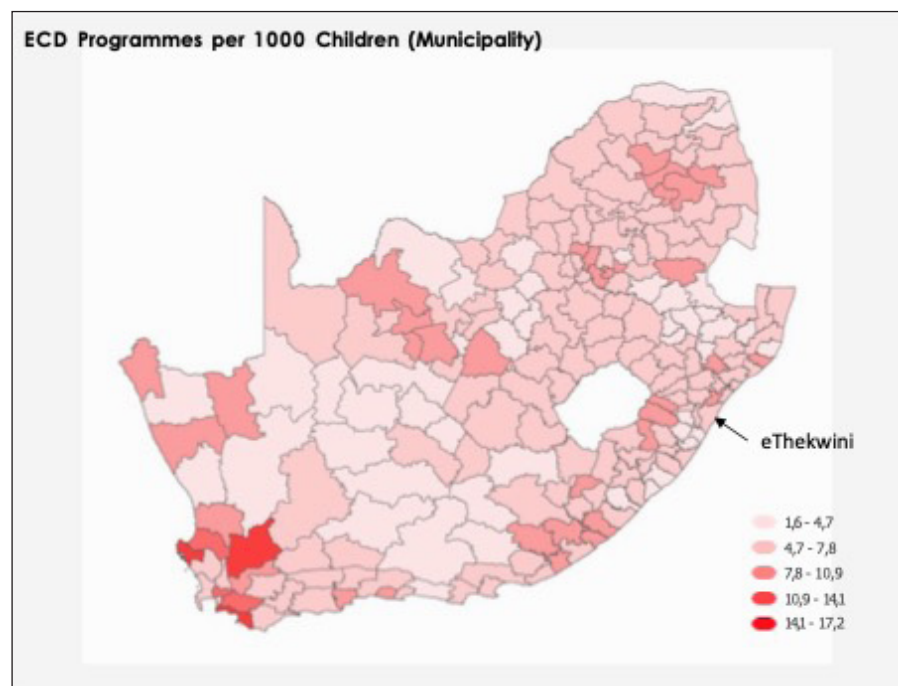
comparing the child's environment to their cultural setting, which shapes the adults they become. Within the child's environment, we can distinguish between those providing a stage for positive development and those that do not. Moreover, the argument from Learning Environment Research emphasise the critical role of the physical environment in achieving quality child development (Adlerstein & Cortazar, 2022; Berti et al., 2019; Matthews & Lippman, 2020). High quality ECD can benefit all children but even more so those from disadvantaged context but these children are enrolled in classrooms with lower quality level, thus limiting their developmental trajectory (Aguiar & Aguiar, 2020; Boyden et al., 2019).

ECD is internationally recognised to have the potential to transform society (Francesconi & Heckman, 2016) through early intervention. Similar to most developing nations the South African (SA) policy framework aims to provide quality ECD to all children, which aligns with the Rights for the Child Charter and the Sustainable Development Goals (Atmore, 2018; Engle et al., 2007). The National Integrated Development Plan for ECD (2015) stipulates the requirements for providing quality learning environments by setting criteria for physical learning spaces. These requirements that include creating safe and healthy spaces and stimulating spaces encouraging exploration and a sense of place and belonging are aligned with internationally recognised best practice (Adlerstein & Cortazar, 2022; Biersteker et al., 2016; Haddad, 2002). A further condition considers the need for equity of access to remote, underserved areas and children with disabilities, which aligns with a Rights Based approach to developed.

Tracing the positioning of young children in SA since the early 2000s, with the implementation the Education White Paper 5 (2005) which introduced formalised early learning, there has been an increase in ECD programmes targeting disadvantaged communities. A comparison of the nationwide Audit

of ECD Provision of 2001 (Williams & Samuels, 2001) and the ECD census 2021 (Department of Basic Education, 2022) suggests that ECD in South Africa are on track with numbers in 2001 at 23,482 ECD centres increased to indicate a total of 42420 Early Learning Programmes in 2022. At a Provincial and Municipal level, the detailed findings of the Census indicate that many children can still not access any ECD programme. The results, as shown in Fig 1, revealed a severe shortage of ECD centres in relation to the population of young children in eThekweni. Similarly, the number of children enrolled accounts for only 17-26% of the child population in the municipal area.

**FIGURE 1 - NUMBER OF ECD CENTRES PER 1000 CHILDREN. (DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION, 2022)**



Throughout the past two decades researchers and activists have published reviews focussing on the progress and challenges of the ECD sector towards transformation. Researchers agree on the primary aim of government to focus on ECD and the critical aspect is confirmed to provide equal access to quality ECD for all children in South Africa. The major challenges identified to have impacted young children since 1994 include Poverty, Education, Health and HIV/Aids (Atmore et al., 2012a) and more recently the Covid-19 Pandemic (Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2021). These challenges emerge as interconnected where children living in poverty is still the most affected as reported in the most recent data (Department of Basic Education, 2022; Tredoux et al., 2023)

The challenges facing early learning includes Government Funding, Teacher Training, Enrolment numbers, ECD programmes, Registration Status, Conditions of Infrastructure and the Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Atmore, 2018; Biersteker et al., 2016; Nelly & Matjokana, 2023; O’Keeffe et al., 2022). Unpacking some of these challenges indicated how the ideals of the policy are consistently negated. Focusing on the limitations to quality learning environments the Policy requirements for registration of ECD centres that are determined by achieving minimum standards (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019). However only through registration access to government funding are established based on the number of children the centre can accommodate. In turn these numbers are determined by minimum space requirements per child and the number of toilets available per the National Building Regulations. Furthermore, as a rule, Government funding does not provide for building or upgrading of centres, which

is left to the service provider (Atmore et al., 2012a; Sotuku et al., 2016).

The limitations in the funding inherently leads to extend the number of unregistered centres and poor-quality infrastructure in disadvantaged areas (Nelly & Matjokana, 2023). Atmore, (2018) elaborates on this point stating there if no formal government funding mechanism towards ECD for 0-4 years even though the allocation of conditional grants targets poor children, however this funding is dependent on the registration status of the ECD centre. Therefore, it becomes evident how the most disadvantaged children are impacted most severely leading towards a continuation of the poverty cycle.

The broader research project, therefore, explored the ECD LE in a select group of ECD centres to achieve the policy ideals of access to quality learning environments. In this paper, 14 women from the centres’ voices provide deeper insights into their lived experience of their LE.

### 3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical and conceptual framework applied to this paper is Spatial Justice and the Ecological Systems Theory.

#### Spatial Justice

Lefebvre’s seminal work (Lefebvre, 1991) considers how every individual has a right to the city. Cities represent opportunity and bring their inhabitants services and basic needs, such as education and development (Soja, 2010). The concept acknowledges the interrelationship between people and space while advocating for marginalised communities’ rights. Lefebvre (2011) argued that space is a social product related to our daily activities. Therefore, the control of this social production of space is redirected towards everyone (Mahmoud & Elrahman, 2014).

The relationship between children and the environment, justice and rights seems to be a multidisciplinary effort which includes geographers, environmental psychologists, socialists, urbanists and architects. Cele (2008) comments on the lack of a theoretical stance by environmental psychologists who aim to improve spaces for children by knowing how children understand and experience space and advocating for participation in making their environments with children's rights activists. However, the conceptual understanding of childhood and the position of children in the world is directly related to how children's spaces are constructed (Bollig & Millei, 2018). Considering this embedded space and childhood relationship underscores the need for social and spatial justice towards children, their care and holistic development to be interconnected to their spaces.

Within this construct of children's space as a position of childhood, the institutionalisation of ECD can be seen as regulation and control rather than the space of freedom intended. However, through pedagogic approaches based on child-directed play/learning and recent developments in research and practice lending voice and agency to children, the potential of the original kindergarten may be found as a form of spatial justice for children (Bollig & Millei, 2018).

### 3.1. Ecological Systems Theory

The exploration of the interrelatedness between the development of children and their context is best understood through the Ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) The theory was developed through a systems thinking approach to child development, where the interrelatedness of parts to whole and various systems at various scales provide a framework for the ecological model. The model considers context as an ecology of physical, social and cultural realms. Critical to the theory is the interrelated nature of the relationship between the system and the developing child. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) argues

that "the developing person is viewed not merely as a tabula rasa on which the environment makes its impact, but as a growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides." (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 21). Thus, the development process is recognised to be two-directional between child and their context (Ferguson et al. 2013)

The ecological model is conceived to represent a range of scales of context working from the immediate (Micro) through a Meso (system of micro contexts) towards the systems where the child is not actively present but still impacted, Exo, and Macro at the broadest level representing the given societal contexts. The Chronosystem brings the dimension of change into the ecological model. These may include a change at the micro level in the immediate family through to the broader influences at the macro level, such as natural disasters or the recent Covid Pandemic.

## 4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research was positioned within the interpretive/constructivist research paradigms. Mitchell (2011) argues that the interpretive/constructivist worldview allows knowledge to be co-constructed between the researcher and the participants. My approach was to combine participatory and non-participatory data collection in a staggered process toward the co-construction of the knowledge.

The research design included a build-up of my getting to know the participants on an informal basis over time while conducting the non-participatory observations before conducting the interviews and class observations. During the extended process of visiting the ECD centres and talking with the participants, the need for transformation at a higher level became evident. The unstructured interviews kept referring to funding and the lack of governmental support, which was later confirmed through literature and policy as discussed above.

From this experience and knowledge gained, it became evident that the most appropriate worldview for research that aims to critique and transform society is the Transformative Paradigm (Mertens, 2007, 2010; Creswell and Creswell, 2018) which aligned with the theoretical framing of the Ecological Systems and Spatial Justice.

This study captures the lived experiences of the women who own, manage and teach in the ECD centres. The journey of developing their ECD centre indicates resilience through the need to make do or adapt to make the best of a poor situation. Secondly, the unequal relationships and inequalities based on their minority status form a focus of the research. Third, inequalities or marginalisation are directly linked to political and social action. In this study, the unequal relationship and inequalities are at two levels. First, the relationship between Government Departments and the ECD sector is unequal, with the ECD sector constantly left to fend for itself. And second, although more subtle, the support from various voluntary groups (Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Faith-based groups) still tends towards unequal relations due to the minimising of their voice.

The research design can be described as an inquiry procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following the tradition of architectural research, a case study design was selected. (Lucas, 2016) However, due to the complexity contained in the research problem, more than a single case study would be needed to provide sufficient evidence for the research. The research design had to bring together the range of built forms and types of infrastructure that support the ECD sector in South Africa. The collective comparative case study design seemed the most appropriate method to capture the diversity in the learning environments.

The selection of the case study sites was purposive (Privitera, 2017), with two affluent and six disadvantaged centres. All the centres are located within the same geographical region. The six centres in the low-socioeconomic context have an established relationship with an NGO, which also has a relationship with one of the high-socioeconomic areas. Time was taken to access each research site; these followed a detailed, non-technical and clear explanation of the research and what would be expected of the participants. Participation was voluntary, and the required informed consent letter was signed. The Humanities Ethical Board approved the research proposal and ethical application in 2020.

The interviews as an data collection instrument to allow for a co-construct and to give voice to the women who manage or teach in the ECD centre. Berti, Cigala and Sharmahd, (2019) report the use of semi-structured interview as often used and an effective tool to obtain the perceptions of teachers in learning environment research. The flexibility of the unstructured interview enables the researcher to establish areas of interest while providing some control to the interviewee (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003; Creswell, 2012). To further the co-construct and social justice to of the research, the principal of each research site was asked to identify the teacher(s) to be interviewed. The teacher interviews were primarily to access their views and experience of the learning environment. The discussion started with a broader picture of the person and her experience before leading into the research topic.

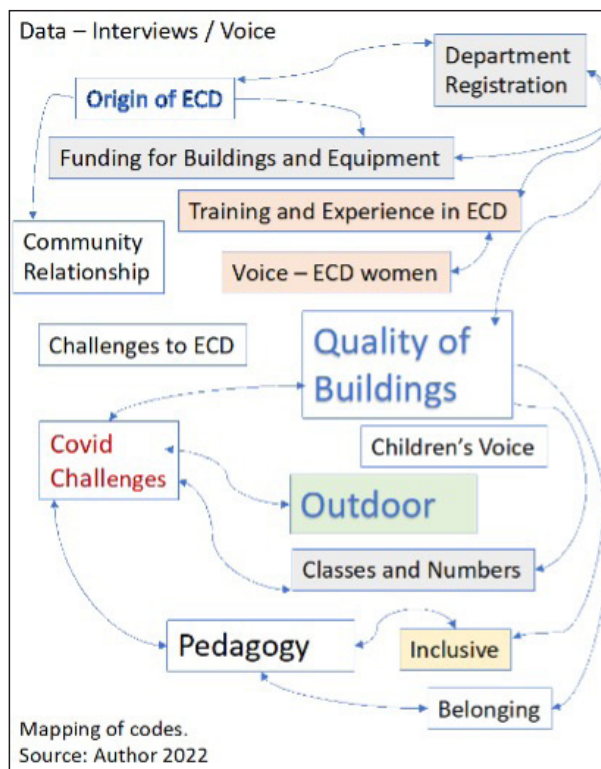
The interviews aimed to access the views and perceptions of the learning environments and their pedagogic approaches. The unstructured nature of the interview gave voice to the story of each ECD centre's development and how the centre fits into its context. I used some prompts to steer the discussion within the frame of the research problem to consider the physical environment and its appropriateness as an ECD learning environment.

The interviews were transcribed to create a narrative for each participant. Each description was analysed thematically in relation to the literature review using de deductive coding. Relationships between the codes were identified to group similar categories. Following the theoretical framework of the Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) the categorised codes could be positioned to consider Macro, Meso, Micro and Chrono system themes. I found the application of the ecological systems theory to be a common framework in the exploration of quality of early childhood development and learning both Internationally and in South African Research (Pillay, 2018; Munnik and Smith, 2019; van Liempd, Oudgenoeg – Paz and Leseman, 2019; O'Keeffe, Southwood and Hayes, 2022).

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews aimed to explore the research question of how the occupants of the selected ECD centres experience their learning environments.

The codes from the interview highlighted broad and site-specific experiences and challenges to ECD delivery and learning environments in the context. The codes were then mapped, as seen in Fig 1 to identify relationships between the codes towards finding cross-cutting themes.



**Figure 2, (Author, 2022)**

The ecological systems theory was then applied to analyse the codes using the different contextual systems as themes. The five themes include ECD Macro Context, ECD Meso Context, ECD Space and ECD Place. The Chrono system was included considering an overarching societal change related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted the study. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each theme with codes and extracts from interview transcripts to illustrate the analysis process.

**Table 1: Thematic analysis of interview data**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Extract from transcript</b>
<b>ECD Macro context</b>	<b>Challenges to ECD in area</b>	What aspects are posing challenges to ECD provision in the area?	<i>“if it was winter, because it was cold. Some of the parents, they insist, do not go outside, my child will get sick” T8</i>
	<b>Department Registration</b>	What is the status of the centre's registration with the Department of Social Development?	<i>“we got in 2017 is a conditional grant... They said there's no money. There's no money. Government don't have money for the ECD, but there's people fighting for us now we hope.” P5</i>
	<b>Training and Experience in ECD</b>	What is the Teacher and Principal training and experience to work in ECD?	<i>“It's very hard. We are looking for the qualified teachers”... “And it's great to have experienced teachers.” P4</i>
<b>ECD Meso Context</b>	<b>Voice - ECD women</b>	How are the women able to express their views and concerns?	<i>“Today we suffer so many things, difficulties, rejection, this and this, this matter, whatever, gender violence, gender-based, all these things come from the early stage. But it worries me if our government don't see that we need to focus on the ECD.”P3</i>
	<b>Origin of ECD Centre</b>	How and by who was the centre founded and developed?	<i>“It was 2002 and I fell pregnant. I was a teenager. So my pastor's wife, my mum, I call her my mum, but she's my pastor's wife. She decided to open this crèche because she want me to go back to school because in my home there was no one who'll look after my baby. And she decided to open this crèche, it was 2002 October... so the following year I will go to school. So 2003 I went back to school and they started the crèche from there. I finishes matric at 2006 I think and then I come back and work here since then.” P4</i>
	<b>Community Relationship</b>	What relationship do the centre have with the surrounding community?	<i>“...we're working hand in hand with the parents... So the parents might call and say, you know what today I'm going to be a bit late, around four o'clock so we're like, okay, no, its fine,..” T4</i>
	<b>Funding for Buildings and Equipment</b>	Who provided funding for the property, construction, maintenance, and upgrades of the buildings? Who provides the equipment and learning materials?	<i>“They came, they said we want to know what is your needs? We see that you are trying your best. They said write down – I wrote down everything, everything...she did even extra job because to put the ceiling there it was the extra job...even to put the toilet in the shower it was the extra job. Even to put, to cut the window to make the door it was the extra job.” P5</i>

Themes	Codes	Description	Extract from transcript
Microsystem ECD space	<b>Classes and Numbers</b>	What is the numbers of children per class and what ages are accommodated?	<i>"I mean when I started our classrooms in the old school had 12 children but our space was literally this size, this size of this office. So our space was very very limited. now we've got 20 children, and large classrooms. I do miss at times just getting that one on one with the children when there's fewer in the class. But I have an intern and I have an assistant, so there's 3 of us, so with 20 that's a good"</i> T2
	<b>Quality of Buildings *</b>	What are the positives and what the negatives about the class / school?	<i>"we were just having a meeting that we need to just make our school look better now. We need to paint it, even inside, the paint is torn, it's coming off. Even outside. Even the areas outside need to be, and we add some playing areas some tyre to step on or paint. We like to do this."</i> P3
	<b>Outdoor</b>	What is the role of the outdoor environment?	<i>"Yeah but If you are not taking them outside they ask you why you are not taking outdoors. They need to."</i> P4
Microsystem ECD place	<b>Pedagogy</b>	What pedagogic approach is followed in the centre?	<i>"people think as pre-primary as running around like wild little things. It's very structured, very intentional and we work around themes so that's also nice. So our stories are related to themes. Our concepts are related to themes."</i> P2
	<b>Belonging</b>	Do children and staff feel secure and do they have a sense of ownership in the centre?	<i>"They enjoy the place because it's much better than home. Yes, it's much better than home to be here..."</i> P3
	<b>Children's Voice</b>	Do the children have an opportunity to express what or how they want their environment?	<i>"Oooh, they were so happy. They were so happy and they were so excited. Because they have small toilets, for like."</i> T7
	<b>Inclusive Education</b>	How do the centre make provision for children with disability or learning difficulties?	<i>"Yeah, whenever I'm doing lesson plan, I have to also plan for them because they need special attention. We need activities that will accommodate them. we've had a remedial group."</i> T6
Chrono System	<b>Covid challenges</b>	How did the changes that COVID restrictions posed impact on the care and development of the children?	<i>"Yes, we have different areas. And then during the COVID was must pack up all... And then we do to, need a space."</i> T8  <i>"lot of our equipment it's not use it's there. Especially all the, our fantasy areas, then music, yeah most of our equipment is stood out because of the COVID."</i> P3

\* *Quality of Buildings – the scope of this code ranged from specific building parameters, such as layout or size, to also considering environmental qualities, such as colour and light. The list of sub-codes included is provided in Table 3, with examples of interviewee quotations to illustrate the nature of the evidence.*

**Table 2: Quality of Buildings analysis with Sub-codes**

Sub theme	Interview Extract
Thermal Comfort	<i>"It feels very hot.... If winter, eish, it was very very cold."</i> T8
Light	<i>"I think lighting is import,... and natural light..."</i> T2
Sound	<i>"Yeah, so because, like sometimes when we are teaching, in the other side, they are teaching too... And so, it's too much noise over there. So, on this side, I have to put my voice up. So, that they can hear me."</i> T5
Floor-finish	<i>"And does that work? The carpet? And when the children mess?" researcher</i>  <i>"It's smelly.and We have to accommodate those children who are allergic to carpet and all that, yeah."</i> T6
Colour	<i>"Because it's a class, I think it's a, because it is under the place they are there most time, I think it's better that way.(neutral) When, because if there's a lot of colours, then their concentration will... It will actually be disturbing them."</i> T3
Open plan versus separate rooms	<i>"It was very hard to work there. You cannot squatter, like, them together at different ages because the big kids would sometimes bully the small ones."</i> T7
Individual versus shared	<i>"A quiet space, no. No, but I have a book here and there. So they have to read it on their own. So like a picture reading. Yeah, that's all I have. But they do read the stories but it's not very quiet."</i> T5
Ablutions	<i>"Because I have to leave other children to go outside for a child who's going to the toilet and leave those behind. I just wish that the toilet was inside, maybe it would be more easier for the teacher."</i> T6
Relation between inside and outside	<i>"I need their focus and concentration only on the morning ring because I have to do eye contact with them so we sit and like... they sit on the other side. Then they don't see outside."</i> T7
Spatial qualities	<i>"usually you'd have some display out. So you use the space to kind of to get the children thinking about it?... That space is not ideal, the, because it is great if you go to any preschool it's normally at the entrance for here and I do think it should be in like the heart of a school,"</i> T2

For this paper, the study findings and discussion are presented with a short narrative discussion of the themes with the respective codes under each theme, with the quotation of the interviewees removed. This strategy provides an overview rather than the detailed voice contained initially in the research reporting.

**5.1. Theme 1 - Macrosystem**

The Macrosystem theme arose from the participants' responses describing influences on the ECD learning environment that belongs to the Macro context as identified by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. These macro systems, which represent a societal context such as culture, socio-economic context and politics, are often influences that indirectly impact the quality of ECD in a given context. Three codes were identified: Challenges to ECD in the Area, Departments Registration and

Training and Experience in ECD. Each of these codes represents different but interconnected systems, where changes in one system can influence the impact of another. The role of government strategies and policies is directly related to these findings.

**Challenges to ECD in the Area –**

The participants highlighted challenges to providing quality ECD that tend to be at a macrosystemic level as they represent broad ideological, social, cultural and political concerns. These challenges that influence the quality of ECD provision at the research sites concur with the literature (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Atmore, 2018; Atmore et al., 2012a; Biersteker et al., 2016) while providing a deeper understanding through the first hand experiences of the these women.

Establishing quality ECD for most South Africans is a paradigm shift as most ECD principals, teachers, and parents never attended an ECD centre growing up. Through the teachers' education and training, they have learnt the value of ECD and see it as critical to empower children to cope with the complexities of society today emphasising the value of ECD teachers training as reported by Biersteker (2008). The principals acknowledged how number of children who need to attend ECD continues to increase, with most mothers/guardians seeking employment to support their families. The need for ECD places leads to an imbalance between the numbers of children and the available ECD centres, often leading to children spending long hours in the centres as well as the number of children per classroom and per teacher/carer, which affects the quality of ECD (Atmore et al., 2012a). The findings shows how these issues often lead to ECD centres being reduced to babysitting/childminding and being short of staff which was found to be predominant in developing countries (Haddad, 2002).

Some teacher felt that the quality concern is exacerbated by parental authority over children, where parents dictate what children may or may not do at school as they do not understand the value of a more free and explorative approach to learning. The value of ECD centres is also not always supported by members of their community where infrastructure gets vandalised or centres experience theft.

### Department Registration

The interviews with the principals of the various ECD centres included the question: What is the status of the centre's registration with the Department of Social Development (DSD)? The registration status helps to position the site among the range of ECD centre categories. The knowledge that emerged from this discussion showed a sense of frustration with systemic issues reported by Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019). The relationship between the conditions of infrastructure and registration status as discussed in the case studies by (Madyibi & Bayat, 2021; Nelly & Matjokana, 2023; Sotuku et al., 2016).

A primary concern raised by the principals was that it took many years before achieving registration. The reasons for delays are attributed to the centre needing to meet the requirements and, in some instances, to the carelessness of staff at the DSD. There is also inconsistency and a need to clarify how full or conditional registration is granted. Similarly, the registrations are sometimes inconsistent with the number of children at the centre. The participants were frustrated and disappointed with the grant amount and how it needs to be used. It was evident from the interviews that the funding does not allow for improving the quality of the learning environments as the centres all rely on NGO funding and support mechanisms for the daily running of the schools. The limitations of the grant force the ECD to rely on fees from parents who cannot afford to pay.

### Training and Experience in ECD

The participants discussion relating to their education and training journey confirmed the concerns raised in the reports by (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Biersteker, 2008). Although the training and experiences of the participant formed part of the case study background, the responses emerged as relevant to their understanding of what constitutes quality ECD learning environments. It emerged that only through the training provided by NGO funding, as the government grant is not enough, do the women learn to appreciate the value of their work. Most women enter the centres without any training and learn on the job from other experienced teachers. It was noticeable that the participants with higher qualifications and experiences were in a better position to discuss how the relationship between children and the learning environment impacts the quality of ECD.

### 5.2. Theme 2 - Mesosystem

This theme arose from the participants' responses describing influences on the ECD learning environment that belongs to the Meso context as identified through the ecological systems theory. The theme combines four codes: Voice of ECD Women, Origin of the ECD Centre, Community Relationships and Funding for Buildings and Equipment.

#### Voice of ECD women

In keeping with the research paradigm of interpretivism and transformative, it was essential to understand the participants' ability to express their views and concerns openly (Mertens, 2007). All the participants spoke passionately about their role and expressed a love for children, and they showed an understanding of the critical role teachers play in the life of children. Furthermore, some teachers expressed pride and ownership towards their learning spaces and understood the value of a suitable environment for the children. Other teachers expressed appreciation for improvements or new classrooms built;

they know the difference it makes for them and the children.

The principals and teachers in the lower socio-economic context all expressed their appreciation for the work of the NGOs confirming Wills et al. (2021) discourse on the roll of NGO's during the Covid-19 pandemic. There was a sense that they could only run the ECD and continue their work with this continued NGO support expressing deep gratitude toward the various organisations and individuals that helped build and improve the quality of their buildings over the years. They remember everyone by name and shared photographs of a building workshop praising the individuals for their contributions. They felt that they were heard by the donors and appreciated being able to express the needs of their centre. The teacher of site E6, which was recently constructed using repurposed shipping containers, explains her reservations towards this proposal and her utter delight with the finished buildings.

#### Origin of ECD Centre

The narrative of principals reflecting on the development of their ECD centre provided a deep understanding of the contrast between the challenges faced and the women's passion for providing quality care and education. Most of the centres developed over time with the support of families, churches, NGOs and other stakeholders working together towards improving access to quality ECD.

A number of the ECD centres in the low-socioeconomic areas are family-based, where the mother started the centres, and the daughter has continued the work, with their daughters now also working as teachers in the centre. The story of site E5 is similar, with a very passionate principal (P5) working to continue the good work that her mother built up over the years. She also explained in detail how the community were involved in the original construction of the school building. In parallel, site H2 originated within a church in a high socio-economic

area. Site H1 is owned by the same individual who is the founding director of the NGO that supports sites E1 to E6. Their vision is to make a difference in the lives of children by supporting the ECD centres and providing scholarships to children to attend ECD Site H1 and the primary and secondary schools on the same campus.

This detailed reflection is not captured in current literature or the recent ECD census (Department of Basic Education, 2022). However, the evidence illustrates how the limitations of the Government policy and funding towards the establishment, improvement, and maintenance of the ECD learning environment are negatively impacting the ECD sector illustrating the inherent discrimination in the argument by Fredman et al. (2022). In the context of the study, the capacity of the centres to provide quality ECD is currently relying on non-government funding and the resilience of the principals and teachers to overcome the challenges.

### **Community Relationship**

During the interviews, it became evident that most ECD centres are embedded in their community—the relationship between the ECD centre and the community work to support each other in their needs. Most of the ECD centres are also physically located to form part of a community where they are located, with the principal living in a neighbouring house or having a church on the same property. These relationships strengthen the ownership of the ECD centres to be rooted in their community. However, in the literature these unique systems are merely referred to as community based centres (Department of Basic Education, 2022) where the details of the connectedness is not captured. Such as when the community asked an ECD centre to include Gr R and the foundation phase or to increase their numbers, recognising the quality of education provided. While the surrounding community received the newly constructed ECD centre at E6 positively.

In more disadvantaged contexts the ECD centre moves beyond early learning and care through a knitted relationship with the parents, which often requires the teachers to go beyond their normal duties. As an example, Site E5 originated from acknowledging the need for ECD and working with the community to construct the buildings the centre extended to include health services. Some centres also support the community by providing basic services such as photocopying. Thus the critical position as discussed by (Boyden et al., 2019) of the ECD centre in serving disadvantaged communities became evident.

### **Funding for Buildings and Equipment**

The research tracing case studies in South Africa (Madyibi & Bayat, 2021; Nelly & Matjokana, 2023) indicated a direct relationship between the source of funding and physical environment's characteristics and the learning environment's quality. The predominant trend for the ECD centres in the low socio-economic area to rely heavily on NGOs and other support to obtain funds to construct or improve the buildings and equipment is a direct result of the policy framework (Atmore et al., 2012b). In this research the dependence on donations was evident from the interviews where all the sites E1 to E6 had received donor funding through direct engagements or through an NGO.

The ECD principals showed resilience in sourcing funding on their own as and when it was needed. The data also indicated that the involvement of NGOs has increased over time, with most of the centres benefiting from a well-established relationship with at least two NGOs. It was also noticeable that in site E3 where there were minimal relations with an NGO, the quality of the learning environment suffered confirming shortcomings identified in the policy framework (Nelly & Matjokana, 2023).

## **5.3. THEME 3 – ECD MICROSYSTEM SPACE**

This theme arose from the participants' responses describing influences on the ECD learning environment related to the tangible environment. Several codes are associated with the physical environment. The code, Quality of Buildings, was further analysed to include a range of sub-codes. Each is illustrated in Table 3. For the purposes of this paper the discussion will consider the most critical issues only as the extent of the narratives move beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Classes and Numbers**

A vital component of an ECD learning environment is the number of children accommodated in a learning space. This relationship is often also determined by the school's layout, the classrooms' sizes and how the age groups are divided. Most ECD research sites had separate classes for each age group. However, three sites had a sizeable open-plan hall with a low-level division to form separate group spaces. In keeping with the literature (Adlerstein & Cortazar, 2022; Matthews & Lippman, 2020), the teachers experienced show how smaller number are more suitable for smaller spaces. And the open plan spaces shared by various age groups was not seen as good quality environment. It was noticeable that the teachers in high socio-economic areas valued fewer children in their classes even when they had the space for more children. In contrast, some teachers from the low socio-economic area seemed to accept the high numbers as the norm, thus confirm the level of inequality of the ECD environment which is not yet found in the literature.

### **Quality of Buildings**

Establishing the participants' views on the quality of their learning environment was at the heart of this research. However, most low socio-economic area participants had to be prompted by asking questions about specific aspects of their

spaces. In contrast, the participants from the high socio-economic area spoke at length, highlighting various aspects that they found positive or negative. The participants' responses provided insight into the differences of views and the limited understanding of the less educated participants' understanding of the role of quality LE illustrating the underlying inequality extended through the challenges in the ECD sector (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019).

### Outdoor

Considering the role of the outdoor it was evident how the participants recognised the space as a vital part of ECD, and most children prefer being outdoors. However, some low-socioeconomic area sites limited the time to 15 to 20 minutes, while the more established sites had an hour outside, equivalent to the high-socioeconomic area. The outdoor LE was seen as separate from the indoor LE in all the centres, meaning no flow between inside and outside was allowed. This view contrasts with approaches in developed countries where more freedom of movement is encouraged (Barrett et al., 2019; Matthews & Lippman, 2020).

The limitations experienced with outdoor LE were related to funding, pedagogic approaches and ECD education of the principal and teachers. These challenges are all related to the policy framework either directly or indirectly (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2019).

### 5.4. THEME 4 – ECD MICROSYSTEM PLACE

This theme arose from the participants' responses describing influences on the ECD learning environment related to the intangible environment which included Pedagogy, Children's Voice, Inclusive Education and Belonging. Of relevance for this paper is the limited voice that children are granted, specifically within the more teacher centred approach found in the low-socio economic sites. This silence of children stands in contrast to a Rights Perspective and the

intentions of the SDG's (ref). Furthermore the notion of inclusive education were limited as teachers suggested that the learning environments are not ideal for supporting sensory-sensitive children and explained how they had developed strategies to overcome this issue. Two centres mentioned that they had included a remedial class in the past, but it was not continued.

Notably the principal of site E1 considered the school to play an essential role in the children's lives, providing a sense of place. The need for belonging for children from impoverished families is critical as their parental/guardian homes are minimal confirming the critical role of ECD to serve the most disadvantaged children (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Pillay, 2018).

### 5.5. THEME 5 – CHRONO SYSTEM

This theme arose from the participants' responses describing influences on the ECD learning environment during COVID-19 period concurring with several authors reporting on the impact of the pandemic (O'Keeffe et al., 2022; Wills et al., 2021).

The day-to-day life in the pre-schools looked very different from before COVID-19. The restrictions placed by implementing sanitation protocols and social distancing were visible in each research site. In some instances, children could no longer use the outdoor equipment as the school did not have enough sanitising spray to follow the required protocols. A further primary concern was restricting "free play" and some of the usual play equipment. In most ECD centres, the children's movement and sharing of toys and learning equipment were restricted due to the Covid restrictions. The interviews all motioned the change in the learning environment due to the restrictions posed by COVID-19 stressing the vulnerability of the sites in the low socioeconomic areas found through other studies (Wills et al., 2021; Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2021).

## 6. SUMMARY

### Key findings:

- The interview finding shows how the principals and teachers are knowledgeable of the value of quality learning environments.
- The experiences of the principals and teachers confirmed the limitation to quality posed by poor quality environments.
- The principals confirmed the numerous challenges posed by the limitation of the policy in relation to registration and funding
- The lived experiences of the principals and teachers confirm the limitations posed by the policy framework and funding model in their desire to provide quality learning environments
- The findings suggest the ECD sector is hanging in the balance due to their dependency on donations and NGO/faith-based support, in lieu of Government support, to continue their work.

Each of the themes discussed brings forward a layer of the complexity of influences on the quality of ECD and their learning environments. Although the thematic analysis included separating the data into codes and separating interrelated issues; the ecological systems theory acknowledges the porosity of the boundaries between the different systems (Ferguson et al. 2013). The critical concern of an unsupportive policy framework was confirmed by several of the codes echoing the reports from Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019), Atmore (2023), Biersteker et al. (2016) and Hall et al. (2019) among others. Within the codes of the Macrosystem, Registration and Teacher Training reflect on the policy's limitations, while the broader challenges to ECD reinforce the urgency of the agenda of ECD transformation. The Mesosystem highlighted how the ECD sector is hanging in the balance due to their dependency on donations

and NGO/faith-based support to continue their work. The Microsystem of Space and Place included the detailed consequences of ECD quality. The limitations include physical spaces that are not meeting health and safety requirements and are not child-friendly similar to most developing countries (Adlerstein & Cortazar, 2022). A further concern is that the spatial restrictions cannot support the number of children and are not conducive to exploratory pedagogic approaches. Minimal support for inclusive education was found, while the dire need for children from disadvantaged families was highlighted stressing the urgency for spatial justice for the youngest children (Pillay, 2014).

The severity of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was visible in all of the centres, with many having no children in August 2020 as reported by (Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2021). Similarly, the learning environment was drastically changed. This finding raises a concern about how to better support the ECD sector during times of societal challenges in future.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The research argues that the government needs to understand and recognise the role of the learning environment in its drive towards the transformation of early childhood development as a cause for stunting rather than growth in the ECD sector. The evidence from the interviews with women from eight ECD centres in Outerwest eThekweni has confirmed the critical concern raised. The fourteen women interviewed gave voice to their lived experiences of being part of the ECD sector in South Africa.

Applying the ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) approach, the findings indicate how the Policy Framework and Funding model in South Africa impact a macro, meso, and micro level, limiting the agenda of ECD transformation. These limitations continue inequality, not providing spatial justice, towards disadvantaged communities and their access to quality ECD. The study confirms the reliance

of the ECD on the NGO, faith-based and other funding mechanisms for continued support in their drive towards quality. The study further indicated the resilience of these women to overcome the challenges they face.

Two factors limited the research, the first being the language / cultural barrier of a white English-speaking researcher conducting research in an area where most participants were African isiZulu-speaking. Although I found that most participants were fully conversant in English, the interviews with some women may have reached more depth if they had been conducted in their home language. The second factor was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research proposal was approved in 2019 before any conception of the COVID-19 pandemic existed. Most ECD centres were closed for several months, and once they were re-opened, the numbers were meagre, and the LE had been dramatically altered to conform to the sanitation and social distancing requirements.

Within the Inclusive Cities conference context, it is relevant to acknowledge the systemic exclusion of ECD women and children. Further research should be considered with increased scope. It can be repeated in different parts of the country to provide a broader understanding of the concerns and quality of ECD LE and how women experience it.

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