

**Topic:**

Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners' perceptions of their professional identity  
in two Early Childhood Centres in the Western Cape, South Africa

by

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**Signed**

**Date**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this study to my late parents, Percival and Francis Dirks, who never had the opportunity to study and be educated the way I am. I am grateful to them for always giving me the best irrespective of our circumstances and for pushing me beyond my limitations.

I also dedicate this thesis to my husband, Charles Rethman and to my beautiful children, Ephraim and Luca Rethman – I improved myself for you to have a better future and life. I hope my commitment and perseverance inspires you to believe in the impossible – always push beyond your capabilities.

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### **Abstract**

In South Africa and globally, early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioners working with children aged birth to four years are still struggling with perceiving themselves as ‘professional’ practitioners. This is largely due to the general perceptions that they are still viewed as childminders, serving at the bottom of the pyramid with the lowest pay within the education sector. These practitioners who set the trajectory for future learning in early development are often undervalued and unappreciated, teaching in very under-resourced circumstances.

This study explores the perceptions of four ECCE practitioners’ perceptions of their professional identity and how these perceptions influenced their approaches to teaching and care. The study was undertaken in two marginalised community ECCE centres in the poverty-stricken community of Capricorn on the Cape Flats. The theoretical framework of Wenger’s community of practice, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theories and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory approach was used as the analytical frameworks. I used semi-structured interviews and journal reflections to collect the data through a thematic qualitative approach. The findings suggest ECCE practitioners’ perceptions of their professional identity is influenced by both enabling and constraining factors. The constraining factors were contextually bound and related to negative perceptions by parents who believed ECCE practitioners as ‘babysitters’ that only play and care for the children. Another constraining factor was the environment in which these ECCE practitioners were required to teach, for example, the influence of gang violence. Whilst these constraining factors were contextually bound and contributed to ECCE practitioners having a weak professional identity the study also highlights that these practitioners valued their work and showed a high level of responsiveness to the children, embarking on a willingness to learn with and from children and families, wanting to advance their qualifications and careers. The findings have huge implications for how the practice of early childhood care and education is understood and what the value and contributions of ECCE practitioners are in a democratic country like South Africa. Whilst there has been important policy moves to professionalise the sector recently, the findings of this study call

for how policy and research needs to include the voices and contributions of ECCE practitioners, especially those working in high risk and disadvantaged areas.

**Key words:** professional identity, early childhood care and education (ECCE), professional development, early childhood development

### **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>B.Ed.</b>	Bachelor of Education
<b>CPUT</b>	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
<b>CITE</b>	Centre for International Teacher Education
<b>CPTD</b>	Continuous Professional Training and Development
<b>DBE</b>	Department of Basic Education
<b>DHET</b>	Department of Higher Education and Training
<b>DSD</b>	Department of Social Development
<b>ECCE</b>	Early Childhood Care and Education
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development
<b>ECE</b>	Early Childhood Education
<b>FP</b>	Foundation Phase
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institutions
<b>MRTEQ</b>	Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications
<b>NCF</b>	National Curriculum Framework
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualification Framework
<b>PIECECE</b>	Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education
<b>SAQA</b>	South African Qualifications Framework
<b>TVET</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
<b>ZPD</b>	Zone of Proximal Development

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Background of Research Study

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### 1.1 Introduction

This study explores Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners' perceptions of their professional identity and the ways in which these perceptions and understandings influence professional practice. To do this, I first outline the landscape of ECD professionalisation to situate the study and discuss how the study conceptualises marginalised ECCE contexts and professional identity. Thereafter, a brief summary of the theoretical framework which was used as an analytical lens is offered. Then, an outline of the research methodology and research design is provided. Following this, the limitations and ethical considerations of the study are considered. The chapter concludes with a layout of the chapters.

According to UNESCO (2011), the practice of early childhood care and education is more than preparing children for entry into formal education; it is a holistic approach to the young child's social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development, resulting in a concrete and comprehensive foundation for lifelong wellbeing and learning. UNESCO (2011) further explains that quality early childhood education and development is important for gender equality and social cohesion, is invaluable for any country's human resource development, and reduces costs of later remedial interventions. For children from poor communities in South Africa, early childhood care and education serves as a critical component in recompensing disadvantaged families for past intergenerational educational inequalities (UNESCO, 2011).

Furthermore, marginalised ECCE practitioners' work in contexts are replete with poverty, violence, inadequate nutrition, social and economic marginalisation, poor health and other social and economic inequalities. Early learning facilities in the Western Cape and South Africa at large are located both in advantaged and disadvantaged areas, with the result that glaring disparities between children's learning and development experiences is evident in relation to their social class and geographic location (Neuman & Hatipogli, 2015).

Considering the challenges that the ECCE sector and practitioners are facing, ECCE has gained national priority in recent years with special attention given to professionalisation in the field, specifically the professionalisation of ECCE practitioners' qualifications (DBE, 2017). In its 2019 Election Manifesto, the African National Congress alluded to improving the quality of early childhood education in South Africa by preparing to make two years of early childhood development compulsory for all children. This was done by standardising guidelines and norms for early childhood development (ECD) and to improve the qualifications of ECCE practitioners in their employment targets over the next five years.

According to Sacks (2014), it is the experiences and perceptions of ECCE practitioners that shape their world. It is these experiences and perceptions that are central to their interactions with children and their ability to offer quality care and to shape their development. There has been a dearth of research related to how ECCE practitioners construct their professional identities. According to Moloney (2010:3), the lack of research concerning ECCE practitioners' professional identities stems from the fact that these practitioners represent such a diverse workforce. Moloney further explains that this group of practitioners differs immensely in qualifications, employment status and situation; they consist of a mix of qualified and unqualified ECCE practitioners, and many of whom operate in a system that lacks identity and unity, and in which they are commonly not perceived as professionals. This research study aims to add to the professionalisation of ECCE practitioners in South Africa by providing insights about their professional identities. The findings hold implications for both policy and the need for further research to be undertaken about professional identities, specifically in high-risk, marginalised communities.

For the purposes of this study, a specific focus is placed on how ECCE practitioners, teaching in marginalised communities, construct their professional identities and how their professional identities influence their approaches to teaching and care.

## **1.2 Background**

For many years in South Africa, females have dominated the field of early childhood development as ECCE practitioners, catering to care for young children from birth to four

years old. Historically, this sector and workforce also largely comprise ECCE practitioners who are underqualified females of colour in need of quality training (Department of Social Development (DSD) and Economic Policy Research Unit, 2014). The early childhood development stage between birth and school is a fundamental time when the young child develops some of their primary personality traits, identity, skills and most importantly their cognitive abilities. Therefore, the ECCE practitioner is a critical person in the facilitation of the child's early development process. Due to the lack of understanding as to what really happens through the development process and that children learn through exploration and play, many individuals assume that early childhood practitioners who work with young children are simply babysitters. Ebbeck and Yole (2011) and Miller, Dalli and Urban (2021) agrees that ECCE practitioners are undervalued in society and too often the value of their work goes unrecognized.

Over the past two decades, specifically in South Africa, has there been a transformative attempt to advance the early childhood development sector. There has been a strong transformative move to bring the professionalisation of ECCE practitioners to the foreground, working with young children from birth to four, to becoming professionals who not only care for young children but also teach them in preparation for formal schooling. The Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators (DHET, 2017) was an important historic step to ensure that qualification pathways are designed for ECCE practitioners to pursue their qualifications for undergraduate and postgraduate studies at higher education institutions. In addition, in 2017 the Department of Higher Education and the European Union developed projects in collaboration with higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa to ensure that programmes for diplomas and degrees, as well as research projects, were conceptualised to advance qualifications and strengthen the professionalisation of the field. Prior to this, the qualifications of ECCE practitioners were only offered at Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges. This was a pivotal step considering that the sector is oppressed by the challenge of unqualified and underqualified ECCE practitioner's fulfilling requirements that are onerous and demanding, yet they are still underpaid and under-recognised.

### **1.3 Problem statement**

Early childhood care and education practitioners working with young children from birth to four years are still labelled as '*child minders*' despite the increased focus on their level of education acquired. These erroneous perceptions influence the ways in which these ECCE practitioners' professional identities are constructed.

This study thus aims to explore what perceptions ECCE practitioners, working in marginalised ECCE centres in the Western Cape, have pertaining their professional identities and how these perceptions influence the way in which they teach and care for young children. The study is guided by the following research aim and questions:

#### **1.3.1. Main question**

What perceptions do Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners in a poor community of the Cape Flats have about their professional identities?

#### **1.3.2. Sub-questions**

1. *How do ECCE practitioners perceive and describe their professional identities as teachers?*
2. *What aspects of these ECCE practitioners' professional identities influence their approaches to teaching and care?*

### **1.4 Overview of data collected**

The study adopted a qualitative approach with an interpretivist paradigm. The aim was to interpret the data collected from recorded semi-structured interviews and journals. Data was collected through interviewing four ECCE practitioners from two respective ECD centres.

The ECD centres where the research for this study was conducted are located in Capricorn, a very poor community on the Cape Flats in Cape Town, South Africa. This community faces high risks associated with its socio-economic challenges including crime, violence, poverty, social and economic ills, and unemployment. The two ECD centres are projects started by their



respective communities. One is funded by a trust formed by a local community forum, and the other is a small three-roomed backyard dwelling started by a community member. Both ECD centres however, thrive with ECCE practitioners who are determined to build strong cultures of learning in their community, fulfilling dire needs. This is evident in the enthusiasm displayed by the happy children in the classrooms.

### **1.5 Research aim**

The primary aim of the study is to understand how ECCE practitioners perceive their professional identities; the factors that influence their perceptions of their professional identities; and how these perceptions shape and influence them as professionals and their approaches to teaching and care.

## **1.5 Overview of structure**

### ***Chapter 1:***

This chapter presents the aims and objectives of the research: to investigate the perceptions ECCE practitioners have of their professional identities and how these perceptions influence their approaches to teaching and care.

### ***Chapter 2:***

This chapter reviews literature relevant to this study, including identity, professional identity, and professional identity, with a focus on the status of ECCE practitioners. This chapter also underpins the suitable theoretical frameworks used for the study.

### ***Chapter 3:***

This chapter discusses the research methodology, describing the data collection, analysis, ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study.

### ***Chapter 4:***

This chapter presents the findings and an analytical discussion. The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and reflective journals is analysed and presented in this chapter. Through a thematic approach, themes were identified related to the main and sub-research questions and the ECCE practitioners' perceptions of their professional identities and how they influence their approach to teaching and care.

### ***Chapter 5:***

In this concluding chapter, a discussion is presented with further recommendations that can influence practice, policy and research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

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### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a literature review and theoretical framework that emphasises the ECCE practitioners' professional identities. In the first section, I give an overview of early childhood development (ECD) – for the purposes of this study, ECCE is included within ECD – and review how the professionalisation of the sector and the ECCE practitioner has evolved within a South African context. I highlight the critical role that ECCE professionals play in terms of the development of the young child and how the fundamentals of their teaching and care set the trajectory for future learning. The second part of the chapter reviews literature about professional identity. I specifically focus on how the perceptions of their professional identities influence the way in which they teach and care for children ranging from birth to four years.

In the theoretical framework, the last section of this chapter, I explore the social learning theories of Wenger, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, focusing on how the importance of belonging to a community of practice, culture and environmental contexts shape the professional identity of the ECCE practitioner. Emphasis is placed on how the professional identities of the ECCE practitioners are socially constructed and formed through everyday engagements and interactions within social practices that influence the way in which they practice teaching and care.

### **2.2 What is early childhood care and education?**

The Department of Basic Education defines early childhood care and development as 'the process of emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral, physical, social and communication development of children from birth to school-going age' (DBE, 2017).

According to the Department of Basic Education (2009), early childhood development refers to the comprehensive approach of policies and programmes for children from birth to school-going age with the active participation of their parents and caregivers. Recognised as the base on which future learning is built, the purpose of early childhood development is to ensure the protection of the young child's rights and to offer quality early learning interventions in

preparing the child for adulthood whilst developing his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential (Biersteker & Dawes, 2008; Atmore, 2012:122). Whilst ECD refers to the development of young children from birth to nine, this study specifically focuses on ECCE practitioners working with young children from birth to four years of age.

In South Africa, an estimated 3.8 million children live in utter poverty. According to Atmore, Van Niekerk and Cooper (2012), many South African children from birth to four years who live in informal settlements in marginalised communities will face zero to minimal holistic quality education. Hall, Woolard, Lake, and Smith (2012) and Sacks (2014) agree that there are obvious inequalities that exist amongst South Africans, specifically between those in middle or higher-income households and those living in under-resourced and marginalised communities. For the latter, these disadvantages are highly likely to deprive children of equitable educational and medical provisioning, which could impede their early development. Addressing these disparities is critical in cultivating ECD initiatives and will strengthen ECD provisioning in any country (Hall, Woolard, Lake, & Smith, 2012). With these disheartening socio-economic challenges and inequalities, education is constantly pushed on the backburner for children living in these harsh realities. These norms have a direct influence on teachers, increasing the pressure to deliver a quality, holistic education and environment with limited to no resources. Many current ECCE practitioners pursued their careers in early childhood development because of their love of children, and because they believed that education would add value to their local communities. However, the expectations on an ECCE practitioner are high, including the complexity of their professional role. With the rapid and continuous changes around policy and their professional development, they are subjected to increased accountability and pressures from external agencies. According to the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators (DHET, 2017), ECCE practitioners should be able to demonstrate their qualifications through both their basic knowledge and practical competencies. Caring for young children has become more than just ensuring basic childcare. Early childhood care and education includes parent education, specific learning outcomes, additional support to children's learning and development, and developing learning opportunities across cognitive, communicative, social-emotional, and behavioral domains.

It is vital that all children grow up in a secure and nurturing environment, guaranteeing that they develop well; the community, family and the environment that children grow up in are critical for their well-being (DBE, 2009). According to UNICEF (2017), the holistic development of children up to four years old has a direct consequence on their whole development and on the adults they will become. Therefore, investing in young children from birth and stimulating them as early as possible in the womb through sound and vibrations maximizes their future well-being (UNICEF, 2017). Children begin to learn about the world around them from as early as the prenatal, perinatal (immediately before and after birth) and postnatal stages (UNICEF, 2017). The first learning experiences of young children from birth to four years happen through bonding with their parents or primary caregivers – in this context, the ECCE practitioners. Their first experiences influence and affect their future physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Providing the foundations for optimal experiences to learn during the period from birth to four years is the best investment the ECCE practitioner makes in ensuring a sound foundation is instilled for their charges' future learning and success (UNICEF, 2017).

In South Africa, ECCE teaching and learning is typically centre-based, home-based, or undertaken in community-based centres (GPE, 2019). The ECCE practitioners responsible for the development and care of these children come from equally diverse professional and paraprofessional experiences (Early Childhood Development Policy, 2015). Van Heerden (2016) states that their experiences range from no formal training to those who have completed a professional degree in ECD. According to the national DBE (2001), in South Africa ECD is defined as 'The processes by which children from birth to nine years of age grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially'.

Within the South African context, ECD used to be sub-categorized within the Department of Social Development (DSD) and focused on children birth to four years old, whilst the national Department of Basic Education (DBE), focuses on children from five to nine years old within the context of early childhood development (DBE, 2001; Atmore & Van Niekerk-Cooper, 2012). However, between 2018 and 2019 the Portfolio Committees on Basic Education and Social Development migrated from the DSD to the DBE (DBE, 2021). This migration included Grade R as compulsory by 2022, in terms of the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill

(2022) in schools as a formal primary school initiative. For many, this migration to the DBE signalled something positive – a seemingly stronger department with more technical capacity and effective management systems in place – but for ECCE practitioners it is causing much confusion and uncertainty, especially around their professionalisation, job security and where they will fit into the ECD system and ECD sector after the migration. The migration also questions where facilitating care and learning through play and other transformative pedagogies in appropriate ways will come in if learning is too formalised for the young child.

According to Atmore, van Niekerk and Ashley-Cooper (2012), there is however extensive local and international research demonstrating the benefits of providing organized, quality early childhood development services and programmes to children from birth to four years old, before they enter formal education. Atmore et al. (2012) explain that making provision for appropriate holistic stimulation during this fundamental development stages of a child can result in (i) ‘enhanced school performance’, (ii) ‘increased primary school enrolment’, (iii) ‘lower repetition and drop-out rates’, (iv) ‘reduced remedial education costs’, (v) ‘reductions in juvenile crime rates’, and (vi) ‘improved economic and social productivity into adulthood’. Atmore et al. (2012) further explain that the benefits of investing in ECD include major education, social and economic returns to the general public, exceeding the returns on other forms of human capital investment, and that being educated is central for ‘building a foundation for life-long learning and economic opportunities. ECCE is fundamental in addressing South Africa’s two key development challenges, which are poverty and inequality. The ECCE interventions also improve the development deficits experienced by children from birth to four years of age, especially children who are vulnerable and at risk, living in marginalised communities.

According to the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (Department of Social Development, 2015), quality ECCE has officially been declared and is recognised by government as a fundamental and universal human right to which all children are equally entitled, without discrimination. Since democracy in 1994, the South African government has developed numerous policy documents and laws to form an enabling multi-sectoral framework that acknowledges the central role of early childhood development, and thus ECCE.

Post-1994, ECD and ECCE (for the purposes of this study, ECD is included in ECCE) have been significantly identified and highly recognised as among South Africa's critical focal points to transform and develop the country socially and economically. This leads government departments and non-government organisations (NGOs) to forge partnerships at various levels to develop and improve ECCE services, policies and programmes that enable improved ECCE services. According to the National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS, 2009), this transformation in the education sector shed specific light on the early learning needs of children from birth to four years (Ebrahim, 2014).

According to NELDS (2009), a curriculum-related policy initiative focusing primarily on the growth and development of children aged birth to four years, every child in South Africa should take part in some form of ECCE stimulation programme. These stimulation programmes should consist of ideas, resources and activities, facilitating their growth and development, and should follow an integrated approach ensuring age appropriate learning and development practiced through a daily, weekly, and monthly plan or programme. These specific early childhood stimulation programmes must demonstrate clear, relevant and age-appropriate learning that consist of planned, organised units of information and activities executed by adults in care and education environments. A well-trained workforce of ECCE practitioners who understands how to meet the needs of children in this age group is imperative but there are, however, many challenges that constrain positive outcomes. A significant number of children under the age of six do not have access to essential ECCE services, including clean running water, passable nutrition and safe structures to learn in (Hall et al., 2017:6; Harrison, 2020:2).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South African Government, 1996) clearly outlines the importance of democratic values, social justice, improved quality of life for all, equality and protection of all citizens justifying the right that every child has the right to equal education. Early childhood care and education is designed to enable children (birth to four years) to acquire skills, knowledge and the necessary attitudes for this type of holistic growth and development. ECCE offers every child of this age the right to the best start in life by equipping their primary caregivers – including ECCE practitioners and parents – with

appropriate information and the understanding on how to ensure that their children's foundation years and early experiences and education are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

All children are born with some natural abilities and skill, which they use to communicate with people and their environments. Early opportunities of teaching and care through quality ECCE interventions provide constructive support and stimulation to young children by adults in their homes and in enriched childcare environments, aiding children between birth and four years to reach their full potential.

### **2.3 Early childhood care and education and the developing child – A South African context**

Atmore, Niekerk and Cooper (2012) state that while many South African children live beneath the breadline, only 16% of the children who live in households where child hunger is rife are reported. This clear indication of so many young South African children living completely vulnerable and poverty-stricken lives places the realization of their rights – as stipulated in the SA Constitution – at a very high risk (Du Plessis & Conley, 2007). Amore et al. (2012) further explain that many of these children from birth to four years old live in informal settlements and marginalised communities. At this tender age, their lives are already severely compromised with regard to learning, as they face hunger, inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, poverty, health and challenging social issues – including HIV and AIDS – and zero to minimal holistic education. According to UNICEF (2017), most young children deprived of early childhood development come from the most marginalised communities where poor nutrition, violence, abuse, inequality, neglect and traumatic experiences 'produce high levels of cortisol – a hormone that produces toxic stress that limits neural connectivity in developing brains'. UNICEF (2017) explains that not all young children receive the necessary nutrition they require to grow, placing them at a high risk of stunted cognitive and physical development.

Education is a basic human right, essential to the building of life-long learning and economic opportunities. However, with the huge disparities South Africa still faces in bridging the education divide, the quality of education and development of young children and of ECCE practitioners – especially those in rural areas – is still a very slow process. In fact, according to



Harrison (2020) and Mbarathi, Mthembu, and Diga (2016,) the most deprived and most in need are ECCE practitioners and children living in rural and informal urban areas who are unable to access formal ECD services, either due to the absence of ECD centres or the inaccessibility of educational resources.

Noticeable financial disparities are prevalent amongst South African children, specifically the children living in these harsh circumstances – they are particularly vulnerable without access to educational fundamentals, which impedes their early development. These social gaps also increase the pressure on ECCE practitioners working in these informal settlements and early learning centres (Atmore et al., 2012) to deliver high quality and holistic education.

Learning is critical for brain development as the brain develops fastest during the early years of life. Research on early childhood development proves that the child's early years form the base of their character development, social interactions, intellect and their capacity to learn. Children's early years are a period when they gain perceptions, skills and attitudes that set the basis for permanent learning (UNICEF, 2017). These include the acquisition of language – reading and writing, perceptual motor skills, basic numeracy concepts, and problem solving skills. It is during this young age that they develop and stimulate a love of learning and the appreciation of relationships (Fourie, 2013).

When children as young as birth to four years old are deprived of the necessary effort and provision to enable their development, it becomes very challenging and costly to provide them with the necessary interventions to catch up later in life (Hall et al., 2017:4). Therefore, age-appropriate learning through play is critical in stimulating learning in children of this age range. Subsequently, it is vital that South Africa has well-trained ECCE practitioners who meet the requirements to stimulate children.

In South Africa, ECCE was previously associated with privilege. Sustainable government funding backed and supported this practice, which was commonly accessible for *white people only* and no other groups within the South African segregation settings (Department of Social Development, 2017). The post-Apartheid dispensation led to the reformation of education. ECCE gained national priority, and to address the inequalities of the past, the government

introduced the concept of Educare, which places importance on a holistic approach, addressing needs around the education, nutrition, health, and security of all children (ECD Policy, 2017). Areas of adaptation were the classification of 'an umbrella term, ECD (Early Childhood Development), which constituted the processes whereby children, between the age of birth to nine years, are nurtured to succeed mentally, physically, morally, emotionally, and socially' (DBE, 1995:33; Department of Social Development, 2015). Post democracy, South Africa brought about a number of important holistic developments for the education system and the sectors were profoundly changed (Hartelle & Steyn, 2015). Government sanctioned and endorsed a number of rights and development instruments. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (Department of Social Development, 2015) emphasised child-centred learning, and the important role of parents and primary caregivers became recognised as critical in providing care and support, and as being instrumental in the upbringing of children. In this context, the above policy recognised the importance of a collaborative effort to ensure that children from birth to four years old thrive; are healthy through good nutrition and food security; have access to social protection; have violence- and abuse-free opportunities for early learning and development; and learn through play. Importantly, the implementation of this policy significantly contributed to the attainment of the goals of the National Development Plan 2030 (South African Government, 2012) and the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in the process significantly improved the lives of many of our children. In line with the global SDGs, we followed the motto that '*No child must be left behind*' through the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs education in ECD service delivery through appropriate services.

Post-apartheid government departments, including the Department of Health, Education and Social Development, has recognized the necessity to increase access and the quality to Early Childhood Development programmes and services. Therefore, government funding for ECD centres and on Grade R children has been increased threefold since 2008-2009 (DBE, 2010).

Atmore (2012) explains that the standard of a quality education in South Africa is like a pyramid where the learners on the bottom of the pyramid, 40-50% of the population of children, receive a 'watered down education.' The teachers in these early learning centres are perceived as 'glorified caregivers or babysitters', they are not trained adequately and there is

zero to minimal parental interaction. It is thus not surprising that the perception of ECCE teaching as a poorly paid, low-status career with low-grade qualifications is normalised as tolerable (Moloney, 2010).

According to research by Woolard, Hall, Lake and Smith (2012) and Sacks (2014), obvious inequalities exist amongst South African children, specifically those living in under-resourced and marginalised communities. Sacks (2014), explains that the caregivers' perceptions of themselves and their identities comes with its own implications for the nature and quality of education and care presented to children in early learning centres (ELCs).

#### **2.4 The professionalisation of the ECCE practitioner: Insights of ECCE and its recent developments in South Africa**

Researchers (Ebrahim, Okwany & Berry, 2019; Wood, 2014; Harrison, 2020) agree that a quality ECCE service heavily relies on suitably qualified and trained ECCE practitioners who understand what they are doing, why they are doing it, who continually reflect on improving their practice, and adapt to challenges.

Since 1994, South Africa has made immense progress in realizing the child's right to education and in advancing an effective, accessible education system of excellence for children (UNICEF South Africa, 2012). The South African Government's National Integrated Plan for ECD (2015) emphasises that it is the 'right of every young child to have access to basic services, including [quality] early childhood development (ECD)'. According to the Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (PIECCE) report, and desktop study by Harrison (2017, 2018, 2020) quality ECD services are highly dependable and influenced by ECCE practitioner development. One of the key prerequisites to implementing an effective, reformed and successful education system is a 'sufficient and qualified work force to secure impartial access to ECCE services. Harrison (2020) posits that quality early childhood education and care is highly reliant on appropriately trained ECCE practitioners with thorough perceptions of who they are, how they need to improve the way they teach and care for young children, and who understand what they are doing, and why they are doing it. They need to be continually reflective on how to improve their practice and be adaptive to the challenges they are confronted by.

Through collaboration between civil society, universities, government, the education sector and the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority [ETDP SETA] standardised training was designed and implemented, developing and paving a new career path for ECCE practitioners and their professional identity. This contributed to the increased professional status and recognition of their career, with special attention given to the reality that a quality ECD service depends strongly on the availability and commitment of suitably qualified and passionate practitioners (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2017). According to Hall et al. (2017), President Cyril Ramaphosa's February 2019 announcement to shift the ECD mandate from the DSD to the DBE drastically emphasised the importance of early childhood development for South Africans, including increased financial support for ECCE practitioners to improve workforce training. Prior to that, interventions included the expansion of the diversity and scope of ECCE practitioners and ensuring that teachers were qualified and appropriately skilled (Department of Social Development, 2015:69; DHET, 2017), thus placing a clear focus on the professional development of ECCE practitioners. To increase the standard of ECD and provide young children with optimal educational opportunities President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the migration of ECDs to the DBE, during the 2019 State of the Nation address which placed an increased focus on the importance of practitioner development and professionalisation.

According to Harrison (2020), NGOs have tended to lead private delivery of the ETDP SETA National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Levels 4 and 5 qualifications in early childhood development due to their work in impoverished, inaccessible rural areas. It is due to NGOs taking up the challenge and working with ECCE practitioners to provide a qualification through the ETDP SETA that great strides have been made around training ECCE practitioners. Initial qualifications that were developed were Levels 1, 2, 4 and 5, with a later addition of Level 6 (ETDP SETA, 2012; SAQA, 2008).

Through the work of the Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (PIECCE, 2018) which is a multi-stakeholder, collaborative project aiming to increase access to qualifications for ECCE practitioners, much progress around practitioner development has transpired and they have been very instrumental in developing and professionalising the ECCE

sector. Their input in advancing ECCE practitioners, motivated by their belief that practitioners are fundamental to the provision of high quality ECD, places emphasis on the ECCE practitioners as primary caregivers who are instrumental in unlocking the potential of young children. Through contributing to the standardization of ECCE practitioner education, PIECCE supports the goal of professionalising the sector.

Because of collaborations like this, many pivotal strides have been made with a number of changes within the early childhood care and education sector since the first democratic election in April 1994 that have contributed to improving the lives of young South African children. The quality of ECCE practitioner training in South Africa improved, as government agreed to make two years of early childhood development and education compulsory, standardising guidelines, norms and standards for ECD by improving the employment target over the next years. Since then, several NGOs and higher education institutions are providing further training and development in education to improve the ECCE practitioners at certificate and then diploma level. With the approval of the Council of Higher Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training, some Higher Education institutions which participate in the PIECCE project will also offer a degree in Early Childhood Care and Education

South African qualifications are recognised through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2008) and training and qualifications provided to ECCE practitioners are obtainable from a variety of training services, which include private and public universities; Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges; or ECD non-profit organisations (NPOs). The service provider or institution providing these qualifications has to get the authority of an accreditation issued by the ETDP-SETA (Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority). UNICEF, together with the DoSD has set guiding principles which states that the minimum qualification for early childhood practitioners is the NQF basic Certificate: ECD – Level 1 Certificate and the highest qualification is the Level 5, Higher Certificate and National Diploma: ECD (UNICEF, 2017).

*Basic competencies for ECCE practitioners meeting the minimum standards are that they should at least (ECD Policy; 2017):*

- Be able to demonstrate highly developed listening, speaking, reading, writing and reasoning skills;
- Be able to display basic communications skills in more than one language;
- Be able to use ICT effectively for the purposes of academic study and professional practice;
- Recognise and interpret development and learning outcomes and understand a variety of influences that influence development;
- Create an effective learning environment, fostering learning through exploration, play and appropriate experiences in a context that respects diversity in backgrounds;
- Encourage children's agency and be active in decision-making functions;
- Possess a strong knowledge base to enable the development of early literacy, early mathematics explorations and beginning knowledge in a range of appropriate areas;
- Plan integrated, age-appropriate, play-based learning activities and programmes;
- Be able to design, select and develop learning material and equipment that is age-appropriate;
- Nurture active engagement in learning through facilitating appropriate play-based methods for children 0-4 years;
- Facilitate development and learning opportunities for children from birth to four years of age and have an awareness of learning barriers including special needs by adopting an inclusive, anti-bias approach;
- Be able to facilitate appropriate assessment and development plan methods and procedures for the young child's progress, use the results of assessment to improve and report on learning;
- Demonstrate basic knowledge and understanding of health, hygiene, safe environments and nutrition, including assisting young children to develop self-help skills concerning health, hygiene, nutrition and their own safety;
- Collaborate with colleagues, families and community systems to create, maintain and enhance environments in children from birth to four years so that they can learn optimally in all areas of functioning;

- Follow a professional code of ethics and maintain a professional knowledge of ongoing professional developments;
- Demonstrate the ability to reflect on classroom practices, experiences and actions to transform and build pedagogical knowledge;
- Be able to apply basic leadership and managerial skills to manage the ECD learning environment;
- Be capable of mentoring and supporting others in ECD learning environments to improve standards of learning through play; and Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of child protection issues, and the ability to identify signs of child abuse and how to refer such cases to the relevant authorities.

In the post-apartheid era there were significant developments as noted within The Nationwide Audit of Early Childhood Development for South Africa, including the threefold increase of Government expenditure on Grade R children since 2008-2009 (Shioji, Yuji, Bipath, Kimura, Tamara and Hamazaki, 2017). Shioji et al. (2017), however, argue that the considerable efforts that have been made to improve the educational system for early childhood development still excludes many early learning facilities in marginalised areas where many ECCE practitioner are still unskilled, unprofessional and unqualified, leaving many vulnerable children in unregistered early learning centres. Shioji et al. (2017) emphasize that if we want to see the lives of South African children improve, we will have to work steadier at improving the status and particularly the self-esteem of ECCE practitioners. Nomlomo et al. (2019) concurs that even though government has made a considerable effort through providing funding and immense training, the task to formalise teachers' professional identities is challenging in South Africa for many reasons, including the socio-economic challenges these ECCE practitioners face (Foley, 2010).

Teacher qualification levels are often used as a standard to measure the quality of ECD services; however, increased levels of ECCE practitioners' qualifications have not always determined a higher quality of teaching or a more professional teacher's identity. This has been noted in South Africa by Dlamini, Lubben, and Campbell, (1996) and Department of Education (2001b), and internationally by Cassidy, Hestenes, Hegde, Hestenes, and Mims (2005). Sacks, Murphey and Moore (2014) explains that the caregivers' perceptions of

themselves and their identities comes with its own implications for the nature and quality of education and care presented to children in early learning facilities. Like all professionals, the ECCE practitioners' professional and personal understanding impacts their professional identities. The ECD sector embodies a vast typology of multi-faceted practitioners who all come with a different skill set, experiences, training, educational backgrounds, employment histories, circumstances and statuses. Therefore, whilst these multidimensional roles of the ECCE practitioners are not entirely respected or acknowledged, obstacles will remain to be overcome in elevating their status (Buchanan, 2015; Chong & Lu, 2019).

Added to the above challenges, the PIECCE report (Harrison 2017, 2020) also explains that, despite development of qualifications, there are still issues with regard to the quality of training and implementation thereof. Harrison (2017,2020) explains that there is a lack of monitoring and evaluation around applications for accreditation, resulting in training organisations offering courses not being able to issue certificates. This has a profound impact on participants' ability to benefit from qualifications and on the reputation of NGOs as service providers.

There has also been limited research on the perceptions and identity of ECCE practitioners within a South African context, specifically ECCE practitioners, teaching at the bottom of the pyramid in local townships in informal educational structures. According to Moloney (2010), studies show that ECCE practitioners struggle to identify (a) who they are as professionals within the education discipline, (b) what they are, and (c) what they are worth. Osgood and Stone (2002) argue that such multiplicity in delivery inspires staff to individualistic and distrustful ways, resulting in a disjointed approach and disbelief in themselves as a professional collective. He explains that perspectives like these are entrenched within two major discourses, namely a traditional view of women associated with 'women in the home'; and secondly, ECCE is a low-status, poorly paid sector, predominantly characterised by women with limited training. Ebrahim (2010) notes that this ideology exists due to South African history and is motivated by the pre-democratic years when governments failed to accredit ECD at the level of importance it deserved within the education sector. She explains that the unequal distribution of funds for early learning centres contributes to the sector being viewed as unimportant.



ECCE practitioners from marginalised communities teaching in semi-formal to informal education centres in comparison to practitioners from private ECCE learning centres are still less exposed to professional training opportunities (Aubrey, 2017). Private ECCE practitioners are able to give learners the best quality education because they are highly trained practitioners who are employed following 'stringent screening' of both their 'qualifications and passion for the job'. They also have more access to opportunities for external workshops and courses on an ongoing and regular basis, in contrast to the qualifications of voluntary and home-based sector professionals (Aubrey, 2017:7). All these opportunities and exposure to social constructs have contributed to their professional identity.

Professional identity in the context of unqualified, underdeveloped and unskilled ECCE practitioners is a global challenge. Internationally too, ECCE practitioners remain among the most poorly remunerated and unrecognised of all professional groups and therefore ECCE attrition rates and staff turnover are globally amongst the highest (Herzenberg et al., 2005; Boyd, 2013; Moloney, 2014; 2017). Nomlomo et al. (2019) state that the professional identity and the lack of early childhood development education professionalisation is one of the contributing factors to why ECCE staff attrition rates are so high. Deacon (2012) and Ashby et al. (2008:69) agree that 30% of new ECCE practitioners leave the profession within the first five years of teaching in the United States. Internationally, 25 to 50% of new ECCE practitioners leave the profession early in their career' (Deacon, 2012). ECCE practitioners need more than just formal training – they acquire a mind shift and clearer sense of ownership with regard to their perceptions and status concerning their professional identity.

## **2.5 Identity**

The abstract and multifarious concept of identity has been intensively researched across a diverse array of disciplines. This section of the literature review emphasises research definitions of identity across various disciplines. In this section, I look at how identity links and interconnects with the ECCE practitioners' professional identities and how attributes of their personal identity influence their profession.

Moje and Luke (2009) define identity as representations: 1) identity as difference; ii) identity as sense of self and subjectivity; iii) identity as mind or consciousness; iv) identity as a

narrative; and v) identity as position. The mind metaphor describes the dialectical relationship between the activities of individuals and their consciousness, which shapes each other in identity construction whilst the narrative metaphor signifies that identities are constructed through the stories told by people about themselves. The position metaphor indicates subjectivities in identity construction across space and time, and how people take up or resist these positions (Moje & Luke 2009). Identity through these metaphors is understood as a complex, socially situated, fluid and dynamic entity (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004; Moje & Luke 2009) which comprise different dimensions of social identity, professional identity and local identity.

According to social identity theorists Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1979), social identity is defined as personal identity in relation to the social groups, e.g., our family, our peers, our colleagues, and our community with whom affiliations are made. Tajfel (1979) explains that the social groups that ECCE practitioners identify and align themselves with help to create, enhance and protect their personal identity. He further expounds that the establishment of group identities results in an identification with a collective, which grounds individuals as group members, in this case, ECCE practitioners to their identity as teaching and care facilitators with their colleagues and within the education sector and ECD community of practice.

Gee (2001) agrees with Tajfel and describes identity as a concept of who people are and how they relate to others. He explains that the traits of identity comprise more than one facet to describe the individual, including the person's individualism, personality traits and communication style that sets them apart from others. Beijaard et al. (2004) explains that identity is something that one develops over a whole lifetime, rather than something that one is born with, supporting the view that our identities comprise key factors that include experiences and connections with others. Stuart Hall (1997) agrees that identity is ever-changing and explains that no person has a constant identity; instead he explains through his representation theory that there is no true representation of people or events, but that our identity is represented through many ways. He further explains that we represent our identity and meaning as a process, exhibited through signs, images, language and culture – which tend to represent us as individuals. The extensive work of Hall (1990) on identity demonstrates

that identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. In other words, our cultural identity comes from our history and everything which is historical, transforming as we progress. In the context of ECCE practitioners, this includes their experiences and interactions with their childhood, peer educators, colleagues, parents, and the community. Lerseth (2013) adds that our identities as professional practitioners link to our recognition of our own individual identities, teaching pedagogy, subject matter knowledge, teacher disposition and classroom management. Our identities include individual beliefs, religion, values, origin, age, sex, cultural norms, career stage, language, abilities, environment, location, etc., which contribute to our attributes as professional teachers and need to be understood within particular contexts (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Teacher identity provides a framework for teachers to theorise their personal, social, and professional identities in the workplace and in the world (Sachs, 2005:15). Beijaard (2004) explains that there is a strong correlation between teachers' individual and professional identities. He indicates that the teacher's identity includes accepted perceptions from society about what a teacher should know and do but also what teachers find important in their professional work and through their personal experiences.

The way in which ECCE practitioners identify themselves as a professional links to the qualities they possess as teachers. When they identify as professionals, 'understand, and position themselves as products of their professional identity', they will automatically be successful in their work (Chikoko, 2015:1). Teacher identity, thus, synthesises with the ECCE practitioner's method of teaching within a specific teaching context and environment, placing emphasis on the personal characteristics of the specific teacher as an individual (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Like Hall, Yazan (2018) agrees that identity is ever changing and interchangeable and is constantly constructed and reconstructed in context, through interactions and experiences. Thus, a teacher's identity is not a narrow, limited or static construct but is a social and professional construct (Oruç, 2013). Yazin (2018) argues that there are vague conceptualisations of teacher identity and the challenges of the lack of a definitive definition

has resulted in teacher identity being taken for granted, causing a lack of understanding of its influence on teacher education, practices and professionalisation.

## **2.6 The professional identity of the ECCE practitioner**

According to Madden (2012), an individual's professional identity is connected with occupation and self. Madden (2012) further explains that there are three critical habits which construct our professional identity: (1) the process of socialisation, 'where one is provided with information regarding the meanings associated with a profession' (Fine: 1996 & Hall 1987); (2) 'the process by which we adjust and adapt our professional identity during periods of career transition' and (3) 'life and work experiences, influence professional identity by clarifying one's priorities and self-understanding' (Schein, 1978). Professional identity in the teaching context is characterised by: 1) expertise in one's area of specialisation; 2) moral integrity; 3) expertise in didactical terms (Komba, Anangisye & Katabaro, 2013). Beijaard (2004) agrees that professional identity is influenced by a number of sources such as the immediate family, significant others, apprenticeship, policy, environment, culture and teaching practice.

According to researchers (Uhlmann et al., 2010:463 & Madden 2012:21) an individual's professional identity relates to discovering meaning connected with one's profession. Madden (2012:21) explains that a weak professional identity relates to lacking self-worth or perceiving that one's profession is unrecognized and undervalued by the government and society (Moloney, 2010; Moloney and Pope, 2012). According to Madden (2012:21), "those who feel their professional expertise is under attack may become disengaged from their work creating malaise within the profession", adding to the problem of a lack of professionalism or a professional identity.

Professional identity formation, like identity, is a multi-faceted process consisting of an extensive range of social, personal and environmental factors. Three primary ways shape professional identity construction, namely socialisation, career transition and work experience (Madden, 2012).

Professional Identity stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, professional identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; 'rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience' (Sachs, 2005:15). Practitioners develop their professional identities as early as the stage when they are students whilst personal learning and training at college takes place. Their identities develop through the concepts that they learn and the conclusions that they draw from theories. They construct their early professional identities as individuals during pre-professional practitioner experiences whilst still studying; then during classroom interaction and related practice with the curriculum and children – such as subject matter, curriculum, instructional planning, and classroom-based goals. The ECCE practitioners also develop their professional identities outside the classroom during teacher association, within their communities with parents, with colleagues, policy and theory, or expert models of practice within their communities of practice (Hsieh, 2010).

## **2.7 Factors that shape the professional identity the ECCE practitioner**

According to Hsieh (2010), functioning as an ECCE practitioner with a conclusive professional identity is not an instant and natural development. Professional identity evolves over time, through an assortment of ongoing processes, including teaching and care experiences in and outside the ECCE classroom and facility. Hsieh (2010) further explains that professional identity progresses through the development of the practitioner as an individual but also as a part of a greater unit. He explains that the general perception is that most ECCE practitioners fall in a category of 'individually oriented teachers' as they base their practice on 'their classroom practice as well as their sense of what it means to be a professional teacher'.

It is evident that the way in which ECCE practitioners view themselves and their identities 'strongly determine[s] the way that they perform roles, the way they develop as practitioners, and their attitudes toward educational changes' (Al-Khatib & Lash 2017:2). Beijaard (2004) emphasised that professional identity is therefore 'strongly influenced by the way they teach and their attitudes towards how they welcome education change'. Undoubtedly, ECCE practitioners and the ECD sector have undergone a shift in identity, influenced by the many rapid changes over the past two decades, altering and shifting the ECCE practitioner's

experiences and interactions within learning facilities and the broader communities (Oruç, 2013). Additionally, this shift will most likely change the face of identity over the next few years, affecting professional identity and the ECCE practitioners' career.

According to Chong and Lu (2019) there are many factors both in and out of the early childhood care and education context that influence PI. Factors that emanate from within the ECCE context may include how successful teachers are or think they are, but also stem from the perceptions, observations and views of how successful the parents and community observe the ECCE practitioner to be. Chong et al. (2019) further explain that the ECCE practitioner faces many challenges whilst interacting with the children, colleagues, parents and the ECD community daily. Meeting the daily needs of this diverse group of people is a great responsibility, yet it is critical to the shaping of the ECCE practitioners' professional identities and development.

Previous research done in Ireland by Moloney (2010) on the 'Professional identity in early childhood care and education: perspectives of pre-school and infant teachers' with 56 teachers concluded that ECCE practitioners are aware of the factors that shape their professional identities. These factors include how their peers, parents and the wider community and policy value and perceive them, and how they perceive their own feelings of inclusivity and belonging.

In similar research on 'Early childhood teachers' perception of the professional self and in relation to early childhood communities' conducted with 88 teachers in Singapore, Chong and Lu (2019) agree 'that the ECCE practitioners' personal and professional perceptions impact their identities as professionals'. Chong and Lu (2019) explain that 'the intrapersonal experiences that one encounters together with the interpersonal experiences within the community lead to a culminating viewpoint of how they perceive themselves as teaching professionals.' Chong and Lu (2019) further explain that the multi-faceted roles and responsibilities assumed by the ECCE practitioner adds to the development of their professional self (intrapersonal) as well as how they see themselves in relation to others (interpersonal).

Another factor that shapes the ECCE practitioners' professional identities is policy. According to Moloney (2010), ECCE practitioners expressed their disappointment in policy, which in their opinion 'looks good on paper, but fails them when it comes to implementation and practice'. Staff stated that the consistency in implementing policy would greatly support them in increasing their professionalisation and status. Moloney (2010) also reported that practitioners related the link between identity and tradition. Most of the interviewees in this specific study believed the perception and value of early learning professional identity was influenced by tradition. Traditionally, teaching was seen as a prestigious career, practitioners were always looked up to and there used to be a high level of pride and respect in teaching. This had changed over the years. Early childhood practitioners were no longer perceived with the same level of respect and recognition as fifty years before, and their profession was no longer accorded the same value (Moloney, 2010).

### **2.8 Agency and the ECCE practitioner's professional identity**

Amongst the many factors that influence the ECCE practitioner's professional identity, their sense of agency plays a critical role, particularly in relation to the environment in which they present themselves and in relation to how they need to maintain their belief in their own professionalism and in the importance of their work. The ECCE practitioners' beliefs, values and commitments in relation to being professionals inform the way they view themselves and the way that they act in relation to their role (Hsieh, 2010).

Agency serves as an essential component within the ECCE practitioners' identity as it deciphers the practitioner as an active citizen whilst in the process of developing his or her personal and professional identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Francis & le Roux, 2011). Agency is *action-orientated*, essential to the ECCE practitioners' approach on how they exert power and influence in making decisions that influence positive social change in the child, education, their environment and their community (Moore, 2007:591; Francis & le Roux, 2011). Durrant (2020:8) concurs that agency is fundamental to education and learning and emphasises that agency is a critical component to how individuals work and live.

In this study, agency forms an important element for ECCE practitioners as they play a critical role in steering how young children see and approach the world. As agents of change,

professional identity gives ECCE practitioners a sense of power through the important role they play in the process of developing the identity construction of young children, specifically in the context of teaching and care and in their role as leaders and role models.

Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013) define agency as the intentional capability of humans to act autonomously in making decisions to develop towards set goals. Agency is not intrinsic to a person, but rather perceived as occurring interactively with the environment, and that the environment in which individuals find themselves may enable or constrain agentic action (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Buchanan (2015:704) describes identity as 'intertwined' with the professional identity and professional agency of an individual. Buchanan (2015) further explains that the perceptions and understanding ECCE practitioners construct of who they are within their learning and teaching environments and concerning their professional identities is what inspires them to take actions within a certain context. These actions, and the perceptions of these actions by others, subsequently feeds back into the ECCE practitioners' ongoing development of their individual and professional identities. Therefore, agency is perceived as one of the key elements that enable strong professional actions within practice that shape professional identity and how ECCE practitioners identify themselves.

For Lopez and D'Ambrosio (2011), agency implies 'self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-regulatory capacity in determining one's actions.' Lopez and D'Ambrosio (2011) agree that the concept of agency not only informs the teacher's decision-making process regarding their own paths towards professional development, but also their choices and interactions regarding the young child and the most beneficial methods applied during teaching and care within a specific environment.

Durrant (2020:8) concurs that agency, as a characteristic of the ECCE practitioners' identity, stimulates engagement and serves as a contributive factor that shape the environments in which we are living, working and learning. In the context of this study, embracing an agentic stance as ECCE practitioners in a marginalised South African community thus allows for a position of powerful progression and change. This agentic stance supports confidence in learning and self-efficacy in leadership – which is crucial for the current position and perception of ECCE practitioners in order to advance their professional identity. With the



application of teacher agency and with the mindset of a change agent, ECCE practitioners in marginalised communities can voice themselves in creative and innovative ways, both in and outside the classroom. Focusing on teacher agency will enable them to distill the real concerns and challenges that confront them, for the children, families, communities and as individuals.

Postma (2015) emphasises 'Foucault's notion that a strong sense of the self is the basis for the individual's' in this case the ECCE practitioner's personal and social transformation. He explains that the growth of acute agency in education is explored in the light of Foucault's philosophies of freedom and agency. 'The critical agent is not only one who could identify and analyse regimes of power, but also one who can imagine different modes of being, and who could practice freedom in the enactment of an alternative mode of being' (Foucault, 1980). The educational implications are explored in relation to the role of the teacher and pedagogical processes.

Teacher agency, considered as a vital dimension of professional development and identity, liberates the ECCE practitioner's sense of being as they unfold their TPI. Durrant (2020) agrees that agency allows the ECCE practitioner the power to voice their own creative practices of teaching and care and they are encouraged to stimulate inclusion and ownership. Of the many different ways to teach and to learn, agency allows an unambiguous place in both the teacher and child's identity (Durrant, 2020).

The ECCE practitioner plays a central role in the life of the child and influences learning, not just now but for years to come. With the magnitude of power and agency ECCE practitioners have as early childhood development practitioners; they need to regain their decision-making voice through re-establishing their professional identity and position.

## **2.9 How professional identity influences approaches to teaching and care**

The ECCE practitioner's commitment, success and the characteristics of their professional identity are expected to add great value concerning the child's achievements (Chikoko, 2015:1; Sammons, Day, Kington, Gu, Stobart & Smees, 2007). Sacks (2014) concurs that ECCE

practitioners' perceptions and understanding of themselves and their professional identities have a major impact on the way they interact and care for children.

McCulloch, Helsby and Knight (2000:118), perfectly summarises the connection between professional identity and practitioner quality: 'educational improvement depends on practitioner *wanting* to make a difference' and their practicum is largely dependent on their *feeling* professional. McCulloch, Helsby and Knight (2000) further explain that professional identity entails quality teaching and comprises more than just skill and knowledge, but also the personal qualities of the ECCE practitioner, for example respect, care, courage, empathy, and personal values, attitudes, identity, beliefs – highlighting the close connection between professional identity and quality.

A study by Cabral (2012) found that curriculum models play a crucial role in practitioners building their professional identities in a unique way and that professional identity develops through the interaction and reflections of the practitioners about themselves and their practices. Thus, the relationships they establish with the professional communities they belong to and the educational practices that such relationships and affiliations bring forth contribute to their professional identity formation.

McCulloch, Helsby and Knight (2000) emphasize that there is a strong connection between professional identity and practitioner quality and argue that improved teaching methodologies rely on the ECCE practitioner's desire to make a difference and are greatly influenced by their having strong professional identities. Professional identity is therefore strongly influenced by the way ECCE practitioners teach and their attitudes towards how they apply themselves to changes in education (Beijaard, 2004). It is evident that the way in which ECCE practitioners view themselves and their identities determine how they perform, the way they develop as practitioners and their attitudes toward their work and the sector (Beijaard et al. 2004:108; Amal, Al-Khatib & Lash 2017:2).

Outcomes of a research study done by Chikoko (2015) in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa, showed that the loving, caring, compassionate natures of ECCE practitioners working with young children depended on their practical methods of engagement. Chikoko (2015:179) explains

that engagement is a 'powerful source of identification in practice which reflects identity in practice'. Wenger (1998) supports the view that practice and engagement is reflective of identity and that the two mirror each other, implying that the way in which the ECCE practitioners identify themselves can be confirmed in what and how they practice – in essence, reflecting their identity. In essence, how the ECCE practitioner perceives themselves influences and establishes their approaches to teaching and care. This same research study noted that the characteristics of caring, serving, compassion and knowledge which form part of their identity influence not only their practices but also their connection and interaction with the children and other practitioners. They indicated that they felt proud when they were *recognised* as demonstrating more knowledge in topics and were used as examples to teach models of teaching and learning. Their journals reflected that inclusivity and being allowed to serve on all levels within the sector added value to their perceptions of who they were as ECCE practitioners and professionals. An earlier study also contended that while the ECCE practitioner finds a sense of belonging within a teacher community of practice, it can play a successful role in the progression of constructing a professional teacher identity (Castañeda, 2011:37).

This section presented the literature review necessary for placing the ECCE practitioner's professional identity and the influences it has on teaching and care into perspective.

In exploring the ECCE practitioner's professional identity, we find whilst 'identity' is about an individual's personal persona, 'professional *teacher* identity' is about the individual's identity in context as an ECCE practitioner and professional. The professional identity relates to *how the individuals behaves* as ECCE practitioners in their capacity and context as ECCE practitioners. In the context of this study, while these various themes have different definitions and explanations, they are used interchangeably and all play a critical role in developing ECCE practitioners as a whole and their professional identities. Professional identity implies interrelatedness between 'professionalism' and 'identity', which means that the one cannot be understood without the other; therefore, ECCE practitioners and their experiences within contextual realities construct their professional identities (Amal, Al-Khatib and Lash, 2017:2).

The identity (the person), the '*teacher identity*' (their notion of themselves as teachers), and *professional identity* (their understanding of themselves as professionals (their professionalism) cannot be overlooked when it is the ECCE practitioner's professional identity that needs to be strengthened. With professional identity often associated with the ECCE practitioner's role and experiences, the way they develop, communicate, their perception of themselves, their approaches toward changes within the education sector and policy, the correlation between the three aspects and the critical part it plays in forming their professional identity becomes evident.

Through reviewed literature it becomes clear that the teacher (knowingly and unknowingly) becomes an active agent of change in the child's life as they constantly advocate for the best learning experiences and creating a positive learning environment as main priorities for the child. The experiences that shape the ECCE practitioner's personal and professional identity and methodologies manifest their values and early childhood best practices (Dallis Been, 2012:67).

Undoubtedly the ECCE practitioner and ECD sector have undergone a shift in identity, influenced by the many rapid changes over the past two decades, altering and shifting the practitioner's experiences and interactions within school and the broader communities (Oruç, 2013). Additionally, this shift will most likely change the face of identity over the next few years, affecting the ECCE practitioner's professional identity and the ECCE practitioner's career drastically.

## **2.10 Theoretical framework for exploring the ECCE practitioners' professional identity**

### **2.10.1 Introduction**

There are many different types of learning theories on professional identity. Each is equally valuable with its own useful purposes, emphasising numerous aspects of learning. The literature reviewed specified that the various themes of identity are socially constructed and indicates that the perspectives and influences of social beings, their practices, environment and resources influences the ECCE practitioners' professional identity. According to Beijaard et al. (2004), professional identity is commonly associated with *how* the ECCE practitioner views him- or herself and is significant in attitudes, behaviors and approaches they manifest

when they teach and care for children in the classroom. Shaped through the interactions between the ongoing relations with other individuals and context, within their social and cultural working contexts, the ECCE practitioner's identity is highly affected by environmental and societal influences, specifically in the context of marginalised communities. This section discusses the theoretical framework used to analyse the data. I specifically focus on social learning theories and base my analysis on the works of Wenger, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner. These theorists provide interesting insights as to how ECCE practitioners' professional identity is socially and co-constructed within ECCE context, and how specific contexts, including environment and social interactions, influence their approaches to teaching and care. These theories place a focus on how the everyday activities, interactions and experiences of the ECCE practitioners and their perceptions influence their professional identities and the way in which they teach and care for young children.

According to Wenger's communities of practice theory (1998), we are social beings, and this fact is a 'central aspect of learning'. He explains that knowledge creates a strong sense of confidence and enhances our identity in relation to who we establish ourselves to be in our community of practice. For example, if the ECCE practitioner is confident in knowing and understanding a certain song or tune, her confidence in teaching this song or tune would not be restricted, nor her ability to express herself through the activities associated with the song. Her confidence and enthusiasm in presenting the song would establish her identity in the classroom.

Vygotsky, like Wenger, believed that human identity is co-constructed through internal and external interactions and factors. Both these theorists believed that identity is subject to change according to social exposure and circumstances. Through social practices and participation, ECCE practitioners gain clarity about their roles and social norms, and most importantly, it allows them to improve and cultivate their professional identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Park, 2015). Other researchers like Foucault (1979), Hall (1990) and Park (2015) agree that identity in its fluid state and its constant progression within a social context comprise communal interaction, both with individuals and with the environment within a community of practice.

For this study, I chose the abovementioned social learning theories as they provide an interesting lens as to how ECCE practitioners construct their professional identities through their background, cultures, environment, interactions, engagement, language and context. These theories indicate that the understanding and perceptions of who they are as professionals is dependent on their sense of value of themselves in and outside of the classroom and how their experiences construct them, attributed to the value they bring to the classroom. These theorists best describe how the ECCE practitioner gains confidence once they establish their sense of belonging within their teaching community and how they develop through co-constructive learning experiences from more experienced practitioners in the field. The sociocultural theory perspective describes how the cultural background of the ECCE practitioners shapes their perception of who they are. This study emphasises social interactions as a strong influence in shaping the professional identity and interactions of the ECCE practitioner. Therefore, we look at how language and social interactions shape the professional identity of the ECCE practitioner through practice in teaching and care between practitioner and the child. According to Vygotsky (1978), language is one of the greatest tools people can acquire as a means of communication and interaction with the outside world. He explains that we develop language from social interactions for communication purposes, which is a critical aspect of development.

### **2.10.2 Wenger's community of practice (CoP)**

According to Wenger (1991), communities of practice are formed when individuals with a mutual passion for a specific topic or interest commonly learn how to improve through regular interaction. The learning experience that emerge through this process of social interaction is unintentional and takes place organically. Community of practice underpins the philosophy that the school and the classroom is not the primary place of obtaining knowledge in the system of learning; instead it is life itself that is the main learning experience with school and the classroom as an active part within life as it happens. The understanding of community of practice first originated in a 1991 publication in partnership by theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, 'Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation' (1991). This publication by Lave and Wenger used an anthropological approach to validate that learning is more than just absorbing information, it is interactive and participatory. According to their

interpretation, learning is a social practice. They emphasize that increased learning is a direct effect of an increased participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991:49).

In 1998, Wenger expanded the concept of community of practice in his book, 'Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity,' in which he focused on workplace learning. He explains that social capital shapes individuals' learning and their professional identity and that participating in a social community constructs our identity within that specific community. The ECCE practitioner forms a sense of identity through participating in an ECCE teaching community of practice as participation creates more than an action – it creates a sense of belonging.

According to Wenger (1998:5), a social theory of learning must have *meaning* so that we can experience life and the world as meaningful and understand that we have the ability to transform as individuals and in a collective. It must create *practice* so that we are able to have mutual engagements and shared activities around our various historical and social perspectives. It must create a sense of *community*, so that we belong to a social enterprise that defines our worth and recognise participation as competence, and lastly it must comprise *identity* in order for us to find learning and becoming. Learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities. Depicted in the diagram below, Wenger describes how these components of identity, community, meaning and practice are 'interconnected and mutually defining'. These integrated components are critical for the development of a well-rounded ECCE practitioner's professional identity.



**Figure 1:** Wenger's social theory of learning.

**Source:** Wenger (2009).

### **2.10.3 The three fundamental characteristics that describes the philosophies of CoP**

ECCE practitioners develop their practice through various means, including the sharing of skills and experience, information sharing, and resource usage. CoP theory implies that ECCE practitioners, as active participants in their practices of social communities, construct their identities through continuous engagements and contribute to the practices of their communities. This 'learning partnership between individuals is found useful in learning from and with each other' about a specific subject using one another's skills and experiences (Wenger, 1998). In other words, teaching and care, for the ECCE practitioner, takes place through the three fundamental characteristics of CoP, i.e. *the domain, the community and the practice*.

### **2.10.4 The Domain**

The domain is described as the characteristics that brings the group of people – in this case the ECCE practitioners – together through knowledge, giving them identity, and defining them through the key issues that they address. Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner, (2016) explain that the domain is the element that gives a group their identity and differentiates them from other clubs, networks or people. Farnsworth et al. (2016) further explain a fundamental element of this framework is that CoP can happen in any 'domain of human endeavor, for example, the practice of teaching and care or the creative interaction between the ECCE practitioner and the child whilst interacting and defining a shared activity'. Learning happens through partaking in multiple social practices, practices which formed through pursuing a shared activity over time'. The ECCE practitioner belongs to an ECCE forum or group where mutual tasks and understanding are accomplished. A 'domain' is thus a term that describes the capacity in which the ECCE practitioner community has acceptability to define their identity and confidence – a community defined by profession or something they establish together (Farnsworth et al., 2016:5).

### **2.10.5 The Community**

The second element that characterises CoP is the community (Farnsworth et al., 2016). This element establishes a unit of people for whom the domain is relevant and importantly creates a sense of identification for the ECCE practitioner. In this 'teacher community' the ECCE practitioners' quality of their relationships and interactions are established. The ECCE



practitioners establishes their community through collaborative partnership as they come together through their various domains of practice. Within this 'teacher community', members define their boundaries between the 'outside and the inside'. For the ECCE practitioners, community is formed with both the internal (colleagues and peers) and external (parents and the broader community). These communities form as they share a platform of mutual interest and domains (the child or teaching practices), sharing their ideas, knowledge and topics of interest (the domain), interacting with each other on a regular basis and learning together, developing and strengthening their professional identities. According to Farnsworth et al. (2016:8) community and identity are closely linked and take place in three stages. These three stages are 1) how they transmit their identity as a participant in a community of practice, and 2) how they express their proficiency in that community, how others perceive them, and 3) how their participation in that community constitutes their identity as ECCE practitioners.

#### **2.10.6 The Practice**

According to Wenger (1998), the final element of CoP is practice, which is defined as 'the body of knowledge'. ECCE practitioners share methods, activities, music, resources, stories, and lesson plans to confront challenges within their specific contexts. Practice is seen as 'a way of acting in the world' and as 'a field of endeavour and expertise'. For example, the ECCE practitioners learn from one another by sharing ideas, themes, songs and like-minded practices and activities. The ECCE practitioners within a community of practice can develop a communal selection of resources, activities, experiences, and stories; in short, a shared practice. ECCE practitioners who meet regularly, even in the staff room, do not realise that interactive discussions are one of their key sources of sharing knowledge about how to care for children. Regular interaction and conversations with other ECCE practitioners can develop into a set of references that becomes a shared platform for their practice.

#### **2.10.7 The three dimensions of community of practice**

Communities of practice are ways in which individuals work together. According to Wenger (1998), CoP matures, transfer, and over time sets principles and expectations through contribution and participation.

### 2.10.8 Joint enterprise

Joint enterprise is a shared acceptance of what the specific community is about and defines its purpose. For example, with regards to the ECCE practitioner, it refers to the mutual deliverables that bind them together in practice and how they deliver outcomes of a common goal through their activities (Wenger, 1998).

*Three aspects that attend to joint enterprise:*

- (i) **Exchanged goals:** ECCE practitioners develop an idea of their joint goals through mutual engagement, for example when the ECCE practitioner interacts with the parent for a mutual learning and development outcome for the child.
- (ii) **Indigenous purpose:** The group goals are determined by the larger structure in which they are embedded, for example, the principal of school management – however, the group establishes their own identity, goals, and enterprise.
- (iii) **Mutual accountability:** The joint enterprise, created through mutual negotiation, is based on mutual accountability, for example, the ECCE practitioners are responsible to each other and for the initiation of sharing information. They strengthen one another's identities without any limitations and their relationship is fortified as their community of practice becomes more established.

### 2.10.9 Mutual engagement

Mutual engagement refers to the ways, which the ECCE practitioners interact in a common, negotiated activity. As they interact, they shape their practices and the culture of their teachers' community. They form norms, values and expectations as their relationships are established, resulting in more relaxed and frequent interactions. A pivotal requirement for a community of practice is that the ECCE practitioners engage meaningfully in shared activities (Wenger, 1998). Through engagement they acquire a sense of who they are in practice and as they interact with others in activities. Mutual engagement provides the ECCE practitioner with opportunities to invest in what they do in relation to others – gaining a sense of value for the practitioners' professional identities and 'who we are' (Wenger 1998). Through their mutual engagements and interactions, they shape their group culture and its practices.

### 2.10.10 Shared repertoire

Smith, Hayes and Shea (2017:212) explain shared repertoire as the ongoing advancement and upkeep of collective procedures, dialogue, resources, activities, techniques, symbols, actions, and concepts. This is the most noticeable effect of the mutual teachers' community of practice.

*Three aspects of shared repertoire worth remembering:*

- (i) **Shared history:** The ECCE practitioners form part of a shared history and therefore give a sense of identity and belonging to their community of practice as their repertoire is built up and shaped over time.
- (ii) **Richness:** The shared repertoire offers a 'language for communicating meaning' (Smith et al, 2017). The size of the repertoire will determine the meaning and value of the group. The larger the group the more there is to work with.
- (iii) **Ambiguity:** The observations and utilization of the repertoire elements are always up for interpretation – it really does depend on the value added to the given element by the group.

### 2.10.11 Identity and community of practice:

According to Smith, Hayes and Shea (2017:211), when individuals participate in a community of practice, they develop a sense of 'who they are'. Participating in a community of practice, participants acquire new knowledge and skills. Learning transforms them as they experience what they can do through their community of practice.

Wenger (1998) believed that 'learning is central to human identity' and that learning and the human *identity is co-constructed through internal and external interactions and factors*. ECCE practitioners continuously form their identities through interacting and adding value to their communities of practice whether in or outside of the classroom through an activity or interaction with another living being. Their professional identity *is subject to change according to social exposure and circumstances and is never consistent*. Who the teacher is in the class with the learners is not necessarily who the teacher is in association with the parents or their colleagues and peers. Through social practices and participation, the ECCE practitioner gains clarity of their roles and social norms within a social context, and most

importantly, it allows them to improve and cultivate the way that they express themselves through their practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Park, 2015).

According to Wenger (1998), this social learning process allows individuals with mutual interest in a topic to form units of collaboration over a period of time and practices; and within these units' resources, outcomes and relationships, they shape to achieve common goals. Through these united ideas, passionate topics, concerns, expertise and knowledge are shared and professional identities are shaped within the context of learning. In other words, whilst practicing, ECCE practitioners discover methods in solving problems, discover information and gain experiences (individually and mutually) through synergies from a community of practice. ECCE practitioners are therefore forming, shaping and transforming their professional identities as they participate in a teacher community (Castañeda, 2011:35).

Wenger's theory of community of practice (1998:151) brings across the concept that identity originates through every day 'experiences and engagements' within social practices and that these daily practices and events plays an important role in understanding the notion of identity and exploring its process and construction. As mentioned earlier, identity and professional identity are closely connected; Wenger (1998) confirms that 'professional identities', like identity is constructed and negotiated through the ECCE practitioners' communications and relationships constructed in their everyday activities in and around the classroom (Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). For the ECCE practitioner in the marginalised early learning centre, where they teach and obtain 'professional experience, schools and the communities are such communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998). In many ways, all opportunities for communal learning and social interactions provide a community of practice contributing to the ECCE practitioner's professional identity.

ECCE practitioners develop their professional identities through learning from their community of practice – learning forms a part of their identity construction. According to Wenger (1998), they 'develop their sense of belonging and alignment in a community of practice and its way of thinking and doing through their active engagement in the cultural practice' of that community. These interactions provide opportunity for legitimate peripheral participation to

evolve to full participation as belonging to a community of practice emerges. Within a community of practice, ECCE practitioners are able to visualize themselves, their positioning, and their future in the practice as they collaborate to actively engage whilst emerging from novice to an expert, in making meaning of the tools, concepts, and processes that co-construct and cultivate the practice. 'With advanced levels of participation, participants' identities and understandings become increasingly aligned to the practice, as they become more skilled in their knowledge of the practice' – which in turn advances their practice in teaching and care (Wenger et al., 2002).

Teacher development opportunities specifically provide opportunities of learning for the ECCE practitioners as these platforms of interaction in and outside the classroom expose them to the adjustment of their behavior and they can identify themselves with others and their surroundings (Wenger, 1998; Smith, 2007; Chikoko, 2015:56). The level at which the ECCE practitioners interact within their communities of practice thus measure how their professional identities are formed (Chikoko, 2015).

In essence, Wenger's (1998) theory of community of practice describes how the ECCE practitioners construct their individual identities through the social connections they make with those around them – whether at school, in the community, with their colleagues at work or with peers in a learning environment. Within these communities of practice, the ECCE practitioner's identity develops informally through mutual learning experiences as they share common goals and practices within a specific environment (Wenger 1998:2).

#### **2.10.12 Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory**

Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory provides a useful understanding for this study as it adds to the notion that ECCE practitioners learn within a social construct through a variety of contexts (Woolfolk, 2014:55). According to Woolfolk (2014:55), social interactions are essential in the expansion of the ECCE practitioners' thought processes, and collaborative interactions enhance their professional identity. The socio-constructivist theory confirms that the ECCE practitioners' identity is constructed when interaction takes place between more than one individual and is influenced by the culture and context in which a specific communicative situation occurs. Socio-constructivism emphasises the influence that culture has on

development and how it shapes the way in which we perceive the world. The socio-constructivist theory places the individual at the center of the learning experience and focuses on the individual's learning that takes place as they interact in a specific social context. Like Wenger, Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory explains that ECCE practitioners learn from their interactions with others such as their peers, colleagues, the children, the parents and the community. Socio-constructivist theory explains that knowledge is imparted through interaction, and the ECCE practitioner learns from these with more knowledge about a certain context, example culture or language.

Evidently professional identity is closely bound with the ECCE practitioner's professional and personal values and ambitions, which emphasises the need for skilled and well trained early childhood development teachers; a core aspect of professional identity (Kelchtermans, 1993:449–450; Moloney, 2010; Madden, 2012:22)

### **2.10.13 Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory**

Vygotsky's work has become increasingly influential and culturally relevant in shaping theories of learning. Like Wenger, Vygotsky (1978) believed that every element of social interaction plays a role in the way that humans learn and shape their identity. He first developed and applied his theories and approaches to learning and development, with his colleagues in Russia during 1920 and 1930. In this section, the researcher looks at Vygotsky's socio-cultural and socio-constructivist theories and explains how these theories' view development and learning as a socially facilitated process that occurs when learners interact with other more skilled and knowledgeable individuals. Vygotsky (1978) claims that these social interactions stimulate our beliefs, cultural values, and problem-solving approaches, emphasising the importance of shared knowledge and skill through mutual interaction as a key factor of development of cognition for the ECCE practitioner.

Vygotsky (1978) strongly believed that the community plays a critical role in the process of making sense and creating meaning to self and of society. Vygotskian thinking assumes that knowledge construction does not begin in the mind but through the social contact between individuals, and describes knowledge as a socioculturally facilitated process guided by physical and psychological tools and objects (Lantolf, 2004, 2008; Shabani, 2016). For the

ECCE practitioner, in developing the young child, social contact is the most fundamental method of teaching and care. They use physical and psychological tools and objects as demonstrative and tactile objects of learning on a daily basis whilst stimulating the child cognitively. Wertsch (1991) agrees that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory places emphasis on how our social and cultural interactions contribute and effect cognitive development and are a key factor in our mental and psychological development. Vygotsky (1978) showed a great interest in how the mental functioning of an individual influences social and cultural processes. He believed that signs or tools form an important link between the social and psychological planes of functioning and that humans live in a universe of signs and tools. He interpreted these signs and tools – to which he believed society contributed in producing – as a communicative system. An important principle that Vygotsky indicated is that thinking moves from the intermental (individual) functioning to intramental (group) functioning (Hedegaard 1998). In other words, thinking occurs firstly on the individual and then in the social plane between people engaged in joint sociocultural activities.

According to Park (2015:2), ECCE practitioners develop their identities through participating in a social practice where they come to learn the norms, characteristics, and culture of the social context. This takes place while they invest themselves intrinsically through self-meaning as they submerge in social situations.

According to the Vygotskian sociocultural theory, culture and society form the foundation of the ECCE practitioner's development, serving as a constitutive component and not merely a layer upon the other facets that make up an individual (Ewing, 2016:4). Vygotsky believed that human development begins with dependence on primary caregivers, for example the ECCE practitioner at foundation stage. Vygotsky, like Wenger, believed that individuals depend on the experiences of others in order to develop. Through the sociocultural theory, he emphasises how culture and language construction play a role in future learning, and emphasises the co-dependence between the social and individual processes (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996:198).

The sociocultural approach explains that the human interactions and learning that takes place in a cultural context are facilitated by language and symbols and are understood through historical development and that 'development cannot be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which it is embedded' (Vygotsky, 1978).

## **2.11 The basis for sociocultural theory:**

### **2.11.1 Genetic (developmental) analysis**

The genetic (development) approach of Vygotsky argues that humans are able to understand a variety of intellectual functions, once the understanding of their origin and the transitions they have undergone is grasped (Wertsch 1991, 19-25). In Vygotsky's words, 'we need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established' (Vygotsky 1978, 63-64). The ECCE practitioner needs exposure to various methods of learning on both an internal and external level in order to obtain a higher level of consciousness in their professional identity and practice. According to Vygotsky, these levels of exposure are influenced by the traditions, environment and culture of the ECCE practitioner.

### **2.11.2 Social sources of individual development**

Also known as the social origins of higher mental functioning. Social cultural theory (SCT) argues that mental efficiency stems from our social environment and relates to how our world is socially organised through the culture we have observed as we develop our talents and abilities, for example, the way in which ECCE practitioners have developed their mental functioning and perception of themselves through social and cultural origins. Vygotsky (1966: 44) explains that any function of an individual's cultural development manifests on two levels, first socially and then psychologically. In other words, how they perceive themselves and perform effectively within their capacity is determined by what they were exposed to through their environment and surroundings as they developed.

### **2.11.3 Semiotic mediation**

Semiotic mediation, also known as mediated action, is the method of using mechanisms or tools as critical aspects of knowledge construction. Vygotsky believed that tools such as signs and symbols, including language, mediate social and individual functioning by connecting the



external and internal in human development. Vygotsky (1966:29) explains that the usage of signs as 'artificially created stimuli' in practice to 'simulate behaviour and form new reflex connections in the human brain' connects us to the concept of culture and that tools play a vital role in mental and cognitive development. He explains that teachers primarily make use of semiotic mediation as tools of learning in teaching and care, for example 'language as various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques, mathematical symbols systems; works of art; writing; diagrams; maps and mechanical drawings and other conventional signs' Vygotsky (1966). In context of this study, additional tools recognised and used by the ECCE practitioner in the sociocultural discourse, are paintbrushes, charts and symbol systems. These are tools primarily used to adopt knowledge through activities for development. ECCE practitioners can only develop and stimulate the child according to tools they are culturally aware of and that are available in their community (Wertsch & Stone, 1985). In practice, ECCE practitioners similarly use tools, which develop their own professional identities; for example, assessment tools (canvas assignments, self-assessments, teacher ratings, surveys, data collection tools for portfolios and questionnaires). For the ECCE practitioner working in a cross-cultural marginalised community with a diverse set of learners, with different nationalities, language as a tool is critical in cognitive development. In Vygotsky's opinion, language takes place through a process of internalization, and socially constructed speech is first processed internally through means of inner speech before it can transcend publicly with others, externally.

According to Shabani (2016:9), Vygotskian thinking indicates that the source of knowledge construction is not to be looked for in the individual's mind but within social interaction, co-constructed amongst other more knowledgeable individuals of the same interest or community of practice. Shabani (2016:9) further explains that the structure of knowledge is a 'socio-culturally mediated process affected by physical and psychological tools and artifacts.'

The core beliefs underlying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is that learning precedes development, mediation is the centre for all learning, language is the key tool of thought and facilitation is vital for learning and social interaction, serving as the basis of teaching and care. Sociocultural theory further posits that 'learning is a process of apprenticeship and internalization in which skills and knowledge are transformed from the social into the

cognitive plane' and that the zone of proximal development (ZPD) serve as the principal area in which learning occurs. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is the area of exploration. He believes that learners are naturally cognitively ready for the ZPD but need social contact and the guidance of a more experienced peer to completely develop through a 'scaffolding approach', supporting the development and comprehension of knowledge and complex skills. Together with the notion of unity of behavior and consciousness – Vygotsky's developmental theories – collaborative learning, modelling, discourse and scaffolding are strategies for supporting the intellectual knowledge and skills of learners and facilitating intentional learning (Shabani, 2016).

Shabani (2016) explains that a major belief that reflects Vygotsky's development theories is harmonious behaviour and inner consciousness, a crucial characteristic in ECCE teaching. As a nurturing teacher, these are essential components for the young child's development. Vygotsky contends that the incorporation of human behaviour and consciousness and the amalgamation of self-awareness with social interaction is a major characteristic in defining who we are as interactive human beings in a social construct – the teacher's professional identity and how they behave in context within various incidents. He claimed inherent advancement that unfolds with time does not set our development; instead, we evolve by our behaviour or social interaction with others – in the context of teaching, teachers becomes more self-aware and self-conscious as their experience and knowledge expand. He further believed that our behaviours reciprocate – as in the teacher child relationship – and that we can only impart what is internalized.

*The Vygotskian theoretical framework's key concepts validate professional development practices, like the practitioner's professional identity. It places emphasis on:*

- Social interaction e.g. colleagues, peers and management, with the parents, the community and the child
- Internalization – Independent accomplishments (journal writing)
- Mediation – material resources, signs (newsletters and journals), and other humans (professional networks) that are reflective

- Psychological constructions – specialised improvement programs that focus on changing the attitudes of teachers including instructional practices whether informal or formal (learning and development, workshops, seminars, and mentoring)

*The Vygotskian learning theories are characterised by the following four principles:*

- knowledge is constructed rather than passively absorbed.
- knowledge is socially invented and not discovered.
- learning is a process of making sense of the world and real life situations; and
- effective learning requires meaningful, open-ended, challenging problems for the learner to solve.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist and sociocultural learning theories provide an interesting lens as to how ECCE practitioners construct their professional identities, as these principles are important for this study. ECCE practitioners interact socially within a variety of contexts with the children, colleagues, parents and the broader community. Socio-constructivist and sociocultural theories place emphasis on learning with others and not as individuals. These interactions and experiences influence the development of the ECCE practitioners' professional identities (Fox, 2001). These theories focus on the active role of ECCE practitioners as learners who builds understanding and makes sense of information from their personal and professional backgrounds within the specific context.

## **2.12 The ecological theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner**

Like the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that the environment is a vital element in shaping human development. He contended that there are multiple aspects concerning human development and that these aspects are interrelated, influencing the persons – in the context of this research study, ECCE practitioners and the effect of their professional identities on the children. In addition to focusing on the individual's development, the works of Bronfenbrenner looked beyond, considering the extensive influences and factors and the contexts (or ecology) of development (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1989) believed that everything related to our environment influences development and the capacity to function as social and cultural beings. Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1989) specifically emphasises that human development, including ECCE practitioners' professional identities, is influenced by their ecosystem through the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. Therefore, external and internal environments contribute to the development of the ECCE practitioners' professional identity. Bronfenbrenner (1977, cited in Swart and Pettipher (2011) and Sacks (2014:9)) refers to these exchanges as proximal processes. He explains that proximal processes interconnect with the individual's characteristics and context in which they exist. The ECCE practitioner is an *active participant* in the development of their professional identity – their identity evolves through personal interactions between their characteristics within their environment.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory agrees with Wenger that human development, like the ECCE practitioner's professional identity, transpires over a certain time spent with individuals within a certain context. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological theory further explains that the specific individuals the ECCE practitioner spend time with, within a certain context and environment determine *how* they shape their professional identity. In other words, if the ECCE practitioner only spends time in the same ECD centre with the same colleagues and peers for a long period, their development and learning will be limited to that environment and peer learning capacity only. Their professional development and knowledge will be limited and expand only to what their colleagues and the environment have to offer within that specific CoP which drives their development (proximal processes).

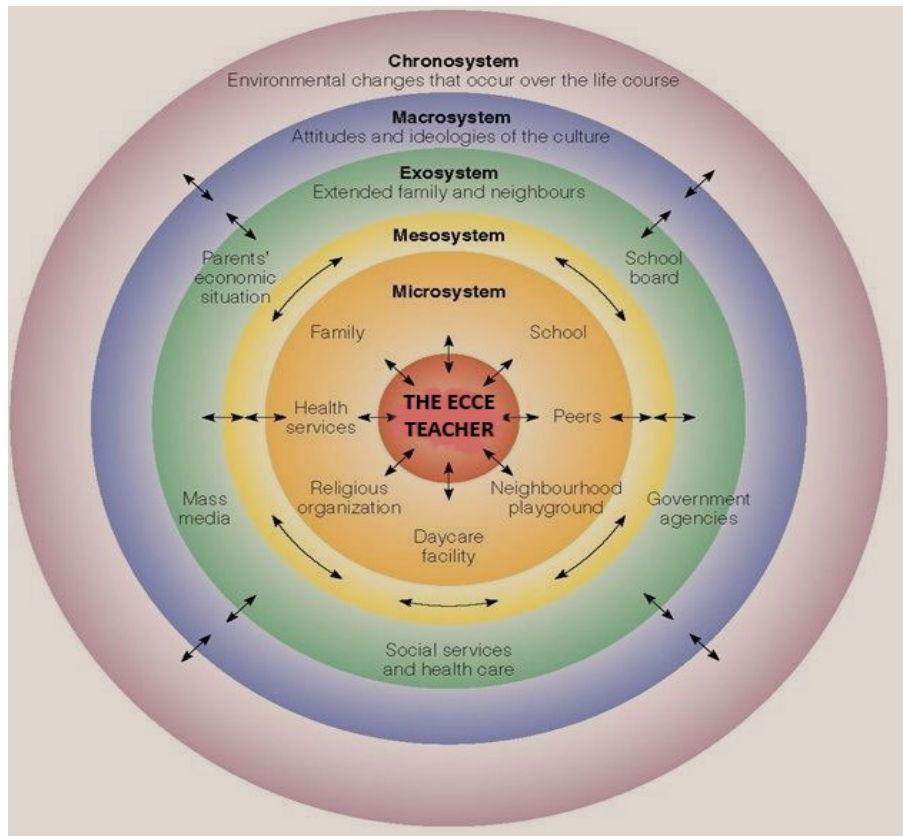
According to Guy-Evans (2020), Bronfenbrenner's model of ecological systems later evolved to the bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), which considers the modern-day interactions and development of the individual with a specific focus on the technological expansion of the developing individual. Bronfenbrenner (1994) took a deeper look at what he termed the 'proximal processes of development, meaning the enduring and persistent forms of interaction in the immediate environment'. He shifted his focus from environmental influences to the developmental processes that the individual experiences over time.

‘...development takes place through the process of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving bio-psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment.’

(Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory focuses on the ECCE practitioner’s experiences and development within the context of their environment and how this influences their professional identity. Also known as the ‘bio-ecological systems theory’, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory describes how levels of environment have a direct effect on human development and explains that human development, since the foundation stages in childhood, is influenced by close contact and interaction with family, community and society and that these levels have a direct effect on one another. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner’s theory, like Vygotsky’s and Wenger’s theories above, agrees that the ECCE practitioners’ identities shape and are influenced through interaction with others and their specific environment.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory places emphasis on the value and context of the environment where development and learning takes place and how the ECCE practitioner interacts within these confronted contextual realities. He explains that interaction within specific realities and the influences of these realities can be enabling or constraining for human development, in this context the ECCE practitioner’s professional identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Interpreted as the five levels of the ecological system, Bronfenbrenner refers to these contexts as layers or levels, within which the individual, in this case the ECCE practitioner, is shaped, developed and their identity formed. He places emphasis on the ideology that the *environment* of the developing individual ‘is a nested arrangement’ of levels that are interrelated, affecting one another and which are sequenced according to levels of influence. These levels are termed the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).



**Figure 2**

Graphical representation of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory.

Source: Adapted from Donald, Lazarus, and Lowana (1997)

### 2.12.1 The individual system

Central to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is the developing individual, whether it be the child, the ECCE practitioner or an individual interacting with the various levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### 2.12. 2 The microsystem

The microsystem refers to everything that has a direct relation between the developing individual and their immediate environment be this at the workplace, school or the home. The microsystem also refers to how the developing individual participates in these relations with others within a particular setting, over a specific period. In the context of the study, the microsystem reflects on ECCE practitioners within the context of ECD, focusing on how their professional identities develop whilst interacting relationally with the child, the principal, parents, colleagues or family. These relationships between ECCE practitioners and their environment, comprising interactions with the closest systems, including their personal and home life and work, is capable of altering beliefs and actions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Interactions

within the microsystem are critical for promoting and supporting development and affects how the ECCE practitioner reacts to situations and circumstances. If the relationships and environment of the ECCE practitioners are enabling and nurturing with parents, peers and the community, they are understood to have a positive result on their development and ultimately professional identity, but if the relationships are constraining and disaffirming, it will have adverse effects on the ECCE practitioner's professional identity.

### **2.12.3 The mesosystem**

According to Guy-Evans (2020), the mesosystem focuses on the interactions between the developing individual's microsystem, including parents, colleagues, the child and environment. In the context of this study, this places emphasis on the interactions of the ECCE and their individual microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that the mesosystem and microsystem are interconnected and work in a congruent way to achieve a healthy individual – in this case, a well-rounded ECCE practitioner with a positive, professional identity. The mesosystem defines interrelations and connects the ECCE practitioner's microsystems, for example when the ECCE practitioner communicates with the parents, the school, peers and the child within their environment, their development takes place and enhances professional identity.

### **2.12.4 The exosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1977) indicated that the exosystem is an expansion of the mesosystem with the inclusion of specific informal and formal social structures. The exosystem does not necessarily include developing individuals but indirectly influences their development through context. In relation to this study, social structures include the community, the extended community, educational systems, policy makers, health services, parent committees and local government. These social structures have direct effects on the development of the ECCE practitioners and their professional identities.

### **2.12.5 The macrosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1977) explains that the macrosystem is a level that fundamentally differs from the former levels, as it does not refer to a specific context but instead refers to existing practices within a specific community. The macrosystem focuses on how cultural origins

affect the developing individual. Within the context of this study, I looked at the marginalised ECCE practitioner within a specific socio-economic status and community. The macrosystem emphasises how the ECCE practitioner's economical, geographical location, ideologies, ethnicity, and cultural or sub-cultural conditions influence the norms, beliefs, values, and circumstances of the ECCE practitioner. It is in the macrosystem that it becomes clear how this level of the ecological system affects the relations between the various levels which include the individual, micro-, meso- and exo- levels, and how it thus shapes *all* development, including the ECCE practitioners' professional identities.

#### **2.12.6 The chronosystem**

Encompassing the element of time, the chronosystem is the final level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The chronosystem describes how each level of the ecological systems theory, including the individual, micro, meso, exo and macro- levels are subject to and influenced by environmental changes that occur over time. Major changes, for example a divorce, death of a loved one, the COVID-19 pandemic, the advancement of technology, a recession or changing a job, affect the individual's development and transitioning process – in the context of the study, these can significantly influence and affect the ECCE practitioners' professional identity and the way they practice (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

#### **2.13 Chapter Summary**

In the above section, I presented the theoretical framework, using the social learning theories of Wenger (1991; 1998), Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979) as a guide to interpreting how ECCE practitioners construct their professional identities through interactive and environmental factors. I looked at how their identity forms part of a community of practice and how belonging to a community of practice influences their approaches to teaching and care within the classroom.

The above theories, made up of the social interaction perspectives and the emphasis that identity is socially constructed, provide a clear theoretical background of the study as it shows how the ECCE practitioner continually constructs identity through various internal and external factors, including environment, context, relationships and practice. These social learning theories consider how the environment, culture and intellectual learning capacities



of the ECCE practitioner interrelates, influencing their development and professional identity and their practice.

These theoretical approaches define how professional identity forms through factors such as engagement and alignment with their practice and experience. It emphasises that participation is key to learning, and through the active understanding of who the ECCE practitioner is, they establish sound practice in teaching and care. The above theories also provide a tool for the ECCE practitioner to connect their theoretical and practical knowledge and step toward the identity as a professional. It describes how various levels of interaction amongst ECCE practitioners and their peers, the community including parents and the child contribute to their teacher professional identity by shaping the beliefs, values, and commitments they hold as teachers. The more ECCE practitioners become involved in their communities of practice, the deeper their understanding and perspective regarding their role within their teaching communities and as ECCE practitioners. For example, an increased sense of belonging and communication promotes overall professional development and personal growth (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

From among the magnitude of frameworks presented on ECCE professional identity and practitioner's professional development in existing literature, the above theoretical frameworks speak to the ECCE practitioner and their importance as socially constructed beings. It underlines the areas critical for their development and confidence to enhance their perceptions of self. In essence, the development of the ECCE practitioner's professional identity is fundamental as a cornerstone of professional change and development in teaching and care. Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the importance of shaping effective relationships in order to enhance the ECCE practitioners' professional identity within an enabling environment with others – whether this be internally at the ECD centre or external within the community. These relationships and a positive environment are positive drivers, not just for the ECCE practitioner and the development of their professional identity but also in teaching and caring for the developing child. The bio-ecological systems theory is a critical tool in guiding ECCE practitioner in their profession whilst building fundamental relationships with students, parents, colleagues and the community for a communication-rich classroom that involves all learning agents.

Participation consists of creating opportunities for being drawn into social settings of learning where ECCE practitioners can learn a sense of value with firm goals. A community of practice can provide opportunities for cross-cultural learning and the sharing of tools, enhancing teaching and care on another level of productivity and understanding within the sector and that everything related to our environment influences the ECCE practitioners' development and professional identity as social and cultural beings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989; Wenger, 1991, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978)

## Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

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### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research design and methodological approach of this study. A qualitative approach was used, which was the most appropriate as I needed to find meaning from how the participants construct their professional identities. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research 'embraces research, based on the collection of people's opinions in terms of words, concepts and constructs which are collected as narratives or stories.' The chapter discusses the research design, research approach, research methodology, ethical considerations, and challenges in relation to conducting research with the ECCE practitioners. It gives an outline of the methods used to collect the data and explains the processes used to analyse data. Lastly, the chapter discusses the researcher's ethical considerations and explains the importance of trustworthiness in research.

### 3.2 Research design

This research study adopted a qualitative design. According to Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2003), a qualitative research approach can be defined as an inquiry into a social or human problem. The qualitative approach aided the researcher in obtaining a clearer understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and defined the way in which the ECCE practitioners construct their truth about their professional identity. Cohen et al. (2003) agrees with Creswell (2013) that a qualitative research approach is defined as an inquiry into a social or human problem and embraces 'research, based on the collection of people's opinions in terms of words, concepts and constructs which are collected as narratives or stories'. Anney (2015) concurs that qualitative research takes into consideration the credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability as criteria when it comes to trustworthiness, ensuring the objectivity of qualitative findings.

The qualitative approach was the most appropriate approach for this study, as I wanted to find meaning from how the participants construct their professional identity. According to Cohen et al. (2003:461), there 'is no one single or correct way to analyse and present qualitative data'; rather it is measured by how it is used and the outcomes in relation to the purpose. Therefore, I had to be very clear concerning the outcomes of the data analysis. Cohen et al. (2003) further indicate that qualitative research approaches are based on the

constructivist philosophy that assumes that reality is a multi-layered, interactive, shared social experience interpreted by individuals. In the context of this study, qualitative research was the most appropriate method to describe human experiences and emotions such as power, determination, recognition, discomfort, compassion, or anger and happiness. Human emotions and behaviour are not easy to quantify, therefore, qualitative research is confirmed to be the most appropriate and effective approach to investigating the emotional responses related to professional identity. Laws, Marcus and Harper (2003:28) concur that qualitative data reflect what people feel and think, whilst the quantitative data approach uses figures and numerical statistics and focuses on numbers. In this study, it would be inappropriate to ground this study in a quantitative approach, as numerical statistics would not provide meaning to its objectives.

### **3.3 Researchers' paradigm**

Rehman and Alharthi (2016) describe an interpretivist research design as the way in which researchers study, understand and interpret the reality of the world. They further explain that a research paradigm is where a basic belief system about a certain reality is expressed through a theoretical framework with assumptions – it is the process by which researchers articulate their way of understanding the reality of what they are studying.

The research paradigm ensures the validity of data and explores the philosophical underpinnings of the study. In this research, the researcher wanted to make sense of how ECCE practitioners perceive their professional identity and how the status of their professional identity influenced the way that they teach and care for children. This process happened through asking questions, analyzing the answers to these questions, and observing the ECCE practitioner within a certain contextual reality. This process created an understanding of how their truth exists in a specific context. These were important in order to evaluate an understanding of the ECCE practitioner's perceptions of their professional identity in the ECCE environment and situations to frame the research in a cohesive manner.

### **3.4 Interpretivist research design**

This study was based on an interpretivist research design (Lipshitz, 2012:19), also known as interpretivist methodology or an interpretive study. MacNaughton, Rolfe and Blatchford

(2006) explain that interpretivism enlightens us on how research participants interpret their circumstances within a social world: this research model's task is to comprehend socially created, negotiated and shared meanings.

Through this interpretive, qualitative design, interpretation of the ECCE practitioners' perceptions of their professional identities is possible, as interpretivism requires that the experiences of the ECCE practitioner be understood through their own eyes rather than the researcher's and that the data is articulated in their context (Cohen et al., 2003:21; Rehman and Alharthi, 2016:56). Rehman and Alharthi (2016:55-56) further explain that the interpretivist design best defines socially constructed, multiple realities, and that interpretivist design methodologies demonstrate that the ECCE practitioner's truth and experiences are created and not discovered. In light of the research question and this research undertaking an interpretive approach, this study will be at a relative advantage in revealing the perceptions and beliefs of the participant's unique contexts. Cohen et al. (2007:7) explain that human behaviour, and the emphases on how humans differ from one another, are best described through the interpretive view, specifically around parallel reflections in educational research. This allows for easy identification of comparisons between emerging patterns and relationships around social and individual behaviour and a variety of ideas of social reality, which are suitable for this specific research.

### **3.5. Methodology**

#### **3.5.1 Sample selection – purposive sampling**

This research study focused on participants who gave the best data possible in order to avoid random information, as the study intended to obtain rich data for the purpose of future research. Use was made of purposive sampling to select the participants. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg and McKibbin (2015) describe purposeful sampling as the most generally used means of sampling in qualitative research approaches. According to Berg (2001:32), purposive sampling emphasises a specific type of person exhibiting specific qualities for a specific research study. Cohen et al. (2003:103) explain that purposive sampling involves 'hand picking the cases to be included in the sample based on theory judgement and typicality'.

*For this study, the purposively selection criteria included the following:*

- Participants should at least have five years of ECCE teaching experience;

- Have access to professional ECCE practitioner development programmes;
- Previously participated in some professional development programme;
- Must at least have a qualified level of education which is a minimum level 4/5 ECCE practitioner certificate or a National Diploma in ECD;
- Understand the community sub-culture and how they fit into the respective community as a professional.

Considering how cultural, social, socio-economic and environmental factors influence the ECCE practitioner's professional identity, it was important to examine the perspectives of staff in the two ECD centres. The criteria took into consideration the year of experience, their level of qualification, level of community interaction and the cultural backgrounds of the ECCE practitioners. The sample criteria requirements were discussed in advance with the management of the schools, who allowed time for the participants to participate in the study. Thereafter the management assisted in selecting the respective participants and the criteria discussed with them.

### **3.5.2 Site selection**

For the purpose of this study, the specific sites were identified through the assistance of True North. True North is a non-profit organisation in Capricorn, Cape Town, that focuses on Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiatives in marginalised communities. True North has been actively implementing ECD development programmes for children and ECD practitioners in Capricorn (also known as Vrygrond) community for more than five years. They train, support, equip and connect preschool principals and their staff (practitioners and teaching assistants) with ECD school registration, training and sustainability support. They ensure that ECD schools in the area meet the development needs of the children and legal requirements to be registered.

This research study relied on the professional advice and guidance of True North as they work extensively within the ECD sector in the Capricorn area, specifically around policy, registration and ECD practitioner development. Reliant on the insight of True North, two suitable ECD centres were selected in Capricorn and interviews were conducted with the four ECCE practitioners working within these centres with children aged from birth to four years. The

Capricorn area is a densely populated community with a wide-ranging variety of children coming from various cultures, race and challenging backgrounds. The ECD centres are situated in a particularly marginalised community with very limited access to resources and opportunities for ECCE practitioner professional development and education. Although there are several ECD centers in the Capricorn community, there are only two primary schools in the area and no high schools, and most of the ECD centres are informal to semi-structured facilities on residential properties. The children from this community who attend the participating ECD centres face very high levels of poverty, come from single parent homes, and their parents are mainly unemployed and living off social grants. Many of them are foreigners and South Africans with very low levels of education. Crime is rife and the socio-economic circumstances that the children grow up in are below the poverty line.

### **3.6 Participants' details**

The research sample consisted of four ECCE practitioners from two respective participating early childhood centres that cater for children from birth to four years. Two participants were purposively chosen from each respective ECD centre. In the analysis, the participants are referred to as Practitioner A, B, C and D. All the participants became ECCE practitioners by default as this was not their first career choice. Two of them started out as volunteers and two of them started out as unemployed community members who unintentionally started working at a neighbourhood ECD. Over time they developed a passion for teaching and care and have now all been practicing for more than five years, developing their careers in Early Childhood Development.

#### **3.6.1 Practitioner A**

Practitioner A is 25 years old and discovered her love of teaching after volunteering with her aunt at an ECD facility before she completed her matric. She recently obtained her level four ECD certificate and has worked as a formal ECCE practitioner in early childhood development for the past six years. At the time of this interview, she taught children 3-4 years of age but she has experience teaching all ages from 0-5 years. Her classroom has 23 children, with no help from an assistant during her lessons. She does everything including her themes, lesson planning and evaluations independently. As an ECCE practitioner, she acknowledged that she still requires much teaching and learning experience; she specifically indicated that she does

not always understand what to do at the different milestones of the children, and with children who have special needs. She felt challenged as an ECCE practitioner. She expressed a keen awareness of the diversity of the children in the classroom and acknowledged that the parents did not always see her as a professional practitioner, due to cultural differences and because they perceived her as too young to understand her role.

### **3.6.2 Practitioner B**

Practitioner B is 30 year old, an experienced ECCE practitioner with a very high level of confidence. She wholeheartedly enjoys her work and has had exposure to teaching and learning within the ECD setting since she left school, as it was her first opportunity of employment. She started out as a volunteer and later progressed to a teaching aid.

Practitioner B has been formally teaching independently for the past five years and has extensive experience of working with children from birth to six years old. At the time of her interview, she was teaching the children in the 18-24months age group. She has twenty children in her class with no assistant to help her, either in the classroom or in the outside area. She has worked at the ECD centre for five years and understands the parents, school and community sub-culture and environment very well – possibly also because she lives in the immediate area of the ECD centre. She is presently in the process of completing her level five in Early Childhood Development.

### **3.6.3 Practitioner C**

Practitioner C is a very experienced ECCE practitioner; she is 28 years old and has been teaching children from birth to 38 months for the past eight years. At the time of the interview, she had twenty children in her class. Practitioner C has an ad hoc assistant in class. She teaches across two classes and often has to be available in guiding and supporting other colleagues at the school because of her extensive experience. She has no formal qualifications but has eight years' experience. Practitioner C's mother tongue is Afrikaans and in several instances, she answered the questions in her mother tongue as this made her feel more comfortable. She was proficient in English but needed clarity through repeating of questions in Afrikaans. Fortunately, the researcher was fully fluent in Afrikaans.



### 3.6.4 Practitioner D

Practitioner D is 40 years old. She initially started her career as an ECCE practitioner after being a volunteer for a while. At the time of the interview, she had been an ECCE practitioner for six years and was teaching a class of 31 children in the 3–4-year age group, with no assistant. Practitioner D has just completed her level four certificate in early childhood development and would like to complete her level five when the opportunity arises. Her mother tongue is isiXhosa but she had a very high level of understanding of and taught in English.

*The below table represents the details of the ECCE practitioners who participated in this study.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Number of years employed at the ECD Centre</b>
Practitioner A	25	Level 4	6 years	6 years
Practitioner B	30	Level 4	5 years	5 years
Practitioner C	28	None	8 years	8 years
Practitioner D	40	Level 4	6 years	6 years

**Table 1: Participants Demographics Table (2021)**

### 3.7 Data collection

The main aim of data collection is to assimilate and collate all the valuable information that would help in formulating the answers to the research questions (Creswell, 1994). Creswell (1998:111) describes this as ‘a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions’. The following paragraphs discuss the data collection instruments used (in this case semi-structured interviews and reflective journals) as the data collection instruments. According to Cohen et al. (2007:181), it is crucial for the researcher to choose the correct data collection methods and instruments to fit the purpose of the research study in order to achieve valuable outcomes. Supporting data collection instruments used by the researcher include semi-structured questionnaires, recordings and journal entries by participants (Cohen et al. 2007:181).

### **3.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews**

Bearing the main purpose in mind, which was to explore the ECCE practitioner's perceptions of their professional identities and how these perceptions influenced teaching and care, the researcher made use of semi-structured interviews as the primary data source. For this research study, interviewing was the predominant method to gather qualitative information, as it creates a 'social relation' between the participants and researcher (De Vos, Delport, Fouche & Strydom, 2011).

According to Cohen (2003:368), the method of semi-structured interviews allows participants to talk about their personal interpretations of the environment in which they live and work, allowing them to express their own point of view regarding situations and experiences. In the context of this research study, and how ECCE practitioners perceive themselves as professionals, the topic was very personal and reflective. The interviewing method was thus more than just a process of collecting data, as it became an expression of a personal experience. It was an appropriate method to discuss their perception of their identities, careers and futures as ECCE practitioners, because it was personal and reflective.

Two appendices are attached to this study: a sample of semi-structured interview used and guiding questions for journal entries (appendix 2). Also included is a sample of the participants' consent form which was clearly discussed and signed by each participant (appendix 3). The semi-structured interviews were well planned with questions (see Appendix 2 attached) relating to how ECCE practitioners described and perceived their professional identities and how this influenced their approaches to teaching and care. The questions were structured to ascertain whether the ECCE practitioners understood what their personal and professional identities meant in relation to the importance of their role as practitioners.

During the interviews, the researcher avoided using leading questions as this could falsify data and give undesired results in relation to the research questions. Instead, open-ended questions were used, which allowed the opportunity to probe for further information where needed. Questions and answers gave the researcher an understanding of how practitioners described their professional identities, what inspired them to become ECCE practitioners, how their culture, environment and background influenced their identity and how they

perceived their identity to influence their approaches to teaching and care. During the interviews, the researcher ensured that all participants were comfortable and well informed about what the intentions of the interview and questions were. All participants were given a fair chance to address their views without being rushed or being under unnecessary pressure. The interviews were flexible, allowing participants to use their own words to express their views. The researcher remained objective and non-judgmental through the process and dealt with every question with the highest of sensitivity and respect.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher had to follow strict health regulations as prescribed by the national government. As all interviews were still conducted face to face, the practicing of administrative protocols were instituted, which included screening, hand hygiene, cough etiquette, surface cleaning, social distancing and disinfection as guided by CPUT. Sanitizer was made available and a safe contact distance of 1,5 meters was maintained throughout the interview session between the researcher and the participant. The researcher also ensured that the area where the interview was conducted was sanitized prior to and after every interview and that the necessary protective equipment was used to prevent possible transmission or infections.

Semi-structured individual interviews were recorded with a digital recorder during a 45minute session, and participants were informed that all recordings were strictly confidential and would be used for the purposes of the research study only. Whilst recording, during interviews, the researcher ensured that the interview questions were not too invasive, and that each participant was comfortable in their understanding of the questions. Each participant was informed and made aware of the recording and was asked whether they were comfortable with being recorded or not. They were comfortable and recordings proceeded. Even though all recording were done with the consent of the participants, the participants were still informed that they were free to withdraw from all recordings, and that their participation was optional. Participants were informed that all recording would be stored in a safeguarded place within a research facility at CPUT, and that their privacy would not be breached. Testing the digital recorder before the interviews were important to avoid problems which might lead to missing vital information. According to Robson (2002), recording interviews can be immensely useful in assisting the researcher – it allows

information to be permanently recorded and easily transcribed. It was specifically useful to listen to the interviews more than once for clarity and accuracy whilst transcribing the data. The recordings were useful in helping the researcher to focus on exploring the topic and questions through observing nonverbal prompts whilst recording.

### **3.7.2 Reflective journals**

The secondary method of data collection in this study was undertaken through reflective journals. Each participant received a journal to map their perceptions of their professional identity. This took place over two weeks during the study, whilst in the classroom and during their daily activities and interactions with parents, the children and the community. Reflective journals are an effective way to obtain data about a person's feelings (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2007). Data would show what happened during any programme or change and the participant's perceptions of these occurrences. Reflective data enables researchers to assess the contribution or success of the process or change. Each participant received a guideline with some open ended – non-prescriptive – questions to motivate and guide them to express their daily experiences. These questions served as a guide to stimulate their thinking around their identity and professional identity, and how they applied themselves to teaching and care (see Appendix 2 attached). The journal served as a reflective instrument where the practitioners could record their perceptions, awareness and interactions with self and others, on a daily basis. The participants could also use the journals to record how they perceived their identities and the perceptions thereof, aided or not aided to their approaches in teaching and care during the time of the research. It was recommended that journals be completed on a weekly basis as a method of observation.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

According to Patton (2002), data analysis is the process by which the findings are organized and interpreted. The data analysis process is a method used to interpret and thereby to reduce the raw evidence, identifying the patterns and constructing a framework for communicating the fundamental results presented by the data (Patton, 2002). The data analysis process is critical in defining the perceptions and sense-making process of the participants concerning their understanding of their professional identities (Cohen et al. 2007:184).

Data was analysed through a thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke 2013) where themes and patterns were identified from the data collected. This was to make sense of the ECCE practitioner's descriptions and perceived professional identity. A good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of the data rather than just using the interview questions as themes whereby data is summarised rather than analysed (Braun & Clarke 2013).

*Data collected was analysed using the following steps:*

- Themes and patterns were identified from the data in order to understand how the ECCE practitioners perceived their professional identities.
- I ensured that there were no biases that influenced interpretations by being cognisant of and acknowledging preconceived concepts. I worked consciously at illuminating these biases while analysing the data.
- When all data was collated into themes and patterns, I ensured interconnections and synergy across research instruments, cross-referencing between the journal entries, the interview answers and the transcribed recordings at all times.
- Then the findings linked to the main research questions were identified and written up.

### **3.8.1 Transcribing the interviews**

Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, an independent transcriber transcribed the recordings. Once transcribed, the researcher listened to the recordings again, ensuring that the correct data was transcribed. Thereafter all transcribed recordings were printed, re-read, organized, and through a thematic process, themes and patterns were identified. The identification of themes and patterns allowed the researcher to make comparisons and find similarities, matching the transcribed data (Yin, 2010:210). The thematic analysis also assisted the researcher in identifying themes and patterns of significance across all datasets and built an understanding of how the participants perceived and described their professional identities (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Braun and Clarke (2013) further explain that the thematic approach is most suitable for the analysis of qualitative data, specifically when using semi-structured interviews and journals, as in the case of this specific research.

### **3.9 Data Verification**

According to Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spies (2002:17), in the verification process, the researcher ensures that all data is thoroughly checked and accurately confirmed according to the data collected during the actual research process. The data verification process confirms that all aspects to consider during the research has been taken into consideration, and this process ensures that the data is accurately transcribed, interpreted and analysed. Qualitative research of high quality must be trustworthy and unbiased.

### **3.10 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness forms an important part of qualitative research and encapsulates the confidentiality and validity in every research study. 'Trustworthiness is the way in which the inquirer is able to persuade the audience that the findings in the study are worth paying attention to and that the research is of high quality' (Johnson and Turner, 2003:15). In order to ensure trustworthiness for this study, the data was checked with the participants to ensure that what they had said was accurately recorded.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research focuses on the qualities of truthfulness, authenticity, accuracy, genuineness and soundness (Salkind, 2006). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018:121), there are various criteria to ensure trustworthiness of a qualitative research study. This study followed the criteria of trustworthiness established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) who believed the following points are important to consider in collecting qualitative data (Korstjens & Moser 2018:121):

#### **3.10.1 Credibility**

Credibility is the assurance that truth is derived through the research findings. Credibility ensures that the researcher formulates a plausible outcome from the participants' original information and interprets the data to reflect the participant's original view (Lincoln & Guba: 1985). Credibility ensures that the findings are grounded in the data that was collected and that the data is not compromised but that all data is firmly analysed, safeguarding credibility. During this research study, the research remained credible throughout the data collection and analysis process, ensuring that all interpretations were done accurately and without unrealistic intent. The researcher remained unbiased and self-reflective through the

interview process. A professional rapport was maintained between the researcher and the participants at all times.

### **3.10.2 Dependability**

Dependability includes the participant's 'evaluation, interpretation and recommendations of the findings' in consideration (Lincoln & Guba: 1985). During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher remained objective, conscientious, self-aware and non-judgmental of the opinions of the participants. The researcher was dependable about the use of interviews and journal entries to collect data and ensured that all interviews were recorded electronically to ensure that accurate versions of the data were provided.

### **3.10.3 Confirmability**

Confirmability concerns and validates the views of other researchers with similar research studies. Confirmability ensures that the data and its findings are impartial and not the intrusive views of the researcher, confirming an unbiased approach of the researcher's viewpoints and preferences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:2). The researcher made sure that all data was confirmed, making use of cross-referencing and ensured the descriptions obtained in the findings from the ECCE practitioners were their actual experiences and perceptions, not the experiences and perceptions of others. In order to ensure freedom from bias, all participants freely volunteered to participate (Creswell, 2013) and were under no circumstances coerced to be participants. The researcher steered away from acting as an authoritative figure and stayed as neutral as possible in order to avoid a dependency issue and familiarity between interviewer and interviewee. Instead, the researcher presented as master's student and did not present as any threat to participants.

### **3.10.4 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity concerns the researcher's constant awareness of self-reflection throughout the research process, taking into consideration the researcher's preferences, preconceptions and own bias. Reflexivity also reflects on the research relationship of the researcher, which includes the researcher's relationship with participants and how this affects the participants' interaction and answers (Cohen et al., 2002). In this study, the researcher continually self-reflected, remaining without bias and objective, being conscious of the need to eliminate her

own opinion and views on the topic. The researcher remained professional, ensuring clear boundaries during the research process.

### **3.11 Triangulation of data**

In this study, the researcher made use of triangulation and thus involved the use of different methods, including individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and reflective journals as instruments to collect data. In education, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:141) describe triangulation as a dominant research method to validate qualitative data. According to Cohen et al. (2007), triangulation is a central part in synchronizing validity and explains how the reliance on a single method may result in bias or misleading interpretation of data. Cohen et al. (2007) further explain that triangulation is mainly used in interpretive research studies to explore different variables, and is perfect in the use of more than one approach of data collection in the study of human behaviour. Yin (2010:67) concurs that triangulation allows the researcher to see the conclusions derived from the data from more than one point of view.

### **3.12 Researcher's position**

According to Creswell (2013:172), it is essential for the researcher to declare their personal experiences and interpretations of the work within the setting. Therefore, the researcher, primarily in the role of interviewer in this research study, ensured that the study was conducted in a non-discriminatory and ethical manner without any prejudice or leading questions that could cause potential conflict of interest. Through the ethics process, the researcher declared that there was no previous affiliation with any of the participants or any of the ECD centres (nor their management or principals) participating in the study, hence the assistance of an independent organisation to source the participating ECD centres was relied upon.

### **3.13 Ethical consideration**

The researcher obtained ethics clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and from the Centre for International Teacher Education (CITE) governing board. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the Department of Social Development (DSD), and from the practitioners and principals of the ECD centres. DSD,



however, confirmed that no ethical clearance was required from their department as this study did not require or involve the participation of minors. The principals were the first point of contact and were introduced to the researcher by True North. A meeting was set up to discuss and explain the consent form and process and requirements of the study with each principal. Thereafter, the principals spoke to the ECCE practitioners and together they were briefed on the research study. The researcher kept contact through updates with the principals throughout the process of the research. To validate and consider all ethical deliberations, the researcher declared that there were no previous affiliations with any of the participants or the participating ECD centres participating in this research study.

The researcher fully complied with the ethical protocols of the university's research ethics protocols and followed all required protocols and approval to conduct the interviews. According to Cohen et al. (2007: 53) informed consent necessitates clarification and objectivity during the interview processes.

#### **1.14 Anonymity and confidentiality**

The anonymity and confidentiality of participants has become one of the top ethical standards when it comes to doing research. It is more than an ethical standard, it is a human right – and preserves the privacy and trust of participants in a research study (Cohen et al., 2007). Ensuring and managing the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants is the researcher's ethical responsibility and the fundamental practice of building respect and trust during the research process. The researcher is responsible to self, colleagues, the research fraternity, the institution of study and the participants to protect and uphold ethical standard through this process (Cohen et al., 2007).

Cohen et al. (2007) further explains that anonymity and confidentiality are important to safeguard the reputation of both the participant and the researcher; to enable opportunities to conduct future research, an ethical process of anonymity and confidentiality protects the identity of the funders and the researcher as a member of a research community. These are part of the researcher's ethical accountability. Essentially, the researcher safeguards the well-being of the participants and self, firstly through clarifying and assuring the respondents, and signing the consent form (Appendix 1) that stipulates how critical anonymity and

confidentiality is. This is a critical step as it impresses the agreement between the two parties and establishes the relationship. The signing of this consent form took place once the researcher had provided the aim and other accurate details of the study and the participants' involvement and understanding was clear.

Sieber (1992:52) explains that confidentiality is an agreement that the researcher has with the participants concerning what their data or the information they provide will be used for. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011:557), anonymity and confidentiality are pivotal to academic research. The researcher in this study informed all participants upon signing the consent form that their anonymity and confidentiality would be respected and not be violated in any way.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ongoing processes that happened prior, during and after the research interviews. It was the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the agreement around anonymity and confidentiality remained an active and constant document through the entire process of the research study. Regular checks around the participants' comfort concerning their anonymity and confidentiality took place during and after the interviews. These checks were also important after the data was compiled and the research was ready for dissemination. It was important to keep the participants informed throughout the entire process to ensure and maintain trust.

The study was conducted in a non-discriminatory and ethical manner without any prejudice or leading questions, which could cause potential conflict of interest or expose the participant's vulnerability. The researcher reassured participants that the data they provided would not denigrate or divulge their identity, image and career in any way. The researcher ensured that pseudonyms were used and not participants' names, the names of their ECD centres, the ECD registration numbers, addresses or any other information that might put the ECD centre or participant at risk of exposure, would not be disclosed in the completed research study. The researcher removed any information for example, job titles, or any other sensitive information that could lead to identifying a participant. The researcher took all necessary precautions to guard the anonymity and confidentiality of participants and ensured that the research does not make it possible to identify participants or their participating ECD

centres. The researcher ensured that the participants understood their rights and had clarity concerning the differences between anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity and confidentiality were always maintained and the researcher used identifiers or aliases instead of actual names.

The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their withdrawal would be respected. They were also informed that they were under no obligation to participate in the study.

### **3.15 Contribution of the study**

- Whilst this is a small scale study with only four respondents, it will provide an understanding of the professional identity and practices of ECCE practitioners in the Western Cape, South Africa; and
- The findings of this study will promote an awareness of how the professional identities of the ECCE practitioners in this study can be used as an example for further research studies that may focus on strengthening teacher professional identity in marginalised communities.

### **3.16 Conclusion**

Chapter three focused on the research design and methodology of this study. It entailed the qualitative approach in an interpretivist research design and explained the research methodology and research design used. Through using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals as the tools of analysis, data was collected and then analysed through a thematic process. The researcher explained the research approach that was used, and the data collection instruments. A synopsis of the participant selection criteria was presented, and a description of each participant was provided. Ethical considerations, reliability, anonymity and confidentiality, and trustworthiness were also considered and discussed as crucial components of the research process and of this study.

## Chapter 4: Findings and discussion of ECCE practitioners' perceptions regarding their professional identities

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### 4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to answer the main research questions, '*What perceptions do Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners in a poor community of the Cape Flats have about their professional identities.*' The findings are presented through two main themes, which are ECCE practitioners' lived experiences and secondly the practices that shape their professional identities. The first main theme of lived experiences that shape ECCE professional identities comprises four sub-themes which are context and contextual realities, perceptions of parents and society, perceptions of practitioners who teach in other phases, and belonging and participation in a community of practice that shape their perceptions of their professional identities. The second main theme of ECCE practitioners' *practices* focuses on three sub-themes, which are qualifications and training, culture and language, and teaching and learning strategies that shape ECCE practitioners' perceptions of their professional identities.

Given the fact that the ECCE practitioners who participated in this study work in an early childhood context wherein knowledge is socially constructed and shared within a community of practice with children, peers, parents and the community, Wenger's community of practice and Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory was deemed suitable as an analytical framework. Additionally, given the view that the ECCE practitioners' professional identities are also interspersed within systems, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory was also used as part of the analytical framework to support the findings of this study.

### 4.2 Lived experiences of ECCE practitioners that shape their professional identities

#### 4.2.1 Professional identities shaped by context and contextual realities

An imperative question that guided this study was related to how ECCE practitioners perceived themselves as professionals. In responding to this question, the practitioners shared their rich lived experiences about how their professional identity was shaped. In sharing their rich lived experiences, they alluded to how experiences in context and contextual realities shaped their professional identity. The following excerpts by Practitioners'

D and C highlight how experiences through the context shaped the way in which they perceived themselves as professionals.

Practitioner D: *In the class I see myself as a professional teacher, to assist children in the activities, all the stuff we do in the class but outside its different. Because you see yourself in the class as a teacher, the children they listen to you and around the school the other teachers you feel that okay yeah I am a professional teacher because the way I do things as a teacher but outside its different because no one sees me as a teacher only these children do, when I teach they see me as a teacher.*

Practitioner C: *The only time I see myself as a professional is when I am here in my workplace. This is when I know when I am working, I know that I must do my work as a teacher who teaches children but once I am not at work then I feel like a normal person.*

Both practitioners D and C shared similar insights in relation to their experiencing a greater sense of professional self within the internal ECCE context about who they were as professionals, as opposed to the external context of ECCE. Practitioners D and C viewed themselves as professionals only within their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which aligned with the internal early childhood context as they interacted and engaged with children and the practitioners they worked with.

These findings alluded by practitioner D and C illuminate how experiences in the internal ECCE context shaped their professional identity. Professional identity is influenced by a number of sources of which context and environment is a pivotal one (Beijaard, 2004). Practitioner C's admitting to '*the only time I see myself as a professional is when I am here in my workplace*' shows how her lived experience within the internal ECCE context shapes her identity as an ECCE professional. Her experience of connecting with the child also shapes the way in which she perceives herself as a 'professional'. On the other hand, her statement that '*When I am not at work then I feel like I am a normal [unprofessional] person*' illuminates that she feels unprofessional when she is outside of the ECCE context. Uhlmann et al. (2010:463) and Madden (2012:21) remind us that an individual's professional identity relates to

discovering meaning connected with one's profession. This interconnectedness is a pivotal characteristic of a Vygotskian perspective which relates to the connections between the individual functioning and development and the socio-cultural practices in which they take place. A distinctive feature of this perspective is that individuals and contexts do not operate in silos but are unified in a dialectical relationship (Vygotsky, 1997). Both individual and society need each other to constitute themselves. Bronfenbrenner (1979) also postulates that there needs to be an interconnectedness between the microsystem, which in this context is the ECCE practitioners' interactions and experiences with context and how this interconnectedness influences their professional identity which forms part of their mesosystem. However, the findings above show that there is a disjuncture between how ECCE practitioners perceive their professional identity between the microsystem and the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) warns that the microsystem and mesosystem need to work in a congruent way in order to develop a healthy individual, in this case an early childhood care and education practitioner with an enabling image as a professional.

When practitioners lack self-worth and perceive their profession as unrecognized, in this case the recognition of ECCE practitioner as professionals and undervalued by government and society, then they have a weak professional identity (Moloney, 2010; Moloney and Pope, 2012). ECCE practitioners' professional status is marked by continuous struggle, which includes the struggle to receive professional recognition of the professional character of the complex work they undertake with children (Skattebol, Adamson & Woodrow, 2016). Chan (2018) further confirms that the early childhood profession is characterised by a decreased level of professional self with early childhood practitioners being underpaid, exposed to poor training opportunities, and lacking a structured career development path.

Whilst the above findings report on how experiences with context shapes teacher professional identities, the study found that contextual *realities* also shape the ECCE practitioners' professional identities. In this study, Practitioner A expressed her concern about how the unsafe and risky contextual realities that were imminent in the surroundings of this ECCE context forced them to shut the doors of the EECE centre in times of emergency as the following excerpt reveals.

Practitioner A: *Sometimes there would be like shootings and stuff, riots happening. So that also puts children's lives in danger so sometimes you have to shut down because it is not safe for us as well. They also target ECD centres, so that we must also close so we can support them whatever like they are protesting on. At times, we have to call the parents to come and fetch the children. They [the protestors] would come to the crèches and maybe like burn tyres in front and we must close down or they threaten to burn down the places and stuff like that. Like they did at organisation in the area, they burned the whole community centre down. They just took the stuff like the valuables and destroyed the centre.*

The unsafe and dangerous context that the ECCE practitioners find themselves teaching in is very concerning. Whilst shootings and gang violence is a common occurrence in many marginalised and disadvantaged areas of the Cape Flats, ECCE practitioners in these areas attempt to continue teaching to the best of their ability and to keep activities functional so that children are not disadvantaged and teaching is functional. However, whilst Practitioner A attempted to keep activities functional, acts of violence shaped their professional identities as they showed the need to subscribe and adapt to what gangsters expected of them during protests. These contextual realities contribute to the portraits of their professional identities and result in weakening their professional identities. The gang violence in the community and forced shutdown of the ECCE centre by gangsters during times of protest are evident. These forces that shape the ECCE practitioner's environment alter the connection between the microsystem and macrosystem which also weakens their professional identity (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the environment and circumstances, to which Practitioner A is exposed, as indicated above, affects every level of her microsystem, which include her values, norms and beliefs, driving her to be protective and responsive in times of unrest. Her macrosystem (the violence in the community, gangs and socioeconomic situations) influences her professional identity over time which develops due to her complex person-environment relations (Swart & Pettipher, 2011; Sacks 2014:9).

As a minimum standard and basic requirement, all ECCE practitioners are expected to uphold a 'safe and healthy learning environment' whilst creating a reassuring and supporting environment for the basic and social needs of the child and simultaneously enabling them to

manage their behaviour during crisis (Department of Social Development, 2006: 66).

Contextual teaching involves making teaching and learning meaningful and connecting to the real world through experiences, environment and culture, which is a critical proficiency for the ECCE practitioner. This is pivotal especially when teaching in marginalised communities where social issues are rife and violence is part of the ECCE practitioner's daily experience. Irrespective of the challenging circumstances these ECCE practitioners teach in, their main priority is still to provide the child with a structured, high quality and holistically stimulating environment before entering formal education.

#### **4.2.2 Professional Identity shaped by parents' and social perceptions**

A very important finding identified in this study was that most of the parents did not perceive ECCE practitioners as professionals, as indicated in the following excerpts.

*Practitioner A: I think the children value me as a teacher because they don't think this is a crèche, for them it is a school but for the parents I don't think they really value me because they think I am still very young. They are of the opinion that I come here and just sit with the children and give them food and play with them. They do not think about the programme that I implement. When parents come and fetch their child I can like have a conversation with them and I see they're starting to see me as a grown-up because sometimes they undermine you – no you don't have children – you don't know what it's like to deal with these children. So I'm like no, I know how to deal with them because most of my days I spend with them.*

*Practitioner B: Some parents see me as a professional and others do not, those that do not see me as a professional are mostly the parents that live near me and they see me as a neighbour or community member. Some of them see me as a teacher when we interact concerning their child. Some parents do not see me as qualified.*

*Practitioner C: Some parents and community members only see me as a teacher when I am at the school with their children. As soon as I am out of school they did not acknowledge or recognise me as a teacher or professional'.*



Practitioner D: *Not all of them they think the same but the majority of the parents think we just do the babysitting. The family and friends, when you are an ECD teacher they do not take you as a professional teacher because they think you are not educated. They still have the perception that it is just 'sleep and play'. Times are different – we teach from infant age to do things, to scribble on the paper all that stuff. However, parents still have that old mentality that 'they are just changing the nappies' and that we are uneducated. There is some parents, who understand what we are going through. They know that we are teachers, they respect us, and they praise what we do.*

All the ECCE practitioners in this study reported that most parents did not value them as professionals. Practitioner A indicated that parents saw her as young and inexperienced and did not consider the ECCE programme she implements. She also reported that some parents did not perceive her as a professional practitioner due to her being young and felt she did not know how to work with children, as she did not have children of her own. Interestingly, the children did not consider this early childhood care and education context as a crèche, but they considered it a school where they valued Practitioner A as an ECCE practitioner. Whilst practitioner B indicated that some parents understood her as a professional, others only understood her as a professional when she interacted with them regarding their child's progress. The sociocultural perspective on identity presents a view that identity and self are constructed within a relationship with others within their social context, and growth is realized as a result of constant interaction between individuals and their cultural environments (Vygotsky, 1978). Considering that she lives in the same area as these parents, the parents consider her as a neighbour and do not recognise her professional status and qualifications as an ECCE practitioner with a level 4 Early Childhood Development Certificate, a minimum requirement to teach young children in ECCE. Practitioner D felt strongly that parents perceived her as a babysitter as they believed that she was uneducated. These findings are not uncommon in both the national and international context of ECCE. ECCE practitioners who work in this sector are often referred to as *babysitters* or *child minders*, ostensibly caring and playing with children rather than teaching them.

ECCE practitioners are grossly underpaid and undervalued in society and too often the value of their work goes unrecognised (Ebbeck & Yole 2011; Miller et al. 2012); they are perceived as glorified babysitters. However, this perception of ECCE practitioners has changed over recent years with increased emphasis on the qualification and professional status. This is evident in the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Educators (DHET, 2017) where emphasis is placed on professionalising the sector. The perceptions that parents have of ECCE practitioners related to their professional identity forms part of the mesosystem whereby connections and processes take place between the developing person in this case the ECCE practitioner, the parents and the early childhood care and education context (Sekopane, 2012). In the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner (1994:39) emphasises that interpersonal relations with a developing person can permit or inhibit engagement. In this study, the interpersonal relations that the ECCE practitioners experience with the parents inhibit understanding of the ECCE practitioners as professionals, thus resulting in the weakening of professional identity. Whilst parents form part of the cultural context that ECCE teachers work in, they contribute to the shaping of the ECCE practitioners' professional identity in a negative way by not fully valuing them as professionals.

The Vygotskian perspective places emphasis on the importance of individuals as humans who shape and are shaped by their living conditions (Vygotsky, 1997). Therefore, activity is deemed necessary in a neo-Vygotskian concept and considered fundamental, which suggests that functioning and development of individuals must be studied within the context of their participation in socio-cultural practice, and more concretely in a variety of activity systems (Wenger, 1998). In this study, it could be argued that activity can be referred to as the creation of awareness of meaning attributed to ECCE practitioners' professional identities. The cultural context within which these ECCE teachers work also includes the parents and the ECCE centres need to create awareness amongst parents of the roles that ECCE practitioners play as professionals.

#### 4.2.3 Professional identity shaped by practitioners who teach in other phases

Another contextual reality that shaped the professional identity of ECCE practitioners was related to the perceptions held by other practitioners who teach in other phases of education.

*Practitioner C: When you go it's sometimes you feel like oh my God, you feel shy and it's like you feel like they... I never thought that I could maybe do this – like the way somebody else is maybe talking or, just like when you are amongst them, it's like sometimes you feel so less because now they speak of how they are working and especially it comes in again where money is concerned. Now they say I can't wait to go to work because I know my salary is gonna be like far away and you are like you can't even talk about your work because you feel ashamed because if they are gonna hear how much you earn then they are gonna be like, huh! So you just keep yourself like...*

Practitioner C expressed her lack of confidence to speak in the presence of other educational practitioners. She felt that they had a stronger repertoire of the language to communicate effectively with others. Her admitting to 'you feel so less' shows us how the perceptions of ECCE practitioners who work in other phases influenced her professional identity. The low salary that ECCE practitioners earn was also a contributing contextual reality that influenced their professional identity.

Professional identity formation is a multi-faceted process consisting of an extensive range of social, personal and environmental factors formed extensively during the ECCE practitioners' work experiences (Madden, 2012), and influenced by how they handle these unexpected circumstances. According to Wenger and Vygotsky, human identity is co-constructed through internal and external interactions and factors and is therefore subject to change according to social exposure and circumstances. Through social practices and participation, the ECCE practitioners gain clarity about their roles and social norms within these contextual realities, and most importantly, the process allows them to improve and cultivate their professional identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Park, 2015). These findings reveal that there is an interplay between the micro- and macrosystem which is an extension of the exosystem. It can be understood that the practitioners who teach in other phases form part of the social

structure which is part of the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and the ways in which they speak and the salaries they earn have an indirect influence on how ECCE practitioners perceive themselves as professionals.

#### **4.2.4 Professional identity shaped by belonging and participation in a CoP**

Belonging has a huge impact on the ECCE practitioners' professional identity (Moloney, 2010) and is central for professional development. Belonging can allow opportunities for the ECCE practitioners to participate in key reflections and to improve their working communities, which is important for professional identity formation (Melasalmi & Husu, 2018:106). Whilst the study showed that the ECCE practitioners experience a sense of belonging with their peers in the immediate ECCE context, which is enabling, they did not experience a sense of belonging to a CoP in the larger, external context of ECCE, which was constraining. The ECCE practitioner who belongs to an ECCE forum or group where mutual tasks and understanding is accomplished falls into a 'domain' in which the ECCE practitioner community has the acceptability to define their identity and confidence – a community defined by their mutual profession or by something that they establish together (Farnsworth et al, 2016:5).

The ECCE practitioners were asked if they belonged to any formal education forum or any networks within the community where they taught. The following data indicates that none of the ECCE practitioners interviewed had a sense of belonging or identity with a CoP in the larger, external context of their ECCE community. The ECCE forums available were, according to them, for the principals only.

Practitioner A further explained that if she had belonged to a forum, it would assist her in gaining more knowledge and teach her better ways to take care of situations and the children's needs.

*Practitioner A: Like if you give me more knowledge of how to take care of a situation if I find myself in one especially like with him like, so I would know how to be with him.*

*Practitioner D: Nothing. The forum that they have here is for principals only. It's for the principals; they call it Capricorn Forum for the principals – True North is mos helping out all the schools around.*

*Practitioner B: The school [belongs to an ECCE forum] yes, but not myself...No...it is mostly for the principals, the True North Organisation and the ECD forum in the area also but all the meetings and stuff is for the principals mostly.*

Tajfel (1979) explains that social groups with which ECCE practitioners identify and align themselves help to create, enhance and protect their identity. He further expounds that the establishment of group identities results in an identification with a collective, which grounds the ECCE practitioners in their identity as teaching and care facilitators with their colleagues and within the education sector and ECD practitioner's community of practice. Communities of practice form through belonging to a teaching community and practicing becomes habituated in the process of identity construction. According to Wenger (1998), we are social beings, and shared knowledge creates strong confidence that identity enhances who we become in our community. Both Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (1998) agrees that the human identity is co-constructed, and that identity is subject to change according to social exposure and circumstances. The ECCE practitioners establish their professional identities through interactions, and the relationships they develop and the educational practices that such relationships and affiliations bring forth are contributory to their professional identity formation (McCulloch et al., 2000). In the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner (1977) places pivotal importance on relationships and interactions with the environment and individuals which include home, work and personal relations. A community of practice can be considered as a force which shapes the way proximal processes and developments are experienced (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). However, this finding shows that whilst the ECCE practitioners did not belong to an external community of practice, they developed a community of practice with the practitioners that they directly worked with. In the study, the ECCE practitioners were asked about how their colleagues and other ECCE practitioners contributed to their teaching approaches and professional identity. The data below informs us that ECCE practitioners relied extensively on the experience of their colleagues to contribute to their learning and teaching approaches.

Practitioner A: *Mostly my colleagues, like yes we would help each other. Maybe if we struggle with an activity, maybe we're doing this theme – the thing they give in the book is not interesting – someone would ask don't you maybe have an idea what would be interesting for them because sometimes they give stuff like basically just colouring so you don't want to do that the whole time, colouring and painting. Maybe something else it can be experimental so they can also say now because it's getting bored for me and for them as well just to colour every time and to paste and stuff like that. There is not much support from the community though.*

Practitioner A confirms that they 'help each other' as colleagues and she emphasises how they assist in creating interesting facets to existing ideas and themes – observing that her colleagues help to strengthen her creativity and add value to the activities that she presents to the children, which adds to her professional identity and approaches to teaching and care.

Through social practices and participation with colleagues, ECCE practitioners gains clarity around their roles, and most importantly, it allows them to improve and cultivate the way that they express themselves through their own practice, enhancing their professional identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Park, 2015). Melasalmi and Husu (2018:91) *further explains* that an improved ECCE workforce with strong professional identities and approaches to teaching and care mostly takes place in relationships between other ECCE practitioners and is based on a shared knowledge approach, sharing practices, and values.

The ECCE practitioners learns from each other and develop their practice through sharing their skills and experience with each other. Wenger (1998) confirms that ECCE practitioners are active participants in the practices of their social communities, and construct their identities through continuous engagement, and contribute to the practices of their communities of practice. This learning partnership between individuals is found useful in learning from and with each other about a specific subject using each other's skills and experiences as evidenced in the following excerpt.

Practitioner B: *Yes, like with Teacher XXX, he is energetic and he can play the drums for the children. He often helps me with presenting activities and songs in a fun way – he knows many tunes. Teacher XXX belongs to another youth organisation where they always when it's holidays they have the holiday programme – so they walk in the street with all the children coming to run, they sing you understand so he has all that amazing talents of captivating the child. Teacher YYY is also good at music. She has the latest music on her phone, which the children love and knows. The children sing along and knows all the words – these two teachers as my colleagues contribute to my teaching and care in a big way'.*

Practitioner B also explains that she finds her colleague 'energetic' and that her colleagues assist her when she 'struggles with an activity' or a theme. Advanced levels of interaction with other ECCE practitioners, combined with the ECCE practitioner's individual identities and a deeper understanding of practice, aligns the ECCE practitioner's skill levels and they develop an increased knowledge of practicing early childhood development (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

The excerpt below reveals that practitioner C and practitioner D also rely on colleagues for assistance, new ideas and activities. Practitioner C indicated that they 'encourage one another' and 'teach each other especially things that we learn from other professional educators in the field'. Practitioner D commented that Practitioner X 'taught her very well' by letting her help in the baby class, and that Practitioner X also made her feel 'welcome'.

*Practitioner D: The first teacher who taught me very well was Teacher X here, I didn't experience that where I'm coming from .... Teacher X is the one who welcomed me in that baby class. I loved assisting in the baby class so every time she showed me how to do things and she always say Teacher D I'm gonna change the children, you can do this and this.*

*Practitioner C: We will encourage one another and sometimes we will exchange ideas. My colleague and I, we are close when it comes to our work. We will always teach each other*

*especially things that we learn from other professional educators in the field. We will share experiences that we learn from others.*

The level at which the ECCE practitioner interacts within their communities of practice measures how their professional identities are formed (Chikoko, 2015). The ECCE practitioners learn from one another by sharing ideas, methods, activities, music, stories, lesson plans, themes, songs and like-minded practices, which is an enabling factor in producing strong professional identities. This process of sharing ideas, recognised as the final element of CoP, is also defined as ‘the body of knowledge’. This practice is identified as the way in which the ECCE practitioners act in the world and as their ‘field of endeavor and expertise’ (Wenger, 1998). Teacher identity is ever-changing and interchangeable and is constantly constructed and reconstructed in context, through interactions and experiences (Yazan, 2018). The ECCE practitioners’ professional identities shift and are unquestionably influenced by their experiences and interactions within learning facilities and broader communities (Oruç, 2013).

Focusing on the ECCE practitioners’ experiences and development within the context of their environment and how these influence their teacher professional identity, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bio-ecological systems theory describes how levels of environment have a direct effect on human development and explains that human development is influenced by close contact and interaction with family, community and society. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner’s theory, like Vygotsky and Wenger’s theories above, agrees that the ECCE teachers’ identities are shaped and influenced through interaction with others and their specific environments.

In the next section, I report on findings generated by the second main finding, which is **practices** and followed by the three sub-themes, qualifications and training, culture and language, and teaching and learning that shape the ECCE practitioner’s professional identity.



### 4.3 Practices that shape the ECCE practitioner's professional identity

#### 4.3.1 Qualifications, training and peer learning

In this study, the ECCE practitioners were asked about how perceptions of their professional identities influenced their approaches to teaching and care. The following excerpt reveals the response of practitioner B, who indicated that her qualifications played an important role in how she projected herself when it came to teaching and care.

Practitioner B: *I see myself as a professional because I have a qualification. I know who I am and what I teach. I know what I am doing, I can take control of my class and I understand what I am doing there, it is not strange to me. What I am doing is real and things must be kept in place so it is like keeping structure.*

Practitioner B explained how her qualifications in early childhood care and education enhanced her approaches to teaching and care and influenced her identity by confidently stating, *'I know what I am doing'*. Whilst practitioner B had a level four early Childhood Certificate which is an entry qualification to teach young children, it is a recognised and certified qualification; this provided her with the confidence and conviction to know that she was providing the children with the appropriate teaching strategies needed for teaching and care in ECCE. In her interview, she confidently asserted herself, stating that *'I can take control of my class'*, revealing her self-confidence and self-motivation to understand what she was doing. Her knowledge gained through her qualification contributed to the development of her strong confidence and was an enabling factor that strengthened her professional identity. Practitioner B has a strong individual identity and her *confidence in the classroom and the way that she approaches teaching and care confirms* Lerseth's (2013) notion that our identities as professional practitioner's links to our recognition of our own individual identities, teaching pedagogy, subject matter knowledge and classroom management. Her alluding to *'I know what I teach, I know what I am doing'* shows her ability to express herself through activities she teaches, which also contributes to establishing her professional identity in the classroom.

The following excerpts further confirm that practitioner A and B both alluded to how their qualifications and training influenced their professional identities towards teaching young children better.

*Practitioner B: Yeah because even sometimes my sisters also say no, we are just 'looking after children' then I must defend and say 'no we are teaching the child and they learn here – we are not just playing all day'. Since my level 4 qualification, I understand that children as young as two years old needs to go to crèche and mustn't just sit at home watching cartoons, they need to be formally educated.*

*Practitioner A: No, actually like it helped me a lot because now I know, I understand more what to do with the child and like when I get in a certain situation what I must do with the child. Because sometimes like you get... children are at different stages – now with especially those children that are more advanced – so I would know how to go ahead with them and with the ones not like disadvantaged...*

*Practitioner D: Some [parents] knows that we do levels and stuff but most of them they think we just come to look after the children and that's it. But last of last year, the time I was doing Level 4 is where I get okay this is not that difficult. So after I did Level 4 it was better although I am still learning, I am still learning because there is more stuff that you have to understand about children.'*

In the above comments, practitioner A, B and C alluded to the fact that through obtaining the level 4 ECD formal qualification and training, this qualification assisted them immensely in enhancing their professionalism, increased their understanding of working with children and improving their practice.

When involved in professional training, the ECCE practitioners obtain the opportunity to interchange ideas and develop new learning material and activities, which they in turn bring back to the ECCE context. ECCE practitioners' professional identities are developed through social experiences and engagement within various levels of interaction whilst at training sessions and in turn, this influences their classroom practice. Bronfenbrenner (1994:40)

emphasises that bodies of knowledge and opportunity structures form part of the macrosystem. The ECCE practitioners in this study embarked on pursuing their ECD qualification to strengthen their professional status and to gain more experience in teaching young children, which ultimately influences the exosystem. This enables the ECCE practitioners to learn different concepts, meanings and understandings, thus evolving their professional identities (Clancey, 1986; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Ertmer & Newby, 2013; Wenger 1998). The ECCE practitioners showed eagerness in legitimatizing their practice and their participation by achieving their levels. In accord with Vygostky (1997), the ECCE practitioners projected that their qualifications would result in a fuller and more extended and responsible participation within the ECCE context. However, for this to become a reality, individuals need an environment in which supporting conditions are prevalent (Van Oers, 2014).

#### **4.3.2 Children's culture and language**

Culture and language are key factors to developing the ECCE practitioners' professional identities. They are also contributing factors to how the ECCE practitioners sees themselves as professionals and to their confidence associated with teaching and care. Vygotsky, like Wenger, believed that individuals depend on the experiences of others in order to develop. Through the sociocultural theory, he emphasizes how culture and language construction plays a role in future learning and emphasises the co-dependence between the social and individual processes (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996:198). In this study, ECCE practitioners were asked about how working with children from different cultures, without English as a home language, influenced their professional identity. The following responses indicated that language and culture that differs from that of the ECCE practitioner presents a huge challenge to the teaching and care of young children. However, the ECCE practitioners used this as an opportunity to develop their personal and professional capabilities in teaching and care as they learnt with and from the children.

*Practitioner A: 'I like the diversity of cultures because sometimes I would ask them to teach me as well in their languages and stuff. Even though, like now also I do know a few words, so I can tell them maybe a sentence in their language if they don't understand me especially like the Malawian and the Zimbabwean children and they*

*would be surprised – uh teacher you also speak our language? Then I say yes, and you must also try to speak my language mos and I would teach them some Afrikaans words and some Xhosa words.*

Practitioner A noted that the exposure to the diversity of culture taught her more about her learning abilities and about the cultures of the children. She noted that the children were quite surprised when they heard her attempt to speak their language. They found her trying to speak their language encouraging and she used this as an opportunity to motivate them to learn her language too: *'Then I say yes, and you must also try to speak my language mos and I would teach them some Afrikaans words and some Xhosa words'*. The practitioners in this study showed that they respected the children's capabilities and realised that they were knowledgeable and that adults could learn from them. Below, practitioner B further provides evidence of learning with and from the children. Wenger's community of practice explains that connection, imagination, engagement and alignment through activities with the children are critical in building the ECCE practitioner's thoughts through activities as they establish their professional identities within their community of *practice* (Wenger, 1998:173; Chikoko: 2015:57).

*Practitioner B: I think it gives me also a new perspective towards them and also respecting their religions and their cultures and learning also from them. Therefore, when we maybe have a topic they can tell me something that I did not know about their religion. Like today, I kept apples and so I cut the apples, I give it to the children and the one child told me no teacher I am fasting. I was so shocked. The child fasts the whole day and she is so small. I developed a new respect for this child. Who does that? I cannot fast the whole day. So yes, I was like okay that is very nice actually for parents to teach her from a small age to fast.*

*The Sociology of Childhood* (James & Prout, 1999) remind us that children are not passive beings, but are active beings from whom adults can learn. In the South African early childhood context, Shaik and Ebrahim (2015) illuminate how children are agents participating in activities and matters when adults engage them. The ECCE practitioner in this excerpt above showed that by listening to the children and expressing the intention to learn from

them, she displayed how she is creating an enabling environment that is consistent with the children's needs, priorities and expectations.

In this study, it was clear that the ECCE practitioners did not just see themselves as practitioners who teach children, but as learners who learn from the children. In the above excerpts and analysis, I showed how the evidence showed ECCE practitioners' willingness to learn with and from the children about their culture and language. The following excerpt shows that the ECCE practitioners were more than willing to learn from the parents too.

Parents are the 'the first teachers of their children' and the level of their involvement in the child's life is critical in early childhood. Literature places emphasis on how important it is for partnerships to take place between the ECCE practitioner and the parent (Moloney, 2010:221).

*Practitioner D: I find it challenging but it's also a nice experience, a good experience. So it's not about different languages or different cultures especially if the mother tells you exactly okay teacher I'm a Muslim, if you are dishing food here at school, my child mustn't eat this and that. No you cannot take off that one's 'doekie' because it is their culture, understand? I am learning also. It is a challenge that give me experience in life okay.*

For the ECCE practitioners, understanding the perspectives of the parents regarding their children's culture is important for them to understand and support young children in their journey to teaching and care. In practitioner D's indication ('So it's not about different languages or different cultures especially if the mother tells you exactly okay teacher I'm a Muslim, if you are dishing food here at school, my child mustn't eat this, this and that. No you cannot take off that one's 'doekie' because it is their culture, understand?') reveals her commitment not only to respecting the child's cultural practices but also to using this information as an opportunity to learn different cultural practices from the parents. This feedback from the parents will assist her in shaping her approaches to teaching and care and to the ways in which she interacts and engages with children.

Exposed to the various cultures of the children, the ECCE practitioners engage with learning opportunities to shape their professional identities. Even though this is challenging as the extract above indicates, they try to manage their situations and identify themselves with the roles and situations presented to them, creating a quality pedagogy and learning foundation for the children in their care. Their willingness to be enlightened and developed through their various circumstances, including culture, teaching practice, children, and their environment – which includes learning from both children and parents – illustrates how their professional identities are shaped (Beijaard, 2004).

*Practitioner A: I do interact with them professionally because like, I would also ask them do you see like improvement at home – like what does she do?*

Practitioner A is willing to take the parent's guidance on the child's development and she finds her professional interaction with parents helpful in understanding the child's improvement.

*Practitioner D: It's not like I'm better than anyone, not only me doing this like understanding between because I always tell my parents if you can work together.... Sometimes I know your child better than you know your child. So there are parents who appreciate me and stuff – that's why I'm like okay and then those parents are the parents who keep me going.*

Practitioner D finds that if she can work cooperatively with parents as indicated above, it enables her task and professional identity. Through shared understanding, guidance and mutual decision-making power, both practitioner A and D strive to 'work together' with parents and improve relationships with parents. Practitioner A checks with parents whether reinforced learning takes place at home and how this adds to the child's improvement and learning. Even though there were limited opportunities for parents and the ECCE practitioners to exchange information with one another, the practitioners relied heavily on the opinions on the parents in terms of what they thought and how they thought the parents evaluated their capacity and performance.

In the below excerpt practitioner B indicates how important it is that her parents receive the service they pay for and that she gets the necessary cooperation from them because they are happy.

*Practitioner B: And when I request stuff, so like....they must bring one packet of wipes every month. My cupboard is always full. Other teachers ask why is my cupboard always full what am I doing with my parents that they cooperate? We never run out, even with school fees my parents are always paid up by the first week of the month and they are never outstanding with payment. I feel, yes, my parents are working with me because they are getting the service.*

It is essential that the ECCE practitioners and parents work together. Meloney (2011:221) explains that communication is a key factor in building relationships and a community partnership with parents. It is in the macrosystem that we uncover how all the levels of the ecological system affects the relationships and interactions between the various planes. Including the ECCE practitioner and parent's micro-, meso-, and exo-levels and how these interactions and relations thus influences the development and professional identity of the ECCE practitioner (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The findings above reveal how ECCE practitioners and parents can develop strong connections through sharing of cultural practices to support teaching and learning. This is important considering that these connections form part of the mesosystem (Sekopane: 2012) and can contribute to an ECCE practitioner's professional identity.

#### **4.3.3 Teaching and learning strategies**

The ECCE practitioners in this study showed a strong commitment to the ways in which they teach. The following excerpt shows how practitioners do not take for granted that children can learn on their own – she realises that children also require the skills and expertise, guided by an ECCE practitioner who can use different teaching strategies. This is enabling for her professional identity

*Practitioner B: I go to the group[s], table by table, to show them how even to handle the crayon, even all of the painting all of that. You can't give them the work and say*

*okay colour this new school, colour in. You can't do that. You have to be there and observe them all the time.*

A central component of Vygotsky's theory is the zone of proximal development. When tasks are too challenging for the child to achieve independently, they can be achieved with the assistance and guidance of another skilled person – the children and the skilled person do an activity together, creating a socially interactive opportunity for learning (Vygotsky, 1962). This is indicative in the above excerpt as practitioner D demonstrates how she makes herself available to assist the children whilst she observes them. Her clear indication of observation reveals her intentionality to scaffold the children. Vygotsky (1962) reminds us that children require appropriate assistance at the correct time as they collaboratively learn from more skilled individuals who are also learning, and who model and scaffold them through using strategies to support the enhancement of their knowledge and skills, thus facilitating intentional learning (Shabani, 2016).

In the following excerpts below practitioner A, D and C indicated that they made use of symbols and sign language to communicate with the children. They had to physically demonstrate to the child what they were trying to communicate when the child did not understand the language or question.

*Practitioner A: No, maybe if it is something that I have like visuals around me and I would ask them can you bring this, like I would show them stuff...or I would just like ask someone that speaks their language to translate it for me.*

*Practitioner D: It's challenging but it's a nice experience, a good experience. The challenge for the children and yoh it's difficult because sometimes the child don't even understand a word and then you must do the sign language like to show – up – down – go, you understand. Let's go – if you don't understand the bathroom – the toilet or whatever – you must use the symbol – come-come so that you are showing him or her that you must sit down on the mat -sit – if she don't understand you must sit on the mat – come sit. That is difficult but for that part it is not about the language – even those who understand the language children are children – a child can stand there and*



*look at you although she understands but they just want to see how you gonna come-come-come.*

*Practitioner C: Is a little difficult and hectic especially those children that don't understand what I am saying. But I see it as a challenge – like okay the child is not going to understand so what do I do now? Then I have to think what can I do to help the child understand, I will maybe talk and talk and maybe then say ok, let me show the child what I am talking about example a cupboard or so.*

Semiotic mediation, also known as mediated action (Vygotsky, 1966:29), is a method where ECCE practitioners use mechanisms or tools within their environment as critical aspects of knowledge construction – strengthening their professional development to enhance the development of the children in their care amidst learning and teaching barriers (Vygotsky, 1966:29). Whilst practitioner A invites other children to interpret what she does not understand, practitioner D uses sign language as a tool to communicate and teach children who do not understand what she is saying. Both practitioner A and D realise that they can develop and stimulate the child as they use tools, gestures, and symbols when they experience cultural and language barriers. ECCE practitioners make use of semiotic mediation as tools for teaching and care (Vygotsky, 1966:29). They use tools that they are culturally aware of and that are available in their ECCE environment to communicate with (Wertsch & Stone, 1985). Vygotsky (1978) placed pivotal importance on how language and culture play a critical role in development and cannot be excluded from the development of the ECCE practitioners' professional identities. Vygotsky (1966) believed that tools such as signs and symbols, including language, mediates social and individual functioning by connecting the external and internal in human development. The usage of signs as 'artificially created stimuli' in practice to 'simulate behaviour and form new reflex connections in the human brain', connects the child to the concept of culture and tools play a vital role in mental and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Material resources, bodies of knowledge and opportunity structures form part of the macrosystem, which the ECCE practitioners use when they implement teaching strategies to optimize teaching and learning. Additionally, whilst Bronfenbrenner (1979) alerts us to the importance of one making use of material resources,

the ECCE practitioners in this study show us how they work co constructively with children as human resources to optimize teaching and learning.

#### **4.4 Chapter summary**

The aim of this chapter was to explore the perceptions that ECCE practitioners have about their professional identities. In order to accomplish this, I organised this chapter around two main themes of lived experiences and practices that shape ECCE professional identities which comprised related sub themes. As was indicated at the outset of this chapter given the context of this study, Wenger's community of practice theory, Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory and Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory provided analytical guidance to support the findings of this study. The study found that ECCE practitioners' professional identities were shaped by their lived experiences and practices as they engaged with the ECCE context, parents, peers, children and the community. Importantly, parents perceived ECCE practitioners as just playing, caring and feeding children and with little recognition of them as real, professional ECCE practitioners engaging in meaningful teaching of young children. As such, the study found that some of the parents did not regard the ECCE practitioners as professionals; however, the ECCE practitioners experienced a greater sense of professional self within the internal ECCE context as opposed to how they experienced a professional self in the external context. This implies that their professional identities were stronger in the microsystem and there was a stronger interconnectedness between the peers in the internal context. This interconnectedness relates to how the ECCE practitioners' identities were not shaped individually but were also shaped by the dialectical relationship they held with their peers, which is an important contributor to development in the Vygotskian, Wenger and Bronfenbrenner perspectives. The support received from their peers, sharing of ideas and knowledge, paved the way for the ECCE practitioners to learn and support one another, which also shaped their professional identities.

The study also found that experiences with contextual realities such as gang violence, shootings and parent perceptions further shaped their professional identities. A Vygotskian perspective argues the importance of individuals as humans who shape and are shaped by their living conditions. It could be argued that whilst these acts of violence might have shaped the ECCE practitioners' identity in a negative way, the ECCE practitioners showed a high level

of resilience and bravery and attempted to keep the activities functional at the ECCE centre, only halting their activities in reaction to protestors and gangsters when instructed to do so. This had to be done in order to protect themselves and the children.

A notable finding of this study is that the ECCE practitioners saw themselves as learning with and from the children and parents. In learning with and from the children, the ECCE practitioners showed that they were not confined to authoritative ways of being where only the *practitioners* hold all the power and are dismissive of learning from children. They valued children as active beings and agents who could teach adults, and thus the ECCE practitioners showed a willingness to co-construct knowledge with the children when a new language had to be learnt. Respecting the children's cultural backgrounds, the ECCE practitioners created the space for parents to share their cultural practices with them and this was highly respected and valued by the ECCE practitioners. They saw this as an opportunity to learn about another culture, which they were unfamiliar with, and this also shaped their professional identities as it showed their capacities to learn and engage with parents. Whilst the study showed that the ECCE practitioners felt like they did not belong to any formal community of practice, the community of practice that did in fact develop in the ECCE context was a strong force which helped strengthen their teaching and learning through each other.

The findings above highlight that professional identities are not constructed solely by the individual but are constructed and possibly re-constructed through the lived experiences and practices with other individuals within a social context. Professional identity is therefore socially constituted and relational to the experiences and practices, as was indicated in this study. These findings have important implications for strengthening professional identities in ECCE. Chapter five includes discussion, implications and conclusions of this study.

## Chapter 5: Summary of Findings and Conclusion

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The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions that ECCE practitioners have of their professional identities and how these perceptions influence their approaches to teaching and caring for children aged from birth to four years old. This concluding chapter presents an overview of the research study with recommendations that can influence practice, policy and research concerning the professional identity, development and status of the ECCE practitioner and sector. This chapter presents a summary of the findings; the themes uncovered in the study; its limitations; and recommendations for the Department of Basic Education and schools, for ECCE practitioners, and for future studies regarding ECCE practitioners' professional identities.

### 5.1 Summary of findings

The literature review and theoretical framework of this study, as discussed in chapter two, places a great deal of emphasis on how the ECD sector and ECCE practitioners' professional identities have evolved over the past two decades in South Africa. The study places a specific focus on how professional identities are shaped over time through a process of ongoing interactions, experiences and exposure within various contexts and contextual realities. The research also found that it is evident that the way in which ECCE practitioners view themselves and their professional identities has a great influence on their approaches to teaching and care (Beijaard et al. 2004:108; Oruç, 2013).

The findings of this research study confirmed a strong alignment with previous studies done by Moloney (2010) and Sacks (2014), confirming that the opinions of parents, peers and the community greatly influence the perceptions ECCE practitioners have of their professional identities. It was also found that professional identity was strongly influenced by their interactions with the children in their care. The ECCE practitioners who participated in the research all indicated that they were not limited, but rather guided, to learning and strengthening their professional identities through their interactions with the children in their care.

With regard to the theoretical framework, the research showed that the key to developing a firm professional identity included a co-constructed learning process through interactions with peers, the children, their environment, community and the parents. Over time and through

social interactions in and outside the classrooms, the ECCE practitioners knowingly and unknowingly contribute to the body of knowledge, shaping each other through their teaching techniques and contributing to each other's professional identities.

In alignment with the theoretical framework, it was found that a variety of internal and external factors, including environment, context, relationships and practice influenced the professional identity of the ECCE practitioners. The social learning theories considered in the theoretical framework, as guided by Wenger's community of practice theory, Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory and Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, supported the findings and indicated that social interaction, culture, experience, values, and belonging to a community of practice influenced the ECCE practitioners' professional identities.

### **5.2 Themes identified in the study reflected that:**

- The lived experiences of the ECCE practitioners shaped their professional identities within certain context and contextual realities.
- Parents' and society's perceptions shaped the ECCE practitioners' professional identities.
- The ECCE practitioners' professional identities were shaped by the perceptions of other practitioners who taught in other phases.
- Belonging and participation in a community of practice influenced and shaped the ECCE practitioners' professional identities.
- The ECCE practitioners' level of qualifications, training and peer learning shaped their professional identities.
- Their professional identities were shaped by children's culture and languages.
- Teaching and learning strategies shaped their professional identities.

The study found that even though parents still perceived ECCE practitioners as 'just playing, caring and feeding children' and serving as babysitters, the practitioners in this study, continued to show resilience and a passion for what they did, irrespective of their circumstances and challenges. Their lived experiences and practices as they engaged within the ECCE context were what shaped their professional identities. The teachers continued to find a deep sense of meaning for what they did in their mesosystem and in the context of the

classroom. It was the disconnection and lack on interaction and exposure to their macrosystem that caused great limitation in the development of their professional identities.

### **5.3 Limitations:**

Like every other research study, this one is not without limitations. First, this was a small scale study that only focused on the perceptions and status of four ECCE practitioners working with children from birth to four years old whilst the ECCE sector comprises a broad variety of influencers and caregivers contributing to the young child's fundamental development. According to UNICEF (2017), the young child's development ultimately starts in the mother's womb and through the first 1000 days and beyond. For a more comprehensive picture of ECCE practitioner development and a holistic approach to the influences that their self-perceptions has on teaching and care, future research could definitely focus on *national larger scale research studies that focus on practitioners who work with children from birth to four*. A study of this nature has the potential to provide a cross-analysis of varying factors that contribute to practitioners' perceptions of their professional identities. A specific focus on the knowledge and skills they need to provide comprehensive support to vulnerable children in their care would be ideal. There is also a need to analyse the actual status of unregistered and inaccessible ECCE centres and practitioners. A quantitative research study would be useful on how many ECCE practitioners and caregivers (specifically in unregistered ECD centres) there are who are still teaching as unqualified and unaccounted for, and how this affects their professional development.

Secondly, this study only focused on four practitioners from one marginalised community. Future studies could definitely include the perceptions of practitioners working with children in home-based care, community and centre-based facilities, and other special needs programmes too. Inclusivity of the various types of learning environments and contexts would give a clearer perception of the status of ECCE practitioners and the ECD sector concerning practitioner advancement and the professionalisation for quality education.

### **5.4 Recommendations for the Department of Basic Education and schools**

Considering the critical role of ECCE practitioners in establishing a sound foundation for a successful academic path for young children living in marginalised communities (UNICEF,

2017) it is important that highly trained ECCE practitioners are established with a much clearer path of certainty in their professional identity. ECCE practitioners require more than just formal qualifications and further development; they require a *clearer understanding* of their perceptions and status concerning their professional identity. It is therefore, recommended that the DBE incorporate status clarifications and '*unpack the perception of the ECCE practitioner*' dialogues and discussions in the learning opportunities of ECCE practitioners.

The critical need of an interactive ECCE CoP is imperative, especially the access of those ECCE practitioners who have weak perceptions of their professional identity in marginalised communities. It is recommended that a prevalent, formal platform be established for ECCE practitioners. This can be done through face-to-face interactive opportunities in local communities or via an online platform where ECCE practitioners can share resources, knowledge and techniques with each other – in effect, a knowledge hub.

Future research could include a comparative study of pre-service practitioners and how they perceive their future role as ECCE practitioners would play out in comparison to the realities experienced by existing ECCE practitioners, with a specific focus on how their perceptions influence teaching and care in the ECD sector.

### **5.5 Recommendations for ECCE practitioners**

Learning and developing are key attributes to developing a professional career and professional identity. It is thus recommended that all ECCE practitioners, qualified or unqualified, teaching at registered or unregistered ECD centres, never stop learning. They should be encouraged to take every opportunity of becoming a better professional by belonging to a professional CoP. According to Wenger (1998), a CoP allows ECCE practitioners to share methods, activities, music, resources, stories, lesson plans and to confront challenges within their specific contexts.

A continued learning process offers practitioners a deeper understanding of how to use a multitude of instructional techniques and strategies. It also provides tools to bridge the challenges they face with teaching and learning gaps. A higher educational level and ongoing

training support ECCE practitioners in becoming better equipped to do their jobs. Learning enables improved teaching and learning experience for both children and practitioners.

The findings suggest that learning is socially co-constructed. Therefore, further development opportunities also must allow for co-constructed learning engagements and experiences with peers and other practitioners, which enhance and empower professional identity.

It is also recommended that ECCE practitioners take every opportunity possible to engage in shared learning practice. Engagement encourages the transfer of knowledge and shared practice.

### **5.6 Recommendations for further research**

The limitations and findings above serve as a guide, providing insights and a pathway for future research studies in similar or related fields.

The information in this research presented data regarding ECCE practitioners and their perceptions of their professional identities and how this influences teaching and care. However, research by Sacks (2014) provides evidence supporting the notion that parental involvement in early development is an indicator of positive outcomes for the developing child. Research into parents' experience and perceptions of ECCE practitioners and the importance of ECD in a marginalised community would be valuable.

A study on how parents in marginalised communities can be more interactive and integrated in the learning process could potentially add great value to the future education of young children.

Future research could include the perceptions of ECCE practitioners in both advantaged and disadvantaged contexts in South Africa to determine how contexts determine ECCE practitioners' perceptions of professional identity.

Finally, this is the first research study that has been conducted concerning the ECCE practitioners' professional identities in a marginalised community, more so a crime-ridden



one. Research of this nature can add value to what it might mean for ECCE practitioners who work in such communities and what steps need to be taken to strengthen their professional identities as practitioners.

To go beyond the national context, it would be insightful to explore how both national and international contexts influence the ECCE practitioners' professional identity. Such a study has the potential to compare and contrast and it might enable one context to learn from one another.

### **5.7 Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate a deeper understanding of how ECCE practitioners perceive their professional identities and how these perceptions influence their methods of teaching and care. The findings of this research study served to contribute to the ECD Sector, but also serve to highlight the world of the ECCE practitioner and how they can be supported in cultivating a more sustainable professional identity.

ECCE practitioners play a pivotal role in teaching and caring for our youngest of children. They should be empowered to believe that they are professionals and not just babysitters or childminders. This can happen if the DBE and DSD take the role of ECCE practitioners more seriously and consider the role ECCE practitioners play in the lives of young children and in society. This study has clearly shown that whilst ECCE teachers face challenging factors such as crime and negative parental perceptions of what their roles are as professionals, they still use strategies to prove themselves as professionals.

## APPENDIX 1: Ethical Clearance Certificate



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### FACULTY OF EDUCATION

On the **08 January 2021** the Chairperson of the Education Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology granted ethics approval EFEC 09-10/2020 to **E. Rethman** for research activities related to her master's studies at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

<b>Title of thesis:</b>	<b>Early childhood care and education educators perception of their professional identity in selected care centres in the Western Cape, South Africa</b>
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#### Comments:

Research activities are restricted to those details in the application for ethics.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "O. Koopman".

Date: 08-01-2021

Dr O Koopman

Acting Chair of the Education Faculty Ethics committee

Faculty of Education

## APPENDIX 2

### Semi-structured Interview

<b>Participants' Name</b>	
<b>Participants' Age</b>	
<b>Name of School:</b>	
<b>Class/Age Group</b>	

#### **How do ECCE practitioners describe their teacher professional identity?**

1. How would you describe yourself as a professional?
2. How do you think the parents, children and families perceive and understand you as a professional?
3. We know that policy informs you of what you should do, how do you think this contribute to you as a professional?
4. Does the environment of the ECCE centre where you teach contribute to you as a professional? Explain?
5. Is the environment where you teacher and care for children an environment where you feel motivated to work? Explain?
6. How does working with children and colleagues from different cultures influence you as a professional?
7. How does teaching children to whom English is not their first language, affect your profession?
8. Has your identity as a professional changed over the years from the time you first began teaching till now?
9. How does your personal life and work experiences affect you as a professional?
10. Were there any personal experiences that you had as a child or adult that contributed to you becoming a ECCE practitioner?

#### **How do the ECCE practitioner's professional identity influences their approaches to teaching and care?**

1. How do you think teaching young children and caring for them influences you as a professional?
2. How do you see yourself as an agent in making a difference to children's lives?
3. How does your understanding of a professional influence the way that you teach?
4. Which teaching approaches do you use when teaching and caring young children?

<p>5. Do you use different approaches with the different ages of children (babies, toddlers, Gr R), explain?</p> <p>6. How do these teaching approaches enable you to feel confident as a professional?</p>
<b>Community of Practice</b>
<p>1. Do you belong to any formal education forum or any networks within the community where you teach? If so, how does this contribute to enhancing your status as a professional?</p> <p>2. How do your colleagues and other ECCE practitioners contribute to your teaching approaches?</p>
Additional/General Comments

<b>Reflective Journal Guiding Questions</b>
<b>Participant Name:</b>
<b>Name of School:</b>
<p><b>Introductions:</b></p> <p>In your reflective writing it is important to remember that the journal reflections are about you, your views and your impressions.</p> <p><b><i>Below are some general guidelines to assist you:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are required to write in your journal <i>at least</i> once a week, over four weeks.</li> <li>• The journal entry must at least be two A5 pages long per day - in the hard cover book provided.</li> <li>• Please write the date above every entry.</li> <li>• Reflect on what happened. Don't try to include everything but explain as much detail as possible.</li> <li>• Give an honest view of your experiences.</li> <li>• Only write down the key ideas from your experiences.</li> <li>• When entering a journal reflection, try to keep a specific activity or day in mind.</li> <li>• Reflect on what you have learned through that specific activity/day, how you approached a situation, the responses you received from your teaching approaches and interactions with parents, colleagues</li> </ul>

and the child, how you could have dealt with situations differently, how the situation relates to early childhood policy, practices, your identity.

- The framework below, *serves as a guide* to help you with your journal entry reflections.

### **The ECCE Practitioner**

- What were your successes and challenges of this week?
- How did these successes or challenges contribute to your professional identity?
- What goal(s) did you reach?
- What motivated you to reach these goals?

### **ECCE Practitioner Development and Support**

- In what way do you experience support from your colleagues, parents and the community
- How does this support contribute to your professional identity?
- Reflect in which areas you need more support
- Explain why support is significant for you?
- How can this be done differently?

### **ECCE Practitioner Teaching and Learning**

*Reflect on one indoor and one outdoor activity that you presented to the children.*

- Was this activity taught in a play based way or formal way? Explain
- When planning for this activity, what outcomes did you envisage important for the children to learn and why?
- What did you learn from this activity?
- How has this activity prompted you to change the way in which you teach it the next time?
- What was significant about this activity - for yourself and the child?
- How did the children respond to this activity - where your outcomes met, explain?
- Explain how your experiences in and outside of the classroom contribute to your professional identity

### **Teacher Professional Identity**

*Reflect on one indoor and one outdoor activity that you presented to the children.*

- How does the activity you presented contribute to your experience and the way that you teach?

- How do your interactions with other ECCE practitioners, the parents and the community add value to your teaching experiences?
- In your experience, what can you do differently to add value to the ECCE sector as an ECCE practitioner

### **Communities of Practice**

*Reflect and explain a significant activity or experience encountered with another ECCE practitioner(s), parent or a child*

- Why was this activity or experience significant to you?
- What have you learned from your interactions with other ECCE practitioners, parents or the children – through this experience.
- What was their responses to this significant experience or activity?

## APPENDIX 3

### Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study on *Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners' perceptions of their professional identity in two Early Childhood Care and Education centres in the Western Cape, South Africa*. This study is being conducted by the Centre for International Teachers Education at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

#### **Purpose and objectives**

The purpose of this study is to explore how Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners perceive their professional identities and how their perception influences the way that they teach and care for young children.

#### **Importance of this research**

This research study will help us to understand how ECCE practitioners perceive their professional identity. It will also inform how we can further support ECCE practitioners in better understanding and formulating their professional identity.

#### **What is involved?**

- You will each be required to attend a semi structured interview session that will last 45 to 60 minutes. These sessions will be conducted by the researcher, Eltena Rethman. A suitable, scheduled date and time will be arranged with you before-hand.
- You will each receive a journal for two weeks. You will be required to record in writing a series of daily activities, routines and stories in this journal. You will receive a guide of leading questions to assist you with this activity.

#### **Voluntary participation**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. We hope you decide to be part to the project will respect all confidentiality and anonymity of this research and your input.

**Anonymity**

All information collected through the interviews and journals in this research study, including your name will be kept confidential. We will not use your name and any description identifying you or people related to you will be changed to protect your and their anonymity - unless you give express permission to be identified and have permission to share the identity of people related to you.

**Confidentiality**

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will always be protected. All recorded data in a locked filing cabinet. Any typed data will be held in a password protected computer storage device.

**Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways, (1) Masters thesis, (2) and scholarly papers.

**Contact**

If you have any further questions, you may contact **Prof Yusuf Sayed** at e-mail [cite@cput.ac.za](mailto:cite@cput.ac.za)

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you agree to participate and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

**Withdrawal**

Even if you decide to participate, you may still withdraw at any time without any consequence or explanation. If so, you will be asked to sign a release form and all the data gathered from you up to that point will be erased.



**Please indicate your preference with an [X]**

[name ] - I volunteer to participate in the study '*Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners' perceptions of their professional identity in two Early Childhood Care and Education centres in the Western Cape, South Africa*'.

[name] - I wish my identity to be **known** in this study.

[name] - I wish my identity to be **unknown** in this study.

[ name ] - I wish to remove myself from the study and have all/portions of my data destroyed.

---

*Name of Participant*

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*Signature Date*

**CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL TEACHER EDUCATION**

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the research assistant.***

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