AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore an inclusive learning environment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) using a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design. Situated in the ECCE context, the study attempts to address a significant gap in the literature by exploring inclusion in the under-researched ECCE sector. Using a PALAR design, this collaborative research also attempts to address a methodological gap by enabling the voice of and benefitting a marginalised sector in the education workforce. ECCE refers to the care and education of young children from birth to four years of age before formalschooling commences. In ECCE the learning environment has three components; the physical space where learning occurs, the temporal factors and the social factors. Firstly, the physical learning environment includes the various indoor and outdoor play areas. Secondly, the temporal learning environment comprises the timing and transitioning of the various activities. Thirdly, the social learning environment creates opportunities for socialisation between different role-players. With this in mind, the teacher skilfully tailors these three components to ensure that children have access to and are able to participate, achieve and are respected in the ECCE programme. Also significant is that this sector of education remains predominantly 'unprofessionalised' with little job security and low salaries. Thus, ECCE receives little government funding with vast discrepancies in the quality of education provision for the rich and the poor. Moreover, these ECCE centres are becoming increasingly diverse, and teachers grapple with the inclusion of children of diverse backgrounds and of varied identities, including gender, socio-economic status, language, ability and race, into the learning environment. With these varied identities in mind,this study adopts a broad view of inclusion that encompasses all diversities, not just disability or learning barriers. Additionally, there is no standardised or universal understanding of inclusion; hence many researchers concur that the concept of inclusion is broad and has varied meanings in varied contexts. Thus each ECCE centre would require a set of guidelines for inclusion that would apply to their unique context. Therefore, the focus of this study is to explore how a group of ECCE teachers and teacher trainers explore an inclusive learning environment in their unique context. The specific research objectives of the study are:

- To explore the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE
- To explore how we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE
- To explore why we need to create an inclusive learning environment in ECCE the way we do.

Consequently, the above objectives provided an impetus for an eight-month-long, virtual learning participatory workshop held with six ECCE teachers and two ECCE teacher trainers. Using a PALAR methodology, data was gathered through a baseline checklist, purposeful conversations, photovoice, reflective drawings and reflective journals. PALAR research adopts a critical emancipatory research paradigm, which seeks to give voice and agency to practitioners in the field. The study is underpinned by critical theory and critical pedagogy that enables a 'collective meaning-making', resulting in greater epistemic justice throughout the research cycles. The generated data is interpreted and analysed using Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA) where data is interpreted using two levels of closed and open coding, to reveal emergent themes that are subsequently related to wider ideological issues. The research objectives inform three iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Data generated in cycle one reveals a misunderstanding of inclusion, a need for conscientisation or personal awareness of hegemony in the learning environment, traditional teaching methods and a lack of relationship-building within role-players in the respective ECCE centres. The second learning cycle is informed by the second research objective and attempts to address the challenges revealed in cycle one. Consequently, cycle two, therefore, allowed for *praxis* – a product of iterative, collaborative reflection and action, with the co-researchers in an attempt to effect change in the learning environment. Themes in this cycle emphasised the removal of dominant ideologies regarding the concept of inclusion, greater conscientisation resulting in the removal of stereotyping and welcoming of all diversities. Cycle two also revealed an inclusive play-based pedagogical approach and ways to build relationships between all role-players at ECCE centres. The third cycle served as feedback sessions to the groups that assisted with synthesising the findings with deeper ideological issues. The study outlines a context-specific understanding of inclusion that could be applied to the broader ECCE sector. Findings reveal that inclusion is an inner journey that begins within teachers, resulting from their own levels of awareness or conscientisation. Becoming inclusive means removing current ways of being and doing and revisiting false beliefs enmeshed unknowingly in the hidden curriculum. It is a process of continuous examination, of unlearning and relearning that leads to action in the form of pedagogical practices and relationship building. This authentic and deep level of inclusion is not governed by policies but is a result of an inner urge for social justice, democracy and human rights for all. Inclusion is thus useful in achieving a more socially just ECCE learning environment. Seeing that ECCE is a critical period to form attitudes and values for life, this study also offers a commitment to social justice and equality concerning the wider world. With a paucity of research in the South African ECCE sector; this study should form a springboard for further research.

DECLARATION

I, Ashnie Mahadew [215 081 467], declare that:

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.

2. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.

3. This thesis does not contain any other persons' data, pictures, graphs or any other information unless it has been specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.

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a. Their words have been paraphrased, but the general information attributed to them has been referenced.

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5. This thesis does not contain texts, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the internet unless specifically acknowledged and the source being detailed in the thesis and in the reference section.

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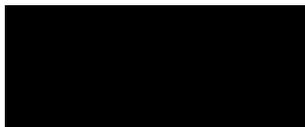
Signed: **Date: 7 June 2021**

LIST OF KEY CONCEPTS

Early Childhood Care and Education

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research

Inclusion

Learning Environments

Diversity

Epistemic Justice

Emancipation

Iterative Cycles

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the unsung heroes working in Early Childhood Care

and Education Centres, quietly shaping young minds. Very often, little recognition is

given for such important work.

"The children you teach may not remember you when they get older, but they will always have a part of you inside of them… the part that gave them hope and love and taught them to believe in themselves"

Maryln Appelbaum [Appelbaum Training Institute]

Retrieved from: https://chalkboardchampions.org/teachers-marilyn-appelbaum-offers-inspiration-for-you/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ALAR	Action Learning and Action Research
ALS	Action Learning Set
COLTS	Culture of Learning, Teaching and Services
DBE	Department of Basic Education (After 2009)
DoE	Department of Education (Before 2009)
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
KZN	Kwa Zulu Natal
LSEN	Learners with Special Educational Needs
MRQECDE	Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Early Childhood Development Educators
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NCESS	National Committee on Education Support Services
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NCSNET	National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training
NIECDP	National Integrated Early Childhood Development Plan
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
PALAR	Participatory Action Learning and Action Research
PAR	Participatory Action Research

SAHRC	South African Human Rights Council
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

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CHAPTER ONE
OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1. INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore an inclusive learning environment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) using a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) method. ECCE refers specifically to the care and education of children from birth to four before formal schooling (Ebrahim, Okwany & Barry, 2019; Harrison, 2020; Ring, Sullivan & Wall, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). Indeed, various global studies (Aubert, Molina, Schubert & Vidu, 2017; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018; Underwood, Valeo, & Wood, 2012) have highlighted inclusion as an essential component in the delivery of a quality ECCE programme. Hence, an inclusive learning environment refers to an environment that embraces a diversity of learners, including diversities of gender, race, ability, socio-economic background, special educational needs or language (Shevlin et al., 2009; Zacharová, Lemešová, Sokolová & Groma, 2020). In this study, a PALAR design (Cameron & Allen, 2013; Damons, 2017; Luthuli & Wood, 2020; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018; Wessels & Wood, 2019; Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt & Wood, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; 2018) attempts to mobilise an ECCE community to co-create knowledge for mutual learning and capacity building. The following three sections outline the concepts of inclusion, early childhood care and education and learning environments to provide a brief background for the study.

1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.2.1. INCLUSION

Inclusion is a broad and context-specific concept that entails more than presence and access. Consequently, the *Salamanca Statement* attempts to define inclusion as equal opportunities and access for diverse learners, including diversities in race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, trauma, learning styles, or disability (UNESCO, 1994, p.6; Valente & Danforth, 2016). This understanding of inclusion portrays an all-embracing broad view that includes *all* children vulnerable to marginalisation, not just those experiencing barriers to learning. However, I find the definition mentioned above by UNESCO (1994) to be partial. Inclusion requires more than presence and access (Engevik, Næss & Berntsen, 2018; Farrell, 2004). The latter's conceptualisation of inclusion also calls for acceptance, participation and achievement of all children at local schools regardless of their abilities. Thus, inclusion in this study refers to more than just being present at a centre. In addition to this, many researchers concur that inclusion has different meanings in varied contexts (Ainscow, 2005; Landsberg, Krüger & Swart, 2019; Krischler, Powell & Pit-Ten Cate, 2019; Luthuli, 2019; Mahlo, 2013;

Makoelle, 2020; Mitchell, 2005; Yusuf, Choiri & Gunarhadi, 2018). Hence the concept of inclusion is context-specific, without a universally accepted definition or a standardised set of procedures that must be followed (Kirschner, 2015; Krischler et al., 2019). Thus, in my study, each ECCE centre would require a unique set of guidelines for inclusion that would apply to a unique context. Therefore, understanding inclusion is problematic due to these broad and non-standardised definitions and misconceptions of surface inclusion as authentic inclusion.

Authentic inclusion goes deeper than the implementation of policies, as it requires teachers to examine their attitudes towards diverse groups of people in a very critical manner. Corbett and Slee (2000) and Petriwskyj (2010) state that government policies are concerned with surface inclusion, for example, the *Education White Paper Six* (Department of Education [DoE], 2001a) in South Africa, which outlines guidelines for an inclusive education and training system. The authors also assert that the second level of inclusion, driven by changes to the learning environment and curricula may involve rearranging the physical space, daily routines or social activities at the centre. Finally, they outline a deep level of inclusion that gets to the crux of the matter and involves an introspection of the teachers' values that covertly shape the hidden curriculum. This deep level of inclusion is consistent with Freire's (1974) concept of conscientisation. In this study, conscientisation refers to becoming aware of or developing a critical consciousness to contest existing ways of thinking (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2012; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Smith, 2013; Villanueva & O' Sullivan, 2019). As a result, teachers would become more aware of their own unconscious biased or stereotyped attitudes towards groups of people regarded as 'other'. This can be achieved by looking closely at the power issues that operate due to diversity and the privilege of certain groups. Thus, reflection results in praxis – a change facilitated through inner reflection and action (Motta, 2013; Rouhani, 2012; Villanueva & O' Sullivan, 2019). This *praxis* can be demonstrated by creating a more inclusive learning environment as free from bias or stereotyping as possible. Hence in this study, an authentic, inclusive learning environment within the ECCE context is created as a product of this deep level of critical consciousness that results in a more socially just and democratic centre, with ripple effects for wider societal change. Since context is an essential component, with varied applications according to unique situations, it is vital to examine the context of this study.

1.2.2. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The ECCE learning environment has a profound influence on children's attitudes to people who are different. ECCE, as mentioned before, refers to the care and education of children from birth to age four before formal schooling begins. A quality ECCE programme lays a solid foundation for development across the human lifespan in all domains (Burchinal, 2018; DoE, 2001b; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2015; Hoadley, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018; Rao, Richards, Sun, Weber & Sincovich, 2019; Woodhead, 2009; Woodhead et al., 2017). These domains include the cognitive, social, affective, physical, moral and language domains. However, relevant to this study on inclusion is the development of positive attitudes to groups of people who are different. Numerous Scholars (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Dickins, 2014; Katz & Kofkin 1997; Kemple, Lee & Harris, 2016; Glover & Smith, 1997; MacNaughton 2003, Perszyk, Lei, Bodenhausen, Richeson & Waxman, 2019; Troyna & Hatcher, 2018) have revealed that young children are aware of people who differ from the dominant culture or who are different from them.

With the above in mind, toddlers can notice and reason about differences but do not react to these differences until they are about five years old (Kinzler & Spelke, 2011). The latter, therefore, recommend that young children's acceptance of human diversity needs to be fostered from a very early age. Following that young children's beliefs about people who are different are influenced by their early environments (Huang, 2018), it is vital that ECCE teachers are aware of their attitudes to diversity and consequently teach children respect for and acceptance of diverse people. These values include an appreciation of and respect for diversity, human rights, anti-bias and justice for all. Significant to this study, ECCE has been given due attention as a means of positive social transformation in both national and global contexts. To achieve this level of positive transformation much depends on the quality of the teacher.

In South Africa, the quality of ECCE services is of concern due to inconsistencies in training opportunities and a lack of stability and professionalism of teachers in the field. Since early childhood care and education have been targeted as a means for social and economic transformation in South Africa, the *National Developmental Plan* has recognised this sector as a priority (Bipath & Joubert, 2016). Accordingly, the *Draft Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for Practitioners and Educators in Early Childhood Care and Education* was implemented (MRQECDE) (DHET, 2017). In South Africa, ECCE presently remains fragmented due to responsibility residing within the Department of Health, Department of Basic Education, Non-Governmental Organisations and the Private Sector. Furthermore, the knowledge in

ECCE is also considered fragmented (Harrison, 2020). Due to divergent teacher training programmes offered by technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and higher education institutions (HEI's), the quality and training of the workforce remains inconsistent (Ebrahim, Hannaway, Phala & Modise, 2018). Despite national and global attention, this sector remains primarily 'unprofessionalised' with minimal government funding, poor infrastructure, inequality, low salaries and job instability (Atmore, 2018; 2019; Bell, 2020; Moodly, 2019). These critical years of schooling require greater attention. Teachers in this sector represent a marginalised slice of the education workforce, and much still needs to be done to enable the voices of these teachers and to increase knowledge production in this emerging professional field. The following section explores the learning environment as the ECCE space where learning occurs through play.

1.2.3. Learning Environment

The learning environment is more than just a physical space but a reflection of a teacher's expertise in an ECCE centre. The learning environment can be a classroom, outdoor play area, a play area in a home-based centre or a mobile centre under a tree. In this study, the term learning environment replaces the word classroom, which is limiting. This is due to young children learning incidentally during outdoor and indoor activities throughout their day. Significantly, a quality inclusive learning environment is created by the teacher, and it goes deeper than just the physical learning space. Schwartz (2019) revealed that three components contribute to a positive learning environment in early childhood education settings, including physical, social, and temporal aspects. Firstly, the physical environment refers to the furniture, classroom displays and resources in the learning space. As mentioned before, the design of learning environments goes deeper than the physical arrangement and also includes temporal aspects. Hence, secondly, the temporal learning environment comprises the programme of activities such as arrival time, the greeting ring, outdoor and indoor play, mealtime, rest time, both small - and large-group activities, including smooth transitions between the various activities (Mistrett, 2017). Thirdly, the social environment consists of all the relationships and interactions between different role-players at the ECCE centre. Indeed, successful inclusion correlates with the teachers' ability to practically tailor and balance these three components of learning environments to include all children. As a result, quality in the early childhood learning environment is a result of the quality of the teacher (Ncube, 2017). It is essential to realise that the inclusive learning environment is created and planned by the teacher as an indication of their expertise where reflective practices allow for scrutinisation and revitalisation of the environment to accommodate the changing needs of the child (Edwards & Gandini, 2015; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Therefore, an inclusive learning environment is a product of adequate teacher training, knowledge, experience, and the

positive attitude of teachers toward inclusion (Mitchell & Hegde, 2007; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian, 2012; Majoko, 2018; Majoko, 2019). This study emphasises that ECCE teachers require knowledge and experience of inclusive practice in order to create an inclusive learning environment.

1.3 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Three factors prompted my interest in this study. Firstly, in my previous twenty-year career, which entailed teaching young children, I had constantly been challenged by the diverse needs of the learners in my classroom. I had to think creatively to differentiate my lessons to meet the needs of children who were developing typically and those who were behind or ahead. I found that with an overload of administrative duties, large classroom sizes, and a growing diversity of children, the practice of inclusion was challenging to achieve. However, it was a practice that required urgent attention, as I could see the benefits of inclusion in the young lives that I was entrusted with. It was apparent to me that all children displayed their strengths and weaknesses in different areas, and none could be standardised and generalised to 'fit into a box'. I became aware that to practice inclusion, there needed to be congruency with my belief system and my words and actions. Hence for me, teaching and learning involved more than just cognition it was about building relationships and showing care in the early years. So, to me, inclusion was not something to be adopted just for a particular situation as a teacher in a classroom, nor was it a method, but a way of *being* in my daily life.

Secondly, in my present career as an initial teacher educator and an ECCE module developer at a university, I found an interest in developing a module for inclusive education in ECCE. One of the challenges faced by teacher educators is to train teachers to teach a diverse group of children successfully (Florian & Camedda, 2020). This especially holds true in South Africa, where due to the legacy of apartheid and colonisation, discrepancies in education quality for marginalised groups persist (Nakidien, Singh & Sayed, 2021). Hence as part of a team tasked to develop an undergraduate degree programme for the birth to four ECCE sector teachers, I considered it vital to look at the needfor inclusive education within this context. Consequently, I was cautioned by my reading of an earlierstudy by Killoran, Tymon and Frempong (2007), who maintain that putting inclusion into practice is a complex process rife with obstacles and challenges, primarily due to a lack of training or inconsistencies in the initial teacher education programme. Studies by Walton and Osman (2018) emphasise the importance of a theoretical background of inclusive education in initial teacher education programmes, whereas Mudzingwa (2019) on the other hand found that initial teacher education programmes prepared teachers theoretically but lacked practical application of inclusive

education in their classrooms. Mudzingwa also states that university preservice modules provide an introduction to inclusive education; however, they fail to provide sufficient pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach in a diverse classroom. With limited inclusive education studies in this sector, I needed to ascertain the current situation regarding inclusive education in a South African ECCE centre. It is also imperative for an ECCE teacher educator to determine how teachers practically set up an inclusive learning environment. This knowledge should contribute to the content for a future module on inclusive education in ECCE to be offered as part of a new degree programme for ECCE teachers. Despite the growing evidence that pre-service training programmes have the potential to advance inclusive practices in education, not much research explains how to achieve this end in the ECCE context. This creates a practical knowledge gap in the ECCE sector.

Thirdly, research should be geared towards the upliftment of communities. Hence, I chose a PALAR design because of its relevance and value to my research participants who belong to a marginalised and undervalued education sector. The publication of a handbook on inclusion gives voice to the research participants as their efforts are acknowledged. Furthermore, PALAR facilitates *praxis* – a product of iterative collaborative reflection and action with my research group, in an attempt to effect positive societal change.

1.4 RESEARCH FOCUS

As mentioned above, this research focuses on filling a theoretical, methodological and practical gap in creating an inclusive learning environment in ECCE. Indeed, the focus is to circumvent traditional understandings of inclusion and to engage with a community of ECCE role-players to understand inclusion according to their unique lived experiences with contextual relevance. Since South Africa is a highly stratified society, educational institutions play a vital role in promoting the inclusion of diverse groups of people (Mzangwa, 2019). When diverse groups learn and play together, especially in the early years, solidarities based on universal ethical principles tend to be forged despite differences. Hence Mzangwa states that educational institutions contribute to the development of inclusion in society in general. The publication of the *Education White Paper Six* (DoE, 2001a) was to provide guidelines for the development of an inclusive education and training system. The purpose was to unmask and address barriers to learning and to recognise and accommodate diversity in educational institutions. Despite this policy, inclusive education remains an unrealised dream due to a lack of clarity in the policy and practical guidance on how inclusive education can be achieved (Bornman & Donohue 2014; Neethling, 2015; Ojageer, 2019; Vlok, 2016). Consequently, Petriwskyj, Thorpe and Tayler (2005) concur that creating an early learning environment that accommodates children of

diverse needs can be formidable for teachers. Clearly, there is a need for knowledge on how teachers could implement the *White Paper Six*, and more significantly in the context of the early years of education.

The research also focuses on inclusion as an inner journey of personal awareness that prompts surface adjustments to the learning environment. Only when we realise that our lived experience has shaped our attitudes towards diverse people can we become genuinely inclusive of those we consider as 'other'. Significantly, Corbett and Slee (2000) and Petriwskyj (2010 p. 196) suggest a "shift in ways of thinking about inclusion" as this process, in essence, goes beyond surface adjustments. Important messages are conveyed regarding who belongs and who does not through the unconscious biases that we all have. The focus of this study then is to expose the co-researchers (comprising of teachers and teacher trainers) to discussion on how to develop inclusive learning environments by exploring their deeper ideologies of power, privilege and difference that usually represent society as a whole. In essence, education is a political act where social justice and democracy are linked to teaching and learning (Darder, Torres & Baltodano, 2017).The authors further state that schools are never neutral, and teachers are encouraged to explore their value systems and how the prejudices and biases of society may be perpetuated. Therefore, I declare that the focus of this study is for the co-researchers to 'conscientise' (Freire, 1970, 1987, 2000) themselves regarding the underlying power issues that exist due to diversity, act upon their reflections by using critical pedagogy and ultimately create inclusive learning environments in the ECCE context. In so doing, the members of the research group were prompted to unlock their potential through a process of collaborative reflection and action, to address a problem within their unique context. Presently ECCE is undergoing reforms in the South African education landscape (Bipath & Joubert, 2016; Bell, 2020; Ncube, 2017), and their knowledge gathered could be instrumental in developing modules for the ECCE higher education qualifications.

1.5 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Having clarified the research focus, another significant component of the process is to underpin one's research with appropriate theoretical perspectives that define the philosophical assumptions of the study. This section will elaborate on the theoretical approaches that offer a blueprint to frame and inform the research process (Ramson, 2015; Yin, 2018). The foremost theory guiding this study is critical pedagogy based on the work of Freire (2000). Critical pedagogy is underpinned by the epistemological and ontological assumptions of critical theory (Abraham, 2014; Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Ayoub Mahmoudi, Khoshnood & Babaei, 2014; Burbules & Berk, 1999). In this critical orientation, reality is dynamic, subjective and fluid, comprising conflicting, underlying power structures that are social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic or gender-related (Aliyu, Singhry, Adamu, Mu 'awuya,

& Abubakar, 2015; Noel, 2016). As a result, people may reconstruct their world through action and critical reflection. Following this, epistemologically, critical theory states that knowledge must be constructed using democratic and participatory methods. That knowledge is valid, which benefits and transforms society (Wagner, Kawulitch & Garner, 2012). In keeping with critical theory, McLaren (2007 p. 186) contends that critical pedagogy resonates with the "Hebrew phrase *Tikkun Olam*, which means to heal, repair and transform the world." Aligned with the above philosophical orientation, I aim to suggest how to transform the classroom into a more democratic and socially just environment.

A critical theory and critical pedagogy aim to democratise the learning environment and to transform the relevant aspects of a particular society. Traditional theories seek to understand or explain social behaviour, while critical theories seek to transform and to emancipate (Thompson, 2017). Essentially critical theory "examines and interrogates relationships between school and society, and how schools may perpetuate or reduce inequalities" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p. 32). In keeping with this, Liasidou (2012) believes that practices in schools that highlight the marginalisation of groups of children due to their race, language, culture, socio-economic status, gender or disability go against these discourses of human rights and justice. The author reaffirms that pleas for ending oppression and the marginalisation of certain groups of children have also been acknowledged in the scholarly work of critical pedagogues such as Giroux (1981; 1985; 2020) and McLaren (2019). The purpose of critical research is thus to challenge the status quo and to question current ways of knowing and doing, to create a more socially just world. This critical stance is essential to achieving human rights and justice in our ECCE environments. Therefore, in keeping with critical perspectives, inclusion has a social justice and human rights agenda that seeks to understand and transform ECCE centres, and thereby to impact positively on the larger microcosm of society.

1.6 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to enable the critical voices of six ECCE teachers and two trainers in their collaborative exploration of inclusive learning environments to be heard. The specific objectives are:

- To explore the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE;
- To explore how we can create inclusive learning environments in ECCE; and
- To explore why we need to create an inclusive learning environment in ECCE the way we do.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the study:

- What is the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE?

- How do we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE?
- Why do we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE the way we do?

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology outlines the procedures underlying the research process. In this section, I discuss the research paradigm, research design, selection of research co-researchers and data generation.

1.8.1 Research Paradigm

To guide the procedures in a study, a belief system or worldview needs to be incorporated (Paragoo, 2021). The research paradigm of critical emancipatory research aims to emancipate and to give voice to a group of ECCE role-players. Essentially a paradigm comprises "the abstract beliefs and principles that shape how a researcher sees the world, and how s/he interprets and acts within that world" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 26). Aligned with the critical theoretical perspectives mentioned earlier, this research aims to transform an aspect of society by emancipating or giving voice, autonomy and agency to the ECCE role players. Seeing that currently, there are only qualifications for ECCE teachers at National Qualifications Framework levels 4 and 5 (Bipath & Joubert, 2016; Ebrahim, et al., 2018; Ebrahim, Seleti & Dawes, 2013; Harrison, 2020) in the South African context, ECCE teachers remain a vastly under-professionalised sector due to a lack of training and widespread funding constraints (Atmore, 2018; 2019; Kuhne & Fakie, 2019; Moodly, 2019). This study is guided by critical emancipatory research as it should provide a voice for a group of teachers who are presently overlooked, underpaid and undervalued. In addition, Zuber-Skerritt (2018) adds that in order for society to flourish, there is a need for research to move away from positivist paradigms where researchers are distant observers of a research phenomenon. The academic researcher should not be regarded as the "sole bearer and creator of knowledge in this kind of research" (Wood, 2020, p. 23). Wood proposes that the theoretical and propositional forms of knowledge may be inadequate in solving deeper problems (like creating inclusive learning environments). Therefore, the co- researchers will actively explore their values and beliefs regarding inclusion by becoming involved in the research process as equals. This research is about gaining an understanding of the participants, making meaning from their interpretations within their unique contexts (Nkoane, 2012). This participatory approach to knowledge construction is termed "epistemic justice" (Ebrahim, Okwany & Barry, 2019) or "epistemic democracy" (McAteer & Wood, 2018). In essence, valuable knowledge is created not just by researchers in 'ivory towers' but also by field workers engaging daily with the children. Consequently, Dube and Hlalele (2017, p. 77) affirm that if "dialogue is underpinned by critical emancipatory research principles such as social justice, education and the learning environment become user friendly and benefit all educational stakeholders." Hence,

the choice of a PALAR design, in keeping with critical emancipatory research, promotes democratic relationships among all co- researchers irrespective of their position or power within their institutions. Indeed critical, collaborative reflection and action in PALAR involve developing agency and autonomy among the co-researchers.Through this voice, knowledge is cascaded to other ECCE role-players, resulting in the inclusion of vulnerable groups of children at our centres.

1.8.2 Research Design

Consistent with the above research paradigm, the study moves away from traditional research and adopts a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design to generate data. This research design is "a conceptual integration of lifelong action learning and participatory action research" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p.1). In essence, PALAR is research that benefits the community, resulting in the enhancement of knowledge, skills or values of the co-researchers. Concurring with this, Setlhare-Kajee (2018) raises concerns about how academics from universities conduct research without giving feedback to the co-researchers in traditional research. The latter highlights the value of facilitating research and development, with participants as co-researchers in all phases of the research. This enables the addressing of complex contextual challenges (for example, inclusion) with transparency throughout the research endeavour. In further opposition to traditional research, PALAR is a research design that enables co-researchers to share their knowledge and collaboratively to build

on each other's experiences. As a result, the process of PALAR highlights the democratisation of knowledge production among researchers and co-researchers as proposed by a critical emancipatory paradigm above. In the past, it was assumed that scientific knowledge was created by specialist scholars and then applied by practitioners (McAteer & Wood, 2018). However, the authors clarify that the underlying epistemological assumption in PALAR is that practitioners, too, can create knowledge based on their actual experiences. The following section looks at the essential features of a PALAR design.

Kearney, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) and Wood (2019) have highlighted the principles of the PALAR process that enable an authentic participatory approach. The authors refer to these as the 3 R's of PALAR: relationships, reflection, and recognition. Firstly, relationship building is a key element of the PALAR process where co-researchers form deep relationships of trust, co-operation and team building as indicated in numerous PALAR studies (Damons, 2017; Luthuli, 2019; Neethling, 2015; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018). This research is aligned with the concept of Ubuntu as it promotes community building, mutual respect, kindness and concern for others (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Hence, in this study, the relationship-building phase is an ongoing process of building respect, trust, a spirit of collaboration and shared goals within the team. Secondly, through reflection, co-researchers

begin to analyse the research process and to gain an insight into themselves, other co-researchers and into the knowledge that has been mutually created. Through the process of reflection, valuable adjustments are made during the learning and research processes. Meta-reflection as described by Zuber-Skerritt (2018) allows the participants to reflect on their reflections at the end of each cycle, thus gaining self-knowledge of biased or stereotypical thought patterns that may exist. Thirdly, recognition forms an essential component of PALAR. It is here that the outcomes of lifelong learning of knowledge and skills need to be celebrated and rewarded. In this case, compilations of photographs, drawings and quotations on inclusion will be published in a handbook for ECCE centres. The participants will be acknowledged as authors, and these handbooks will be distributed digitally and electronically and may serve as a valuable resource and guide. Recognition is not the final step in the PALAR process as it forms a step toward a new cycle of research and learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018; Wood, Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2017). Hence, we see that PALAR cannot be fully understood and facilitated through traditional teacher-centred methods focusing on cognitive aspects but it should be facilitated also through a self-directed, learner-centred approach incorporating the affective domain. PALAR research is a more humane approach using research with the people for the emancipation of the people.

1.8.3   Selection of Co-researchers

The participants were purposefully selected according to who could best inform the research objectives and enhance an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maree, 2016). Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, all interactions needed to be carried out using a virtual platform. Participants, therefore, needed a smartphone and an internet connection to participate in the study. Teachers, as well as students and trainers from the selected ECCE centre, were invited to join and to contribute to this research project. The participants who were willing to join the research formed an action learning set (ALS). This term, initially coined by Reg Revans, refers to a group of people coming together to work on real challenges, using their individual knowledge and skills to facilitate deeper learning (Morrison, 2017). Although the voluntary participation of both male and female stakeholders was sought, this was unsuccessful due to a scarcity of males that work in this sector. Since PALAR research aims to gain a deep understanding of the research problem and foster close relationships among the participants, the ALS consisted of eight participants comprising six ECCE teachers and two ECCE teacher trainers. In this research report the ALS refers to the group that includes the research participants and the principal researcher. Since, the participants were also active as researchers, they are referred to as both co-researchers and participants.

1.8.4 Data Generation

An emergency scramble to online research necessitated the need to conduct virtual interactions through a WhatsApp chat group, as suggested by Covid-19 researchers (Adom, Osei, & Adu-Agyem, 2020; Jowett, 2020; Chen & Neo, 2019). WhatsApp was selected due to its popularity as a low-cost instant messaging service that allows people to share text, pictures, documents, audio and video files easily (Bucher, 2020). All interactions and data generation were carried out utilising this online platform due to social distancing (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020). The use of a baseline checklist, photovoice, reflective drawings, journals and conversations "attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 265). These varied methods discussed below should have contributed to the trustworthiness and authenticity of my research findings.

1.8.4.1 The Baseline Checklist

The checklist was handed to the co-researchers at the beginning of cycle one (Appendix E) and served to ascertain the existing conditions and participant knowledge prior to the beginning of the project similar to Ojageer (2019). This instrument consisted of sixty questions that co-researchers needed to tick and comment on. The questions served as a record of the co-researchers' feelings towards inclusion and their practices of inclusion. Items on the baseline checklist were derived from the literature review and consisted of questions regarding their understanding of inclusion and the co-researchers' ability to create an inclusive learning environment. The checklist also served an important function to identify gaps in knowledge as well as areas of strength. This shaped subsequent learning cycles.

1.8.4.2 Photovoice

In addition to the baseline checklist, data were also generated by using photovoice. An old English adage says that a picture is worth a thousand words. Photographs possess the potential to be used in a 'participatory visual method' in the form of photovoice (Stringer, 2014). Consistent with the PALAR design, photovoice, like other visual methodologies, should promote change in participant thinking and assumptions (Wood, 2020). The latter also states that this method enables the co-researchers to self-reflect on the phenomenon critically and to articulate their reflections in dialogue with others. Also of significance is that photovoice is an appropriate method for data collection, as it is concerned with the democratic acquisition of knowledge and hence it contributes to social justice (Liebenberg, 2018). The author further states that it does this by ensuring that "community members are involved throughout the research process, to produce data that are authentic to community experiences" (p. 1). In this study, photovoice requires co-researchers to describe and comment on photographs that illustrate

events or contexts that they have experienced. These images facilitate deeper collaborative reflection, resulting in rich data that can illuminate authentic lived experiences. Photographs were captured using participant smartphone cameras and these images were shared on the WhatsApp platform.

18.4.3 Reflective Drawings

Similar to photovoice, reflective drawings also possess the potential to be used as a "participatory art-based method" (Wood, 2020, p. 149). Essentially, this method requires co-researchers to describe and comment on their drawings, illustrating events or contexts they have experienced. Consequently, this method contributes to the transformative potential of knowledge acquisition and goes beyond 'data collection' with an added therapeutic component (Mitchell, Theron, Smith, Stuart & Campbell, 2011). These authors also mentioned that it is essential for the drawer's context to shape the interpretation of the drawings through a process of collaborative meaning-making leading to valid knowledge production. Hence, I can establish that in addition to the benefits as mentioned above of photovoice, drawings also served a therapeutic purpose as the participants were encouraged to reflect

on these images. As a result, this enables a lived experience, a perception, or a thought to become visible. Like the photographs, co-researchers created their drawings and then photographed them using their smartphone cameras and shared them on the WhatsApp platform.

1.8.4.4 Reflective Journals

In addition to the above, writing reflective journals assists co-researchers in recording their experiences, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes in each cycle. Reflective diaries are 'containers' for writing that provides a record of the thoughts and reflections of people (Wallin & Adawi, 2018). Consequently, Stringer (2014) suggests that researchers can obtain a large amount of information by reviewing documents like reflective journals. Documentary data from teachers' reflective journals serve to triangulate data from other sources, thus contributing to significant trustworthiness of the research (Ojageer, 2019). In essence, journal writing enhances co-researchers' critical thinking skills and assimilation and reflects professional knowledge and pedagogy (Göker, 2016). The latter emphasises that through reflective journals, teachers can develop their leadership and teaching skills. Göker's findings also verify that many teachers increased their awareness in evaluating their current practice, which is a cornerstone of reflection. After each cycle, the co-researchers filled in a reflective journal that guided the processes for the following cycle. Co-researchers typed out their reflections or handwrote them and shared them using the WhatsApp platform. As the principal researcher, I used this to critically reflect on my learning and to improve future group interactions. A more detailed description follows in chapter four.

1.8.4.5 Purposeful Conversations

In addition to reflective journals, purposeful conversations facilitated the extraction of a greater depth of information by providing the co-researchers with the opportunity to clarify their thoughts and feelings (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; Neethling, 2015). This ensured transparency as crucial evidence is gathered throughout these informal conversations. These informal conversations were carried out using the WhatsApp platform (Appendix I). Consequently, when comparing in-person and WhatsApp group chat conversations in Singapore, WhatsApp group chats generated more elaborated responses and better group interactions between co-researchers (Chen & Neo, 2019). These conversations (although virtual) facilitated deeper insight into the lived experiences of the co-researchers. These were transcribed, analysed and used to shape subsequent action in the learning process.

1.8.5   Data Analysis

Situated in the critical emancipatory research paradigm, PALAR research stipulates transparency in the data analysis process, with the full participation of the eight members of the ALS (Wood, 2020). There is no clear distinction in qualitative research where data generation stops and data analysis begins (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Ojageer, 2019). The use of critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) provided a comprehensible guide for the eight ALS members to analyse critically the data according to three guiding principles, namely repetition, recurrence and forcefulness, which were outlined originally by Owen (1984). Firstly, members of the ALS together completed an analysis of the data by searching for the repetition of particular words and phrases (Orbe & Kinefuchi, 2008; Wright & Orbe, 2003). At this stage, potential themes and awareness of emotions, tensions, and misunderstandings were foregrounded from the captions and journal entries. Secondly, the ALS took note of common meanings conveyed through various discourses (recurrence). I then linked these to broader ideologies relating to inclusive education. Following this, the third criterion of forcefulness, identified critical deeper insights, not appearing consistently across the text. In this regard, we took note of how particular reflections were emphasised by using uppercase, italic and various punctuation marks. Hence after reviewing the emerging themes generated individually, we collectively re-examined the text to see how the emergent themes responded to answering the research question in each phase.

1.9 LOCATION OF THE STUDY

The research location included a teacher training centre as well as an ECCE centre that accommodated children from varying cultures and language groups. The research was carried out virtually with teachers, trainers and prospective/registered students from the ECCE training centre.

The centre was established in 1996 as a community based non-profit Early Childhood Development (ECD) organisation. The research site provides training for ECCE practitioners and caregivers working with babies, toddlers and young children in different settings. A variety of programmes and ECD qualifications that are registered with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) are offered at the organisation, including the Further Education and Training Certificate and the Higher Certificate and Diploma in ECD. The staff consists of a director, administrators, trainers and teachers. The organisation is based in Durban and serves various townships, semi-rural and rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and includes a nursery school that is used for training purposes. The nursery school consists of three class groups of children under the age of five years; however, this number has reduced drastically due to the onset of the Corona Virus pandemic. The collaboration for this PALAR research comprises synchronous and asynchronous interactions with a group of teachers and trainers from the organisation as well as with students from the organisation. Meetings for this participatory study were conducted virtually as suggested by Garthwaite (2020) and involved a heterogeneous cultural group who were invited to share their experiences of harnessing inclusive practices.

1.10 VALUE OF THE RESEARCH

Due to national attention being focused on the ECCE arena (Bell, 2020; Bipath & Joubert, 2016; Ebrahim et al., 2018) and a dire need for well-informed and knowledgeable teachers (Ebrahim et al., 2018; Martinez, 2019; Urban, 2012), this study could provide essential information on how to create inclusive learning environments in ECCE settings. Research has confirmed the value of inclusive practices (Luthuli, 2019; Neethling, 2015; Nel, 2018; Ojageer, 2019) in more formal educational settings. With the launch of a new degree programme at South African Higher Education Institutions and with intentions to professionalise this sector, we see a dire need for scholarship and research into the practicality of inclusion. The study should contribute considerably to current research on inclusion in ECCE. Using the collaborative and democratic principles of PALAR methodology in this project serves to voice the ideas and contributions of a group of ECCE teachers and trainers. The project should culminate in the printing and electronic distribution of a handbook on inclusion for ECCE centres authored by the different contributors to this research project. This handbook could be utilised as a resource guide for other centres. Hence, the knowledge from the study may strengthen a collaborative relationship between the university and the ECCE community. Furthermore, this study could offer guidelines for effective implementation of inclusion that may serve as a framework for teachers as well as policymakers in ECCE.

1.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics are norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and inappropriate behaviour (Resnik, 2011; Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). The ethical principles that researchers must consider when conducting PALAR guided my actions in this study (Wood, 2020). I received ethical clearance from the University of Kwazulu-Natal with the ethical number HSSREC/00001146/2020 (Appendix B). I heeded Wagner et al. (2012) and considered ethical principles throughout my research project. In essence, ethical considerations are crucial to protect the research study participants from potential harm (Chidarikire, 2017; Dube, 2016). As suggested by Paragoo (2021), pseudonyms were used in the research report to protect the anonymity of the co-researchers. Initially, co-researchers were advised to voluntarily sign informed consent forms (Coons & Watson, 2013; Luthuli, 2019) that explicated essential details of the research (Appendix C). In keeping with the principles of justice (Flick, 2015), all co-researchers were encouraged to participate and to influence the work. However, participation was purely voluntary (Brooks, Riele & Mguire, 2014), and those who did not want to participate at certain times were excused. Throughout the two phases and three cycles, the co-researchers were consulted, and the development of the project remained transparent (Cohen et al., 2018; Wood, 2020) and open to suggestions. Decisions informing the research processes and progression through the cycles were decided on collaboratively. Co-researchers were also involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data in collaboration. Interpretations of data were also open to revision according to the suggestions by the co-researchers. The photographing of people's faces in photovoice activities were discouraged. Wood (2020) states that community-based participatory research requires added dimensions of ethical considerations. These will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

1.12 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter one encapsulates an overview and rationale of the study and highlights the background and context. The research questions are outlined in this chapter in conjunction with a breakdown of the thesis chapters.

Chapter two explores the theoretical frameworks that pervade the study and that inform all aspects of decision making within the parameters of inclusive learning environments in ECCE. Critical pedagogy and critical theory are explored as groundwork for the study.

Chapter three employs the research questions as a point of convergence to critically review literature from global and local perspectives and to identify insufficiency within the findings.

Chapter four outlines the research methodology and procedures while justifying the choice of a qualitative PALAR design to answer the research questions.

Chapter five discusses and analyses the relationship-building phase of the study and the first cycle of the PALAR process, focusing on exploring the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE. The analysis of a baseline checklist, photographs and drawings, transcriptions from conversations and entries in the reflective journals using critical thematic analysis should contribute to identifying a gap for future investigation.

Chapter six addresses the gap in cycle one and focuses on creating inclusive learning environments in ECCE. The analysis of photographs or drawings, transcriptions from conversations and entries in the reflective journals contribute to this chapter. The results are interpreted and compared with the existing literature that was reviewed.

Chapter seven highlights the third cycle of the PALAR process, focusing on theorising why we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE the way we do. The themes that support and those that contradict the literature are also presented in addition to the insufficiencies within the literature as well as new perceptions revealed by this study.

Chapter eight presents the summary of the contributions, limitations and recommendations of the main findings with regard to the research questions and the purpose of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter one provided an introduction to Early Childhood Care and Education, Inclusive Education, and Learning Environments. I also outlined a framework for the rationale, purpose, research questions, methodology and significance of the study. This chapter focuses on the theoretical and conceptual foundations that underpin the study. The theoretical framework provides a general representation of ideas for this study, whereas the conceptual framework encompasses specific or narrower ideas relevant to inclusion in ECCE. Firstly, I sought to explore the theoretical framing of the study and to examine how critical theory and critical pedagogy form an underlying platform for exploring the methodological implications of my research. Following this, I argue for a conceptual tool that supports the creation of an inclusive learning environment in the ECCE milieu. To start with it is essential to understand the theoretical framework in the context of this study.

2.2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The following section explores the foundations and meaning of 'theoretical' in the context of this study. The word 'theoretical' arises from the word 'theory', and both are used interchangeably. The word theory has its origins in the Greek word *'theoria'* which means contemplation. In the writings of Aristotle, theory represents contemplations and reflections on the philosophy of science and the cosmos (Harrington, 2005). Harrington also stated that,

> *"The ancient Greek philosophers believed that people who did not pause to engage in contemplation and reflection had no points of orientation for conducting their lives in practice. Thus theoria for the Greeks remained indispensable to everyone who sought wisdom, happiness, and the 'good life' in the realm of praxis"* (2005, p. 2).

Essentially, this contemplation on theory is necessary for self-fulfilment and purposeful living. In addition, theory is a means of predicting or explaining a natural phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014) that grounds research and forms a perspective that offers a precise, focused, and in-depth understanding of a research phenomenon (Du plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Consistent with the above, Osanloo and Grant (2016) succinctly describes theory as a blueprint for a research study, while Adom, Husein and Adu-Agyem (2018) regard theory as a foundation for the

construction of research. I concur with Sinclair (2007) that theory can be seen as a map or itinerary to be followed to reach the research destination.

Following the clarification of 'theory', it is essential to scrutinise the concept of 'framework'. The framework refers to the structure or support that governs the research process. Jaison (2018, p. 80) asserts that "the theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study." The theoretical frameworks are consequently applied to research in higher education and scientific inquiry (Hammersley, 2012). Adom et al. (2018) assert that theoretical frameworks bestow academic credibility and academic work devoid of a theory is often side-lined or ridiculed. Similarly, Ramson (2015) concisely remarks that for a discipline to be scientific, it needs to embrace the notion of theory. I would compare the theoretical framework as a skeletal system that buttresses the research process. I also see my theoretical framework as a common thread that weaves through my study – a subtle yet powerful driving force that influences my decisions and actions throughout this research process. I agree with Mertens (2014) and Osanloo and Grant (2016) that theoretical frameworks are critical components of research and need to be enunciated at the initial stages of the research report. Hence, the following section, at the outset, elucidates the ontological, epistemological and axiological underpinnings of critical theory as a broad foundation for my study on inclusive education in ECCE.

2.2.1 Critical Theory

Critical theory aims for societal transformation by understanding and challenging existing power structures. Several scholars (Cohen et al., 2018; Crossman, 2019b; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Higgs & Smith, 2015) concur that critical theory is a social theory that aims to transform society, where traditional theories aim to understand or explain society. Essentially critical theory can be described as "social criticism that contains within it the seeds of judgment, evaluation, and practical, transformative activity" (Thompson, 2017, p. 1). Hence from a critical theory perspective, all human societies are corrupted and distorted by deep-seated power structures that influence our lives (Higgs & Smith, 2015). The latter further state that critical theorists need to understand thoroughly, what these power structures are, how they operate and how we may consequently dismantle them. Therefore, from a critical theory perspective, I deduce that no universal truths or set of laws or principles can be applied to everyone. Thus to effect social change these power hierarchies need to be contested. To gain a deeper insight into critical theory, it is essential to explore its origins.

2.2.1.1 Origins of Critical Theory

The following historical account of critical theory is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion; however, its purpose is to understand how critical theory came into existence. The philosophy of critical theory is believed to have its roots in the work of Immanuel Kant.

2.2.1.1.1 Immanuel Kant

The work of Immanuel Kant called for people to move away from dogma and think and reason for themselves. A critical philosophy was first proposed by Kant, a German, in 1781 with the publication of his work *Critique of Pure Reason* (Dube, 2016; Luthuli, 2019; McKernan, 2013; Raffnsøe, 2017). Kant, a university professor in Konigsberg, was banned from religious writing due to his beliefs that ethical behaviour was based purely on rational thinking. The *Critique of Pure Reason* involves a critical analysis of the power and the limits of the mind, to understand the world in which we find ourselves (Rickman, 1995; 2011). Furthermore, Vanzo (2016) states that Kant's philosophy was traditionally believed to synthesise the two opposing philosophical standpoints of Rationalism and Empiricism. The views of Rene Descartes and Rationalism emphasised the value of *a priori* or intuitive knowledge, which can be summed by '*cogito ergo sum*' or '*I think therefore I am*.' Conversely, the theories of John Locke and empiricism were centralised on '*tabula rasa*' or '*blank slate*' where experience was the source of all human knowledge (Hardman, 2016). Significantly, Kant presented the deficiencies of the two aforementioned early schools of thought to form his critical or transcendental philosophy (Sperber, 2015). This critical philosophy developed during a period of Europe known as the enlightenment era. Accordingly, the enlightenment ideal of education, proposed by Kant, "not about the insertion of „newcomers into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders; ways of being in which the individual is not simply a specimen of a more encompassing order." (Biesta, 2009, p. 7; Hattam, 2020). Kant's famous words borrowed from Latin poet Horace, *Sapere Aude* proclaim that society needs to have the courage to use their *own* reason (Küpers, 2017). From the exploration into Kant's studies, similar to Tomaszewska (2016), I can surmise that critical theory to Kant meant moving away from secularism, thus encouraging human autonomy by reasoning about moral and ethical dilemmas. Hence, sound judgement and ethical behaviour are products of rational thinking rather than dogmatism. Relating to the concept of inclusion, teachers in the ECCE context need to foster their autonomy and reason regarding issues of transformation in the design of educational experiences where diversity can be valued and embraced. Teachers are seen as agents of change within the education system and society. However, philosophers argue for critical theory having its grounding in the work of philosophers other than Kant. Chidarikire (2017, p. 21), for instance, postulated that critical theory had its philosophical roots in "Marx's analysis of socioeconomic

conditions and class structure." I will now explore a brief exposition of Marx's contribution to critical theory.

2.2.1.1.2 Karl Marx

The work of Karl Marx, that centred on social divide due to the economy, is also proposed as a historical foundation of critical theory. Regarding education, the ruling class in stratified capitalistic societies had a well-rounded cultural education, inaccessible to most people from the lower classes, and education served to preserve their status in society (Trott, 2017). Significantly, the primary purpose of schools in capitalist societies is to indoctrinate children, to grow up and be a part of a submissive labour force that is industrious, accepts authority and fails to oppose manipulation by the government (Takemura, 2019; Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Incidentally, Marx was a Jewish philosopher and writer who was deeply influenced by Kant, Aristotle and Hegel (Kaine, 1992). His view of the education system was rooted in society's class nature, which reflected the economic structure (Burke, 2020). The latter explains why Marx maintained that the education system was influenced by economics and served to reproduce the material conditions and circumstances of the different classes. Marx's theory emphasised how political power was maintained through the exploitation of the working (Proletariat) class by the upper (Bourgeoisie) class (Horsthemke, Siyakwazi, Walton & Wolhuter, 2016). Marxist convictions highlight that the shortcomings of the educational system were due to the inequality and injustices of the capitalist system (Johnstone & Terzakis, 2012). The authors hold that Marx believed that school teaches children to passively obey authority and to reproduce class stratification, where one group may be allocated greater privilege and power than another. Of significance to my study is the fact that according to Marxists, the education system works in the interests of the dominant class instead of in the interests of children who are vulnerable to exclusion. Using Marxist philosophy as a base, scholars (Chidarikire, 2017; Dube, 2016; McLaughlin, 1999) claim that Hermann Weil developed the Frankfurt School based on radical social science. Consequently, I explore the development of the Frankfurt School as a foundation for critical theory.

2.2.1.1.3 The Frankfurt School

Critical theory is also believed to be derived from the neo-Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School (Moodley, 2012) that originated in Germany in the 1930s, engaging the work of Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno. Initially, the ideas of the Frankfurt School, comprising mainly of Jewish scholars, emphasised the social problems resulting from capitalism (Gordon, Hammer & Honneth, 2019). Influenced by the upheaval in Germany during Hitler's reign of terror, the school relocated to the United States of America, where Habermas supplemented critical theory by building on the inadequacies of

Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno. Consequently, Habermas added a new dimension to critical theory, which was instrumental in more than just critiquing societal structures but sought to improve human lives (Chidarikire, 2017; Dube, 2016; Gordon, Hammer & Honneth, 2019). Significantly, Habermas worked closely with Parton and Piaget and developed his theory of communicative action that serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge through mutual understanding, resulting in actions leading to social integration and solidarity (Alexander, 1985). Furthermore, Habermas identified three types of knowledge; including quantifiable knowledge that is tested during assessments, practical knowledge gained incidentally through interaction and thirdly knowledge that fosters awareness of distortions in society due to issues of power and privilege (McLaren, 2007). The latter clarifies that this third type of knowledge goes further than just understanding but has a transformative agenda. Hence, critical theory is a way of understanding, negotiating, and transforming relationships, knowledge and societal structures to create a more just society. I, therefore, deduce, similar to Mckernan (2013), that critical theory is a broad tradition that considers critique as a method of investigation to remove inequalities from society. In this study, a critical stance will encourage ECCE role-players to be cognisant of the value system of the institution and of majority groups and to create inclusive environments for a diverse group of children. Critical theory critiques current ways of knowing and being, hence mobilising teachers to create environments that embrace varied groups of children. A subsequent exposition of the philosophical assumptions of critical theory will follow.

2.2.1.2 Philosophical Assumptions of Critical Theory

Theories guide researchers in identifying and clarifying their positions concerning the nature of ethics, reality, knowledge, and methodology (Grix, 2019; Holmes, 2020; Leavy, 2017; Mertens, 2014). In the following sections, I explore the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions (Cohen et al., 2018; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Flick, 2018; Mbambo, 2019) of critical theory and its relevance to my worldview as these naturally impact on my research study. The methodological assumptions will be elaborated further in chapter four. I will now delineate the ontological underpinnings of critical theory.

2.2.1.2.1 Ontological Assumptions (Nature of Reality)

A critical world view calls for a reality that is dynamic and socially constructed. Ontology concerns the nature of being and reality (Aliyu et al., 2015; Bridges, 2016; Cohen, et al., 2018; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Damons, 2017; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Essentially ontological assumptions are concerned with what constitutes reality or *what is* (Scotland, 2012). Researchers need to adopt a position regarding their perceptions of what informs reality. Significantly, it is an ontology that enables

researchers' certainty, about the nature and authenticity of their research (Moon & Blackman, 2017). Additionally, Terre Blanche et al. (2006) outline three paradigms that underpin their ontological assumptions. Firstly a positivist reality that is stable and rigid; secondly, an interpretive or internal reality and thirdly, a constructionist reality that is socially constructed. Consistent with a socially constructed reality, critical researchers challenge the status quo and seek to transform social relations. Hence "one of the key assumptions in critical theory is that there are multiple realities and that research is not only created by the dominant or elite researcher" (Noel, 2016, p. 1). In essence, the critical position of reality is dynamic, subjective, and fluid, comprising conflicting, underlying power structures that are social, political, cultural, economic and ethnic, or gender-related (Aliyu et al., 2015). Since people can reconstruct their world through action and critical reflection, this standpoint does not restrict itself merely to contemplative ends (Renault, 2016). Hence critical research aims to transform society, promoting peace, wealth, freedom, and self-fulfilment for all (Fuchs, 2016). It is essential to note that the concepts relating to inclusion are constructed and remoulded by the research team. Using a participatory research method, the reality of the researcher and the co-researchers are both transformed through the research process with no power hierarchies apparent. I gather that the ontological assumptions of my research, attempt to critique the social world and reflect and act upon the factors that could foster or impede teachers' practical efforts toward creating an inclusive learning environment. Cohen et al. (2018) maintain that ontological assumptions initiate and underpin epistemological assumptions or ways of enquiring into the nature of knowledge. I will now briefly explore the epistemological underpinnings of critical theory.

2.2.1.2.2 Epistemological Assumptions (Nature of Knowledge)

A critical perspective calls for a unique standpoint regarding the nature of knowledge and procedures of knowledge acquisition. Epistemology is how we come to know reality (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Bridges, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Luthuli, 2019; Mbambo, 2019). Epistemology then refers to the nature of knowledge, how it is constructed, and how it is acquired (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Indeed epistemology is a category of philosophy that centres on the methods and practices of gaining knowledge of social reality (Lochmiller & Lester, 2015). Moon and Blackman (2017, para. 7) further state that:

> "Epistemology is concerned with all aspects of the validity, scope and methods of
> acquiring knowledge, such as what constitutes a knowledge claim; how can knowledge
> be acquired or produced; and how the extent of its transferability can be assessed."

To be situated in a critical paradigm knowledge is valid if it can be turned into practice or if it can transform and empower the lives of people. Therefore, methods used to procure knowledge involve

a 'collective meaning-making' between the co-researchers and the researchers where power bases and inherent inequities in society are questioned (Lochmiller & Lester, 2015). Hence, I believe that epistemology influences how researchers design their research while attempting to discover real knowledge that benefits society. I understand that knowledge is socially constructed and that valuable knowledge benefits and can transform society and that it should be constructed using democratic and participatory methods. With this in mind, my research values the knowledge and lived experiences presented by the co-researchers. Thus knowledge acquisition between the researcher and co-researchers are reconceptualised, from a "position of knowledge and epistemic hierarchy to one of epistemic democracy" (McAteer & Wood, 2018, p. 1), leading towards greater social justice. The ontological assumptions clarify the nature of reality, and the epistemological assumptions delineate the nature of knowledge, the axiological assumptions that follow, attempt to elucidate considerations of ethics and values embedded within the research paradigm.

2.2.1.2.3 Axiological Assumptions

Axiological beliefs are embedded in research paradigms and guide the decision-making process in research. (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Deane, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018; Mbambo, 2019). Consequently, "axiology refers to what the researcher believes to be valuable and ethical" (Killam, 2013, p. 6). This defines and evaluates right and wrong behaviour concerning the research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). To clarify, this relates to the value attributed to the different aspects of research, including the data, the participants and the audience to which the research is reported. Thus, research ethics is more than just a requirement written in a digest, nor is it a mere formality for research or social responsibility, but a representation of the researcher's philosophical and value position (Žukauskas, Vveinhardt & Andriukaitienė, 2018). The contribution of ethics to research is substantial but it is not my intention to elaborate on the purposes and value of ethical considerations in this chapter. Instead, I seek to emphasise the ethical assumptions that underpin critical theory. I gather that axiology that predicates critical theory also promotes other universal life values of democracy, social justice and human rights. Taking cognisance of the axiological underpinnings of critical theory in this study, I seek to explore the concept of inclusion that is beneficial to a marginalised sector of education as well as children vulnerable to exclusion. As a researcher, I benefit from the research; however, the ECCE community must benefit from the study as well. The previous section investigated the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions of critical theory in relation to my study on inclusion in the ECCE context. The philosophical underpinnings of critical theory form the building blocks for critical pedagogy. Bearing these philosophical underpinnings in mind, the following section outlines critical pedagogy as a framework for this study.

2.2.2 Critical Pedagogy

The above assumptions of critical theory serve as a philosophical foundation for critical pedagogy (Abraham, 2014; Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Ayoub et al., 2014; Burbules & Berk, 1999). Prior to understanding critical pedagogy, it is essential briefly to examine the keywords that make up the concept. Firstly, pedagogy refers to the art and science or even the craft of teaching (Daniela, 2019). An art because there is no set script or instructional guide, and science due to the methodical research on how teachers can enhance learners' achievements (Okeke, Wolhuter, Adu, van Wyk & Abongdia, 2016). Historically, the word pedagogy originates from the Greek *paidos* 'boy child' and *agogos* 'leader' (Ivanov &Tolstova, 2021; Smith, 2020). In the writings of Plato, pedagogues are "men who by age and experience are qualified to serve as custodians (*paidagögous*)" of children (Longenecker, 1983 p. 53). Among the ancient Greeks, pedagogues were moral guides who needed to be obeyed and respected by children. As a result they were bestowed a greater status than the schoolmaster or *didaskalos* in ancient Greece (Young, 1987). Drawing from this ancient definition, pedagogy deals with more than the art or science of teaching. It involves genuine care and bringing their learning to life in meaningful ways (Smith, 2020). Significantly, the author stresses the role of pedagogues to encourage reflection, action, and transformation in learners. I can, therefore, conclude that all teachers should strive to become pedagogues who enhance the holistic development of children in all domains.

Secondly, the word 'critical' refers to the foundations of critical pedagogy in critical theory. As mentioned earlier, critical theory questions societal domination and exploitation (Fuchs, 2016). Hence critical theory is an over-arching term for a range of perspectives that assume that "knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated" (Moodley, 2012 p. 49; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004). Essentially critical pedagogy serves as a transformation-based approach to education (Abraham, 2014; Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Freire, 1974; 1987; 2000; Giroux, 2009; Naiditch, 2017). It is a means of examining knowledge acquisition and the role those social institutions play in knowledge construction (Brown & Sekimoto, 2017; Giroux & McLaren, 1989). It defines how teachers and children need to engage with the world to transform it. Critical pedagogy addresses social justice and issues of democracy, which are seen as intimately related to authentic teaching and learning (Kincheloe & Steinburg, 1997; Higher Education and Training HIV and AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), 2017). Considering that the South African education landscape is rapidly changing due to the diversity of learners in classrooms, there is a need for teachers to become 'critical pedagogues' regarding issues of difference as "not all identities are equally valorised in schools and society, and oppression is experienced by those whose identities are not valued" (Walton & Osman, 2018, p.1). The foremost

theorist who questioned power, culture and oppression in a classroom was Paulo Freire, who made an indelible mark on the development of critical pedagogy.

2.2.2.1 Paulo Freire

Despite various approaches to critical pedagogy, the ideas of Freire remain an undisputed influence on the development of critical pedagogy (Ayoub et al., 2014; Freire, 1974; 2000; Giroux, 2009; Kohan, 2021; Naiditch, 2017). Due to his radical questioning of power, culture and oppression within the schooling context, Freire was forced to live in exile for over fifteen years (Darder et al., 2017). Freire's book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) explains that education has a political dimension, and that revolutionary reconstruction of teaching and learning needs to occur for pedagogy to be meaningful and connected to social change (HEAIDS, 2017; Naiditch, 2017). Hence *"according to Freire, teachers are politicians, and we engage in politics when we educate"* (Freire, 2000, p. 68; McLaren, 2007, p. 308). Markedly, Freire (2000, p. 15) adds that teachers need to be political and social agents who,

> *"challenge their students, from an early to a more adult age, through games, stories and reading so that students understand the need to create coherence between discourse and practice: a discourse about the defense of the weak, of the poor, of the homeless, and a practice that favours the haves against the have-nots: a discourse that denies the existence of social classes, their conflicts, and a political practice entirely in favour of the powerful."*

The principles of inclusion, therefore, coincide with the values and principles of Freire that highlight how educational systems may perpetuate social injustices concerning relegated and marginalised children with a diverse range of characteristics, abilities and socioeconomic circumstances. Inclusion is, therefore, unavoidably linked to Freire's principles of equality and social justice in both educational and social domains. Freire's ideas on democracy, equality and social justice did not just arise from his own thinking, but were the result of engagement with other philosophers.

2.2.2.2 Philosophers that Shaped Freire's Ideas

For a more nuanced understanding of critical pedagogy, it is essential to trace the contributions of Marx and Dewey on Freire's work.

2.2.2.2.1 John Dewey

Numerous common threads exist in the work of Dewey and Freire (Beckett, 2018). John Dewey was a leading proponent of an American philosophy known as pragmatism where reality is not static but in a constant state of becoming (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Dewey, was recognised as the father of the

progressive education movement, and he had a significant effect on the thoughts of Paulo Freire concerning democracy in education (Darder et al., 2017) and an emphasis on child-centeredness (Thorburn, 2018). Thus Darder et al. (2017) and McLaren (2009) concur that the work of Dewey links individual and social intelligence with discourses of democracy and freedom. In essence, Dewey's philosophy promoted education as a community endeavour, reflection, and thinking as central pedagogic tools and emphasised the value of the construction of knowledge through interaction with the environment (Darder et. al., 2017). Undoubtedly, although Freire deliberated on Dewey's philosophy in his studies in education, Dewey is seldom credited as an influence on Freire. Beckett (2018) proposes many reasons for the latter, however these are not relevant to this thesis. Both Dewey and Freire advocated an ethical foundation for education, one in which there is a dialectal relationship of social sharing and growth between individuals and the community (Byrd & McReynolds, 2018). No doubt, Freire would agree with Dewey that society must be renewed and that "education, and education alone" (Dewey & Dewey, 1966, p. 3) is the means of social renewal. The subsequent section outlines the influence of Karl Marx on critical pedagogy.

2.2.2.2.2 Karl Marx

Like Dewey, the views of Karl Marx, also contributed to Freire's ideas on education. Johnstone and Terzakis (2012) claim that the essence of Freire's portrayal of schools is parallel to a Marxist description of the state, where the state is biased in its mediation of the social classes. The state, according to Marxist views, is markedly working to maintain the status quo and to serve the interests of the upper ruling class. The authors further maintain that the Marxist understanding of the dynamic relationship between the various structures in a class society is consistent with Freire's ideas on the metaphorical concept of 'banking' in education. In McKernan (2013, p. 425), critical pedagogy is described as

> *"a movement involving relationships of teaching and learning so that students gain a critical self-consciousness and social awareness and take appropriate action against oppressive forces".*

Therefore aligned with Marxist thoughts, Freire regarded schools as potential tools to socialise the next generation to conform to the values and interests of a capitalist society. In essence, Marx believed that schools teach children to obey authority passively and to promote the reproduction of class stratification, where one group may be allocated greater privilege and power than another. Thus, Marxists regard the education system as working in the interests of the ruling class instead of learners who are marginalised and excluded. Similar to Johnstone and Terzakis (2012) I can deduce that Freire was a Marxist due to his convictions that the shortcomings of the educational system were due to the

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inequality and injustices of the capitalist system. Having thus explored the foundational thinkers who influenced critical pedagogy, it is necessary to look at the principles that inform critical pedagogy.

2.2.2.3 THE TENETS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The aim of this section is explore the tenets of critical pedagogy that relate to teachers and their actualisation of the key principles of their practice. Villanueva and O'Sullivan (2019) conducted a survey of a hundred peer-reviewed works on critical pedagogy and identified frequent emergent themes in the selected literature, which were associated with the work of Freire. The authors found that the themes that are aligned to most of the research in education are linked to the transformative aim of critical pedagogy, its associated democratic classroom approaches, and to the concepts of conscientisation and praxis. Additionally, the work of Darder et al.(2017), Giroux (1985), McLaren (2007), Moodley (2012) and Kincheloe (2012) highlight concepts of ideology, hegemony and counter-hegemony as key aspects of critical pedagogy. In the following section, I discuss ideology, hegemony, counter-hegemony, democratic pedagogies, relational pedagogy, language implications, conscientisation and praxis, intending to demonstrate how these provide theoretical foundations for this study.

2.2.2.3.1 Ideology

Ideology refers to the dominant beliefs that underpin our actions. However, there is plurality in the different ways that the concept of ideology is used (Martin, 2015). Generally, ideology is a set of principles and beliefs that impact on all aspects of education provision (Lynch, 2016). Significantly, Marx offered an ambiguous definition of his theory of ideology that centred on false ideas that are determined by class interests (Parekh, 1982). McLaren (2007, p. 205) succinctly defines ideology as the

> "production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups. Ideology refers to the production of sense and meaning. It can be described as a way of viewing the world, a complex of ideas, various types of social practices, rituals, and representations that are accepted as natural and as common sense. It is the result of the intersection of meaning and power in the social world."

Keeping the above-mentioned intersection of meaning and power in mind, Brown and Sekimoto (2017, p. 21) regarded ideology as the "normalized and naturalized production of meaning by which people make sense of the world." Their study looked at the classroom as a representation of society and incorporated critical pedagogy as a means to learn about how ideology and culture impacted on advertising in an increasingly diverse world. This article highlights how students' critical awareness of

dominant ideologies may influence future advertising professionals about power dynamics. Applying this to my study, in a diverse classroom, the ideologies of teachers and children may be examined using critical pedagogy. Like Darder et al. (2017), I deduce that teachers need to critique not only educational curricula, texts and practices but their fundamental belief systems that underpin their actions. For example, in this study we need to critique current beliefs regarding the concept of inclusion and how these false beliefs may lead to the acceptance of dominant discourses. Hegemonicprocesses of subtle social domination are also interrogated in this critique of ideology. A discussion on hegemony will be offered in the following section.

2.2.2.3.2 Hegemony

Hegemony is a process of subtle social domination through moral or intellectual leadership of a dominant social group over a subordinate group (Darder et al., 2017; Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971; McLaren, 2007). The work of Antonio Gramsci, based on Neo Marxian philosophies, proposed the theory of hegemony as an organising force within disparate societies (Jaques, Islar & Lord, 2019). These authors maintain that "hegemony refers to how a dominant class maintains power through an amalgamation of coercion and consent through both material and discursive pathways" (p. 3). McLaren (2007) confirms this when the author states that hegemony is a struggle where the powerful win the consent of the oppressed, and the oppressed participate in their oppression. Moreover, Moodley (2012) adds that hegemonic practices include attempts by an influential class to gain control of society's resources through the education system. The author further reiterates that a dominant group may obtain control over subordinate groups, resulting in universalism and standardisation.

Villanueva and O'Sullivan (2019) and Giroux (1981) state that critical pedagogues maintain that schools could become spaces for resisting hegemony. I concur with Moodley that teachers should draw on the concept of hegemony and that they should be mindful of how dominant ideologies are entrenched and where the privilege of being white, able-bodied, English-speaking or male, may shape the belief system of teachers and young children. McLaren (2007) states that hegemony is contested when classrooms encourage the questioning of authority and the dominant values, attitudes, and social practices conveyed by the education system. I agree with Moodley (2012) that hegemony, in any form, must be identified, resisted and critiqued through social action. This process of reconstructing power relationships by focusing on the ideologies of the previously marginalised is known as counter-hegemony (Darder et al., 2017). The following section explores counter-hegemony as a central tenet of critical pedagogy.

2.2.2.3.3 Counter Hegemony

Developing counter-hegemony entails resisting dominant ideologies and redefining existing power relationships (Sugita, Setini & Anshori, 2021). The work of Paulo Freire is opposed to the interests of the elite and dominant classes and in favour of the oppressed sectors of society (Freire, 1993, 2005; 2018, 2019). "Freire's pedagogical work channels its principles, concepts, relations, practice and praxis towards a counter-hegemonic education" (Freire, 2019 p. 1). Also, critical pedagogy integrates a theory of resistance that seeks to divulge why students from marginalised groups are unsuccessful within the educational system (Darder et al., 2017). The latter state that this oppositional behaviour in the educational system is a perpetuation of the oppression in people's lives. Hence, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) state that counter-hegemony is the process that contests current ways of thinking and being as well the arrangement of political and economic relations, aiming ultimately at human liberation. The author further states that a key component in counter-hegemony is the role of individuals (like teachers) who aim to change the status quo by suggesting new ways of conceptualising the world. I agree with Ohito and Oyler (2017) that teachers need to be aware of pedagogies that sort, level, and label some students as more notable or successful than others. Teachers must be critically aware of hegemony and recognise inclusion as being counter- hegemonic. The following section explores the concept of democratic teaching methods in critical pedagogy.

2.2.2.3.4 Dialogue

A dialogical approach enables learners and teachers to speak and to listen, thus contributing mutually to the learning process. Freire's work contests conventional methods of education where children are passive recipients of knowledge. Indeed the metaphorical concept of 'banking' deviates from acting critically in education (Nols, Haudenhuyse, Spaaij, & Theeboom, 2019). Similarly, McLaren (2019, p. 1243) emphasises that Freire's "pathfinding intervention into the dross and drudgery of the banking model of teaching brought hope and promise to those thirsting for liberation and helped teachers find their backbones." Therefore, Bohórquez (2020) believes that horizontal dialogue between teachers and learners is an essential element in sharing ideas and in ensuring democratic pedagogic practice. Consequently, a teacher needs to exhibit the willingness to learn as she/he teaches (Abraham, 2014). This highlights the fact that teachers should reject the banking model of education, in which they are the ones who possess the knowledge and that they are there to "deposit it in the heads of learners" (Bohórquez, 2020 p. 128; Freire, 2000). Because banking ignores students' prior knowledge and life experiences, it maintains the status quo (Nols et al., 2019). Hence, banking is aligned to the "theory of anti-dialogical action", which uses the strategies of conquest, divide and rule, manipulation, and

cultural invasion (Freire, 2000, p. 138; Nols et al., 2019, p. 729). Education, therefore, needs to promote people's critical awareness of societal conditions and structures that marginalise people (Freire, 2000). Teachers in ECCE centres need to allow for dialogue and co-construction of knowledge by promoting the active engagement of all children. Learning should thus involve problematising, raising questions and challenging children to shape their destiny (Cappy, 2016; Nols et al., 2019). Teacher virtues such as "respect for children's knowledge, autonomy and cultural identity; rejection of discrimination; humility; joy; knowing how to listen; openness to dialogue; and caring for people" (Freire, 1974, 2000; Nols et al., 2019, p. 729) contribute to inclusion. I concur with these authors that "the solution is not to 'integrate' children into the structure of oppression but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves" (Freire, 2000, p. 74). Therefore, a critique of banking methods is essential to hear the voices of the minority and of the marginalised groups of children. In the following section, I look at conscientisation as a salient component of critical pedagogy.

2.2.2.3.5 Conscientisation

Conscientisation refers to an awareness of power dynamics and of acting against these (Gelot, 2019). Paolo Freire (1974, p. 19) describes *conscientização* as a Brazilian idea of "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." Freire suggested dialogue and problem posing as a pathway to *conscientização* and transformation in classrooms (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). In addition, Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2012) contend that *conscientização*, conscientisation or critical consciousness is the ability of humans to act in morally appropriate ways that respect the freedom of others. This idea builds on the above discussion on dialogical classrooms. Darder et al. (2017) affirm that in critical pedagogy, as mentioned above, dialogue serves as an essential foundation for reflection and action that leads to conscientisation. They further explain that this serves as a starting point for teachers to inquire into how the beliefs of the dominant class become enmeshed in the hidden curriculum. Sedigheh, Shahram, Leila, and Muhamadreza (2019) define a hidden curriculum as the implicit values, behaviours, and norms transferred without conscious intention and awareness by children and teachers. I agree with Smith (2013) that conscientisation is the development of consciousness understood to have the power to change the current reality. Hence conscientisation is essential to act against the exclusion and marginalisation of diverse groups in the ECCE context. The following section discusses Freire's ideas on relationships.

2.2.2.3.6 Relationships

The ECCE learning environment is an important arena that fosters human relationships. Humans exist in relationships, and the individual is a product of relationships (Aspelin, 2014). Although students and teachers enter the school from unique positions, classroom interactions inevitably build relationships. Freire remarks that this relationship building is enabled by situations where students are able to discover their own knowledge by dialogical relationships that embody love, trust, and humility (Freire, 2000). Freire also demands that the student and teacher treat one another with the utmost respect, where trust and humility are present, and failures in love, trust, and humility disable the educational relationship (Margonis, 1999). Consequently, studies emphasise that the caring teacher-student relationship is crucial for successful learning (Noddings, 2012; 2013; Aspelin, 2014). In the early years, the confidence and sense of well-being are more substantial when young children build a strong relationship of trust and care with an adult (Dickins, 2014). Similarly, research by Howes et al. (1994) found that young children who felt secure with their teacher displayed more complex play and greater social competence with peers. Also, Rentzou (2020) notes that the concept of care implies a more holistic focus than teaching and learning in this sector. The author highlights that care indicates the physical, psychological and spiritual well-being of the young child. In this sector, there should be no dichotomy between care and education. On the contrary, both aspects are essential and equally valuable in the optimum ECCE learning environment.

2.2.2.3.7 Language is never neutral

Language may serve as a powerful tool that enables inclusion. Meaning and intentions arise from the speakers unique set of socio-cultural experiences that pervade language (Freire, 2000) which has cultural, ideological, or historical baggage (Newberg & Waldman, 2013). The author also claims that language is essential in negotiating and renegotiating power as many are disadvantaged or marginalised firstly through words and expressions, then through actions. The author also states that language can be both exclusive and a tool of liberation. Hence, teachers require an awareness of the power of language to convey unconscious bias or stereotyping. Having good intentions is not enough; teachers need to take responsibility for their language and terminology. In addition, teachers need to have "a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of privilege and oppression" (Steyn, 2015, p. 385). The author also emphasises that teachers need to develop a lexicon for diversity fluency as in all other literacies. "Language shapes our behaviour, and each word we use is imbued with multitudes of personal meaning" (Newberg & Waldman, 2013, p. 1). Seiter (2020) reaffirms that historically, language has excluded many individuals and groups due to marginalisation and discrimination due to culture, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability,

socioeconomic status, appearance and more. The author states emphatically that inclusive language aims to reflect respect and dignity for all groups of people. It brings everyone into the group and excludes no one. Hence, a 'diversity grammar' that facilitates the unmasking of coded hegemonies in the daily communication of teachers is essential. The subsequent section explores the relevance of praxis in creating inclusive learning spaces.

2.2.2.3.8 Praxis

Freire regarded the iterative processes of reflection and action that teachers encounter when applying critical pedagogy in the classroom as praxis (Motta 2013). Smith (2013) adds that informed action constitutes praxis. The author clarifies that to Freire, dialogue was not just about gaining a deeper understanding through reflection but it was an integral part of making a difference in the world. Praxis may result in classroom changes in classroom practice and may also transcend the classroom to benefit society. For instance, Rouhani (2012) demonstrates the process of linking critical pedagogy to practical, spontaneous, and direct action by transforming an abandoned house into a youth centre that went clearly beyond the borders of the classroom. Hence, if we need to change society, we need to change the practices in the classroom. Diversity in terms of race, language, ability, age, ethnicity, religion, language and gender, among other identity markers, are becoming a defining feature of schools (Walton & Osman, 2018). For Freire (1974) praxis is a process of dialogue comprising action and reflection, resulting in transformation within schools and ultimately within society.

This chapter has thus far examined the use of critical pedagogy and critical theory as a theoretical grounding. I compare these two theories as the cogs that support an inclusive learning environment (figure 2.1). From the above discussion, I establish that the cogs of critical theory and critical pedagogy are integral to creating an inclusive learning environment. Freire's concept of conscientisation is pedagogically useful when engaging with issues of power, privilege and difference in the education context, as many teachers are unaware of their "own complicity in perpetuating exclusionary and oppressive educational practices under the guise of inclusion" (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018, p. 8). I concur with Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht that teachers' unexamined ideologies, beliefs, and values in the early years may hinder the creation of inclusive schools and their communities.

Figure 2.1 Synthesis of two theories

Source: Author

2.3 SYNTHESISING THE TWO THEORIES

In educational research, Tellings (2001) suggests that integrating theories are beneficial as research about complex human issues (like inclusion) often require a deeper and more multifaceted understanding of their complexity. The author suggests that theories are integrated through reduction, synthesis, horizontal addition or vertical addition. Tellings explains that reduction occurs when theories are similar, and one theory is re-defined by or *subsumes* another theory. According to the Mirriam Webster dictionary, *subsume* refers to placing something as a component or element of something more extensive or more comprehensive. Hence, on closer view of critical pedagogy, it is apparent that it was conceptualised and *subsumed* by critical theory. Similar epistemological and ontological assumptions underpin the core of both these theories. Since inclusion does not just require a pedagogical approach, both theories were used as a fundamental framework for my study. I was also able to glean a deeper understanding of critical pedagogy by exploring its philosophical roots in critical theory. The following section argues for a conceptual framework to form the groundwork for an inclusive learning environment. I suggest a conceptual framework that allows teachers to engage with their attitudes to diversity and their conceptualisations of inclusion, impacting on actions and behaviour towards children.

2.4 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The distinction between conceptual and theoretical frameworks appears to be nebulous and hence problematic. We sometimes refer to theoretical frameworks as conceptual frameworks; however, these terms are neither interchangeable nor synonymous (Osanloo & Grant, 2016; Adom et al., 2018,

Kivunja, 2018). Conceptual and theoretical frameworks constitute an amalgamated understanding of issues within the study, which allows the research to focus on a specific research problem. They guide the research process and give impetus to its theoretical grounding (Imenda, 2014). The theoretical framework serves as a viewpoint , while the conceptual framework provides a "logical structure of connected concepts that help provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another within the theoretical framework" (Osanloo & Grant, 2016, p. 17; Luse, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2012). Adom et al. (2018) and Akintoye (2015) contend that conceptual frameworks are ways through which a researcher may present asserted remedies to the problem that was defined. Maxwell (2013) clarifies that the conceptual framework is primarily a conception or model of your study plan. Conceptualisation is a process that allows the researcher to specify the meaning of the terms used in research. It is a system of beliefs, assumptions and expectations that support and inform the research focus (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

As mentioned before, the conceptual framework makes it easier for the researcher to specify and to define the concepts within the narrow confines of the research objectives (Luse, Mennecke & Townsend, 2012; Adom et al., 2018). Maxwell (2013, p. 41) argues that a conceptual framework is 'constructed, not found'. I see the need to institute a conceptual framework for this research study within my unique context. Drawing on the above principles of critical pedagogy and the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical theory, I constructed a framework to guide my study. The overlapping nature of the concepts necessitated the representation of a target board (Figure 2.2). Seeing that this study aims to effect positive societal transformation, I began by attempting to change the individual teacher. Through a process of conscientisation individual change should be facilitated. This is achieved by becoming aware of false ideologies, hegemony, traditional teaching methods and thinking that promotes individualism instead of relationship building. Consequently, this individual change precipitates institutional transformation, resulting in a learning environment that welcomes diversity as a strength. Thus, this change within the ECCE centre should ultimately have a positive impact on broader societal transformation.

The diagram below represents each salient component of the study as elements that create an inclusive learning environment. Ideologies refer to the removal of false beliefs that serve to maintain the status quo. In this study, teachers need to examine dominant understandings of what inclusion entails. Teachers also need to challenge their current beliefs about groups of people they regard as 'other'. This 'unlearning and relearning' is an iterative cycle of collaborative reflection, action, and reflection resulting in praxis. Developing a critical awareness of one's beliefs about diversity, privilege,

and the intersectional nature of identity is essential. The second section represents hegemony, which refers to how certain majority groups maintain social dominance. Counter-hegemony in opposition to the latter challenges this aiming to create a more democratic society. By adopting flexible approaches, teachers may challenge their current ways of thinking and act against stereotyping, bias and discrimination, as reflected in the third section. Adopting a critical pedagogy also calls for teaching in a culturally responsive manner. This enables teachers to contest hegemony as the child's culture and life experience are represented in the classroom, creating an atmosphere of cultural synthesis that welcomes all diversities. In opposition to traditional 'banking' methods using dialogue encourages the articulation of the learner's voice and leads to a more democratic learning environment. The diagram also represents the human aspect of inclusion in the fourth segment. The emphasis here is to encourage relationship building, focusing on collective meaning-making rather than values associated with individualism. Hence to build an inclusive learning environment, teachers need to build awareness that language is always value-laden and never neutral.

By contesting the above-mentioned hegemonies, teachers can develop into activists, superseding their roles as mere curriculum deliverers. They can speak out and act out against injustices which results in them commanding a greater voice and autonomy, leading to their emancipation. Moreover, children may become more aware of their own attitudes and act against discrimination. Teachers may develop an awareness in children to recognise how dominant ideologies become enmeshed in their young minds using the hidden curriculum. As a result, during their daily interactions, the voices of children become enabled. This new awareness could further assist teachers in creating an inclusive learning environment (figure 2.2), resulting in broader societal change. The diagram below outlines a framework to guide the study.
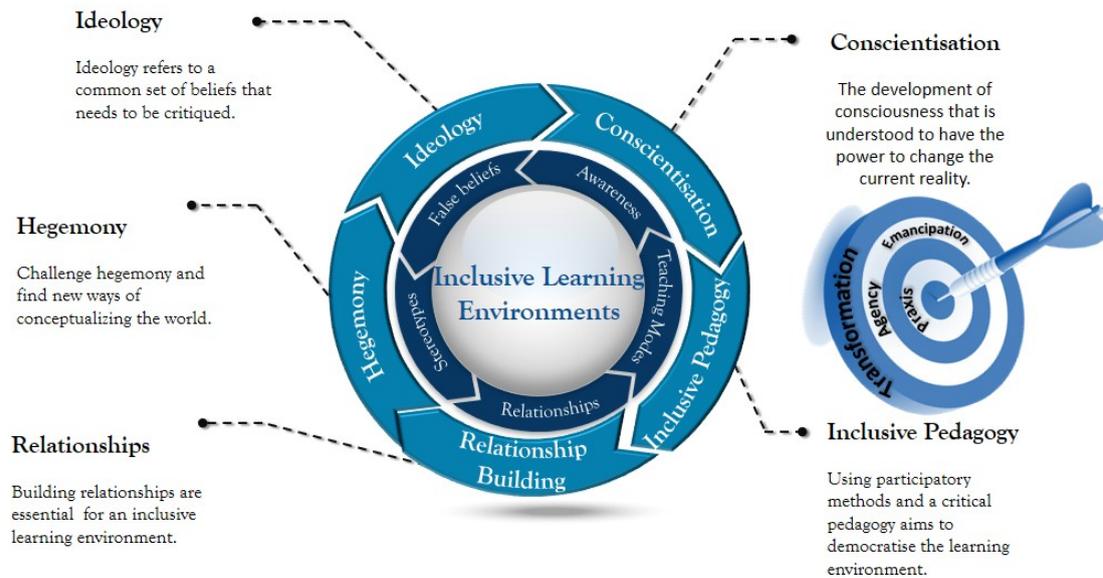
Figure 2.2 A conceptual framework

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The above section argued for a conceptual framework (figure 2.2) that specifies asserted remedies for the problem of creating inclusive learning environments in the ECCE milieu, together with my rationale for using them in my study.

2.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter outlined my theoretical perspectives comprising critical theory, critical pedagogy and the conceptual framework. *Firstly*, critical theory, influenced by Kant, Marx, Habermas and the Frankfurt school, underpins the study. At the start of this chapter, I outlined the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions of critical theory. The chapter explored how a critical perspective defines reality as socially constructed and knowledge as subjective. Also notable in this stance is that knowledge is produced on the basis of equality of power and esteem. Here the research values promote social justice, democracy, and participatory methodologies. I found these values vital to my emancipatory research agenda, uplifting and giving a voice to a group of ECCE role-players. This critical perspective formed a backdrop for a critical pedagogy that underpins my concept of the phenomenon of inclusion.

Underpinned by the philosophical assumptions of critical theory, the chapter *secondly* outlined the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy, including ideology, banking, hegemony, counter-hegemony, conscientisation, relationships and praxis. These aspects of critical pedagogy gave impetus to my research on inclusion and offered a solid point of departure. Using these critical aspects of both theories, I *thirdly* attempted to draw up a conceptual framework to assist specifically in creating inclusive learning environments within the ECCE context. Conceptualisation is a process that allows me to specify the fundamental principles of the two theories within a unique research context. Therefore, through the construction of the conceptual framework, I relate the concepts to the research problem. I structure the conceptual framework as an amalgamation of critical theory and critical pedagogy that seeks first to remove ideologies and to develop a critical consciousness among the participants. I formulated five analytical aspects from the two theories as salient criteria to assist ECCE teachers in the exploration of an Inclusive Learning Environment in ECCE. This chapter deduces that for teachers to gain a deep level of inclusion, they need to adopt a critical mindset and a change in consciousness.

The above had ramifications for my standpoint as the chief facilitator of the research project. Personally, adopting a critical perspective forced me to become acutely aware of my position in this research. Consequently, using a personal reflective journal enabled me to reflect critically on my learnings and to improve upon my skills as a PALAR researcher. I saw the need to develop the capacity to inquire into and to question all knowledge. Sometimes it was uncomfortable as it meant challenging my current ways of knowing or doing things. I needed to examine my assumptions and understandings about this research and life in general. I found that this study on inclusive learning environments had to acknowledge the role of privilege and power given to diverse social groups. Moving forward and addressing issues of inclusion required this awareness. Hence a critical pedagogy resonates with the goals of this research to create more inclusive learning environments in ECCE. The co-researchers also needed to adopt this stance to achieve the research goals. I needed to think of creative ways to facilitate this. The following chapter engages with the review of literature pertinent to my research objectives.

CHAPTER THREE
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter two sought to provide an insight into the overarching theoretical and conceptual foundations that underpin this study. To begin with I outlined a theoretical framing for the study and examined how critical theory forms a broad underlying platform for critical pedagogy in exploring inclusive learning environments. Following this, I argued for a conceptual tool that supports creating an inclusive learning environment in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) milieu. With this conceptual framework in mind, this chapter focuses on a review of relevant literature which seeks to survey scholarly sources that are concerned with inclusion within the ECCE arena. Guided by my research objectives, this literature review summarises current knowledge, identifying relevant theories, methods, and gaps in the existing research. Inclusion, as alluded to earlier, is more than just making changes to the learning environment. To gain authentic inclusion, teachers need to examine their ideas of what inclusion really is and how it relates to embracing diversity. I, therefore, find it essential to explore three central concepts in this review. In the following sections, I outline selected literature relating to exclusion, diversity and inclusion in the South African and global education contexts. This review further examines the context of this study that consists of the early childhood care and education sector in South Africa and it engages with relevant scholarly work that has a bearing on the research questions.

3.2 UNDERSTANDING EXCLUSION, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

To gain a profound understanding of inclusion, it is vital to explore the meanings of exclusion and diversity. Exclusion occurs when one is prevented from attending, participating in or achieving and serves as the direct opposite of inclusion. Seeing that this study adopts a broad view of inclusion that encompasses the inclusion of all diversities, not just children with disability, it is also essential to explore the fundamental concept of diversity. The following section explores the two types of exclusion that have a bearing on the research objectives.

3.2.1 Exclusion

Researchers describe macro-exclusion and micro-exclusion as two forms of exclusion (Cologon, 2019; Faustino, Moura, da Silva, Muzinatti & Skovsmose, 2017; Kollosche, Marcone, Knigge, Penteado & Skovsmose, 2019). The authors explain that macro-exclusion is an outright exclusion,

and micro-exclusion is a subtle and covert practice often mistaken for inclusion. In the following sections, I explain segregation as a blatant form of macro-exclusion and a more insidious and therefore dangerous micro-exclusion in the form of integration, assimilation and celebration. So at times, centres may appear to be inclusive but are exclusive due to these surface or tokenistic forms of inclusion.

3.2.1.1 Segregation as Macro-Exclusion

Segregation involves education in separate settings for marginalised groups (Kivirauma, Klemelä & Rinne, 2006; Sónia, 2012; Zabeli, Perolli-Shehu & Gjelaj, 2020). During apartheid, South Africans were segregated resulting in limited instruction in subjects like mathematics and science. This was known as the *Bantu Education Act. 1953* which aimed to direct non-white people into the unskilled workforce (Gallo, 2020; Mckenzie, 2021; Moore, 2016). In a similar vein to the apartheid regime, children with disability or learning barriers were physically excluded from mainstream education (Neethling, 2015). Professor Kader Asmal claimed in the *Education White Paper Six* (DoE, 2001a, p. 4) that in South Africa, "race and exclusion are the decadent and immoral factors that determine the place of vulnerable children." Hence the publication of the *Education White Paper Six* established "that all children and youth, (irrespective of race, ability, gender, language, socio-economic background) can learn and that all children and youth need support" (p. 6). Following this, Cologon (2019) describes segregation as a form of macro-exclusion that calls for separate education settings or activities for the marginalised. The author further states that in addition to segregated schools or centres, segregation may occur within mainstream settings, for example, a 'special' class for children with 'special needs'. Connor & Goldmansour (2012, p.31) write "with segregation comes devaluation, a loss in cultural capital for individuals, which is a form of disempowerment that actively disadvantages students". It is self-evident; therefore, that segregation has adverse effects on groups, due to isolation from regular society, resulting in the maintenance of inequality. In the context of this study, segregation needs to be recognised as an obstacle to human rights and to the acquisition of a more inclusive learning environment in ECCE.

3.2.1.2 Micro-Exclusion

Children may attend centres but still be excluded from authentic participation and achievement. Practices of integration, assimilation and celebration at early learning centres may be mistaken for inclusion with detrimental effects on children who may feel undervalued and alienated. Therefore, micro-exclusion (Cologon, 2019; Faustino et al., 2017; Kollosche et al., 2019) though more subtle and much more challenging to identify, still needs to be addressed, in early childhood settings.

3.2.1.2.1 Integration

Due to pressure for all children to access schools, children are integrated into programmes with very little accommodation or adjustments for individual needs. Mainstreaming came into effect, where all children are educated within the same setting. Mainstreaming involves attendance, but not necessarily inclusion (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Cologon & Thomas, 2014; Cologon, 2019; Curcic, 2009; Jelas & Ali, 2014). It is now widely recognised that "being there is not enough; it is no guarantee of respect for difference or access to the material, social, cultural and educational capital that people expect" (Komesaroff & McLean, 2006, p.97). Numerous studies (Cologon, 2019; 2020; Daniels, 2018; Slee, 2003; Swart & Pettipher, 2016; Zabeli et al., 2020) regard integration as the ineffectual location of children together at a school without accommodating their individual needs.

Hence education is delivered to specialised environments that comprise special classes in mainstream schools (Cukalevski & Malaquias, 2019). In addition, these 'special' classes that label children as 'special needs' may have segregated playgrounds (Cologon, 2019). Mangope et al. (2018) state that these children may also follow a specialised curriculum under the guidance of a 'special education' teacher. The authors also state that this leads to insufficient social mingling with 'regular children'. For example, in mainstream school settings, the whole school may come together for school assemblies, music, or a few sporting activities.

A significant criticism of integration is that children who are different need to be 'fitted-into' a programme. Instead, teachers need to assume that all children are different, and a programme needs to be consistently designed with differences in mind. Therefore, integration involves the moving of 'special' education from a segregated setting into a mainstream one, which amounts to exclusion disguised as integration. Hence, Graham and Slee (2008, p. 278) maintain that the "shifting of children around on the educational chessboard" is not inclusion. Similarly, Armstrong and Barton (2008, p.10) argue that

> *"integration makes no requirement for the school to effect radical change in its culture and organisation because the expectation is that the child is accommodated to existing structures and practices or-at best, if organisational and pedagogical adjustments are implemented, they take place around the individual child or group of children identified as in need."*

From the above discussion it is clear that children excluded can be segregated and physically located away from regular classrooms and children (D'Allessio, 2012) or integrated into mainstream classrooms-where they attend separate lessons for most of the day. Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton

(2013) believe that inclusion is misconstrued as an issue of location (where if children share a space, then they are included), and due to this misconception, many policies and movements towards inclusion do not meet with success. Similar to inclusion, integration is not a static condition. D'Alessio (2012) cautions that reductionist notions of integration may prevail because the inclusiveness of integration is dependent on specific contexts and people. Hence, we have to bear in mind that interpretations of the notion of integration are not always exclusive or assimilationist practice.

3.2.1.2.2 Assimilation

Similar to integration, assimilation is a subtle form of exclusion, where minority groups are expected to fit into a dominant culture, resulting in the loss of personal identity. Assimilation may also be confused as inclusion as it supports the myth of being 'normal' and goes against principles of inclusion. Daniels (2018) defines assimilation as an adaptation to the child's existing learning environment. Thus assimilation promotes standardisation and conformity where minority groups become part of the dominant group and difference is negated. Reygan et al. (2018) maintain that this creates a situation where there are no separate social structures for diverse identities, perpetuating exclusion. The authors also state that assimilation occurs in various forms, including pluralism, limited desegregation, purported desegregation and assimilation that can be partial, individual or group-based. Dickins (2014) points out that in the early education context, centres may expect minority groups to conform to the dominant language, hairstyles or culture in order to belong fully to the group. The author that to move away from assimilation; differences among groups need to be accepted. Essentially this entails the creation of a society where differences are even embraced and appreciated. Hence ECCE centres that require African students to 'tame' their afro hair or speak with English accents attempt to assimilate these children into the centres. For instance, a recent media report by Mahlati (2021) makes the claim that children at a Gauteng school in South Africa were segregated in tuck shop lines and were teased about their hair. These children were asked to conform to the dominant western culture, resulting in a loss of their own cultural identity.

3.2.1.2.3 Celebration

Discourse in the form of celebration of diversity has also been identified as a subtle form of exclusion that does not address issues of power or privilege. Celebratory rhetoric abounds in the literature, which asks for a celebration of diversity and difference in education and society at large (Engelbrecht, 2006; Hornby, 2015; Ojageer, 2019; Tchombe, 2017). Reygan et al. (2018) and Baglieri, Bejoian, Connor and Valle (2011) caution that these celebratory discourses could result in the pathologising of difference, where the 'other' is regarded as an anomaly. For instance, schools may highlight 'saris,

samosas, and steel bands', 'foods and festivals', or 'holidays and heroes' in an attempt to stimulate classroom discussion on the cultural practice of minority groups, thus promulgating greater acceptance and tolerance of the 'other' (Henry & Tator, 1999). Such discursive practices exoticise the 'other', celebrating the ' unique beauty and colour of students in minority groups and highlighting their 'foreign' qualities (Ajodia-Andrews, 2013; James, 2001; Knight, 2008). Additionally, this celebration of diversity creates a polarity of 'us' and 'them', thus sustaining a 'mythical normal'. Therefore, in early learning centres, the tokenistic observation of 'Heritage Day' where children dress in cultural clothes once a year or observe 'disability awareness day' teaches culture selectively and superficially. These tokenistic celebrations of difference merge in an educational system that is often deeply entrenched in dominant Eurocentric pedagogies and ideology. Rather than the misleading celebration of cultures and diversity, Reygan and her colleagues call for a deeper and critical understanding of the power hierarchies apparent due to diversity. Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000) remark that policies fail, due to unchallenged assumptions shaping and driving these policies. Therefore, there is a need to speak of inclusion in terms of power issues relating to diversity (Cologon, 2019; Nutbrown et al., 2013) rather than in terms of superficial celebratory discourse. The following discussion clarifies the concept of diversity and 'otherness'.

3.2.2   Diversity

An understanding of diversity is essential in the effort to create an inclusive learning environment. Various sources claim that diversity generally refers to the differences in people due to varying reasons (Dike, 2013; Kaur & Arora, 2020; Tamunomiebi & John-Eke, 2020) and is understood as the different ways in which people are both alike and different. Diversity refers to the range of identity categories in a group of people, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, class, and immigration status (Jones & McEwan, 2000). Consequently, diversity in the context of inclusion is about recognising and valuing difference (Dickins, 2014). The author states that this entails treating people as individuals and having positive regard for people despite differences.

3.2.2 Diversities in ECCE

In the following section, I explore the diversities currently within the South African context. Many studies concur that schools are becoming more diverse (Daniels, 2018; Govender, 2018; Reygan et al., 2018; Rowan et al., 2021; Rusznyak & Masinire, 2018; Xiao & Kwo, 2018) due to an interplay of various factors, including the impact of social media, globalisation, migration and urbanisation. The MRQECDE (DHET, 2017) list basic competencies for professionally qualified early childhood

development teachers. The competencies listed emphasise that teachers need to have an understanding of and need to be able to analyse the complex and differentiated nature of South African society critically. The policy also states that teachers need to learn to work in creative ways to facilitate the diverse challenges encountered by young children and their families. Diversity challenges listed include poverty, disabilities, cultural and language differences and gender and sexual diversity. Teachers require new-age skills to create an inclusive learning environment (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Ojageer, 2019) and a 'forced introspection' to deal with differences in the classroom (Kiguwa, 2018, p. 21). The diversities relevant to this study include those in socio-economic status, diversities in gender and sexuality, diversities in ability, diversities in skin colour and race, and diversities in language.

3.2.2.1.1 Diversity and Socioeconomic Status

In a media report the former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan remarks that, "poverty is the major obstacle to the realisation of children's rights" (Atmore, 2019, para. 10). He also mentions that in a country like South Africa, poverty remains the greatest barrier to inclusion as more than half of the population (fifty-five per cent) are subject, to scarcity of basic resources. The report further states that young children, females, black Africans and those living in rural areas are the most marginalised in our country. Studies by Nel and Grosser (2016) reveal that socio-economic factors impact on the accessibility of educational resources, and poverty serves as a stumbling block to an effective education. Moodly (2019) concurs that the developmental milestones of affluent young children in South Africa differ from those children from impoverished backgrounds due to a lack of stimulation and access to well-resourced ECCE centres.

Due to various factors, children living in poverty are disadvantaged. For example, children may be living in areas with high crime rates (Berry, Dawes & Biersteker, 2013) with few opportunities to be involved in outdoor play activities with other children. Furthermore, these children are susceptible to chronic illnesses like HIV and AIDS, which delay their development in various domains (Vranda & Mothi, 2013). In addition, many of these young children have teenage mothers as single parents. A study by Statistics South Africa (2018) revealed an alarming rate of teenage pregnancies in South Africa, which negatively impacted on the cognitive and behavioural development of young children. These are further compounded by absent fathers (Freeks, 2017) and child-headed households due to poverty (Atmore, van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2012). Further to this, Atmore (2019) declares that children who suffer from malnourishment or hunger are unable to learn in the same manner as other

children. Atmore fervidly declares that poverty turns childhood into a time of affliction and compromises the optimum development of the young child.

Also of concern is a report by the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) that records the fact that the learning environments in poverty-stricken areas are often in dilapidated buildings with meagre furniture and poor sanitation. The report further declared that parents living in poverty required social assistance, had low educational qualifications, and seldom prioritised their children's education (SAHRC/UNICEF, 2014). Also significant is a study reported by Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert (2012) on children from Thembelihle, schooling in Lenasia. This study revealed that when poor children come into contact with wealthier children at school, the results are bleak. The study introduced the concept of 'relative poverty', where poverty "may bite hardest in relation to others" (p. 137) due to a more significant socio-economic gap. Poverty often created the social exclusion of poorer learners due to non-payment of school fees or lack of stationery or resources that other learners had, leading to learner humiliation.

On a more positive note, Berkowitz, Moore, Astor and Benbenishty (2017) published a review of multiple research findings, linking a positive learning environment to academic achievement irrespective of poverty. The review showed that a warm, accepting school climate resulted in improved academic performance and in a decline in the academic achievement gap between wealthy and less affluent children. Their study affirmed that the main reason for the achievement gap was that the wealthier students had a greater sense of belonging than the more impoverished children who felt alienated. Their reviews of various studies recognised that when teachers made a concerted effort to include all children, this resulted in increased participation and achievement of lower socio-economic groups. They reported that discrepancies between the two groups of children were eliminated. The last-mentioned report has considerable significance for this research, as there are discrepancies in socio-economic status among children in South African ECCE centres. Teachers need to be mindful of how to eliminate these gaps caused by poverty and disparities.

The issue of poverty also foregrounds the necessity for children to have their basic needs met before developing in cognitive domains. The denial of these primary needs impacts negatively on the self-actualisation of children. Self-actualisation is the realisation of one's full potential (Castle & Buckler, 2021). The authors describe Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a motivational theory comprising seven hierarchical levels within a pyramid. From the bottom, the needs comprise physiological needs, safety, love and belonging needs, and esteem, aesthetic and cognitive needs, with self-actualisation at the

top of the pyramid. Only when the basic needs are met can self-actualisation be achieved. Hence, for children to develop optimally in all domains, the primary needs must first be met. Therefore, teachers in early childhood need to be aware of the effects of poverty on the development of children. Atmore (2019) is of the view that suitable interventions during the early years can enable disadvantaged children to develop optimally, thus avoiding the need to address these problems during formal schooling or in later life.

3.2.2.1.2 Diversity in Ability and Ableism

Several scholars (Cologon, 2019; Cologon & Thomas, 2014; Friedman & Owen, 2017; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019; Luthuli & Wood, 2020; Nario-Redmond, 2019; Sharma & Hamilton, 2019) regard the concept of 'ableism' as a deeply entrenched form of discrimination. Ableism is a social prejudice that people who are disabled are inferior and require 'fixing'. Matthews (2009) suggests that ability may either be easily detected or difficult to ascertain by teachers. Cologon (2019) believes that ableism occurs in everyday situations where people without disability or learning barriers may patronise or show unnecessary benevolence to the person grappling with an 'impairment'. Moreover, the author states that people automatically assume incompetence based on the person's diagnosis and the inaccessibility of places, events and materials. Seeing that people with disabilities are underrepresented or misrepresented in the media, books and the curriculum, I believe that being disabled is something that society still fails to acknowledge. Like racism, sexism, and homophobia, ableism needs to be eradicated to achieve true inclusion in early childhood education, formal schooling, and in wider society.

According to the *Human Rights Watch (2019) Report,* the South African government has not delivered on its promises to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities nor has it ensured their future employability. They recommend that President Cyril Ramaphosa should place children and young people with disabilities at the centre of government priorities. Hence, findings of various studies in the formal education sector reveal that South African teachers grapple with challenges to implementing the inclusion of children who have special educational needs who are often termed 'disabled' or 'impaired'. These challenges include lack of parental participation, heavy teacher workloads, inadequate training for teachers and a lack of resources (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Makoelle & Malindi, 2015; Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht, & Nel, 2016; Ojageer, 2019).

In the ECCE sector in South Africa, the *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Plan* [NIECDP] (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2015) states that children with physical or neurological vulnerabilities in centre-based or non-centre based programmes may not

"be excluded from access to any early childhood development services supporting realisation of their rights based on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, .marital status of their caregiver, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, language, culture and birth. In addition, to promote the achievement of equality, measures shall be taken to ensure the availability of, and access to, quality early childhood development services for vulnerable children" (p. 51).

Thus the child with disability or learning barriers may 'enjoy an elevated constitutional status', due to the *Children's Act (38 of 2005)* and the *NIECDP* (DSD, 2015). Notwithstanding these policies, scholars (Agbenyega, 2003; McConkey, Kahonde & Mckenzie, 2016; Mckenzie, McConkey & Adnams, 2013) highlight how in traditional African communities, disabled children are often stigmatised and condemned as products of the 'anger of the Gods' or various other superstitions. Therefore, besides condemnation from family and community members, Wodon and Alasuutari (2018) also claim that African rural communities have poor infrastructure and offer little physical accommodation for children with disability or learning barriers to access and participate fully in school. Furthermore, should children with disability or learning barriers gain access to programmes, they are often made miserable due to bullying from peers due to misguidance and stereotyping by adults.

Studies in Zimbabwe by Henry and Namhla (2020) have noted that the diverse nature of children in early childhood education classes requires teachers with specialised knowledge, skills and competencies, to design daily routines that promote the early wellbeing of children with special education needs. Their study reveals that the inclusion of children with special education needs in ECCE is no easy feat and recommends that early childhood teachers need to attend continuous professional development activities to enable them to develop all children holistically. Studies by Majoko (2017) also in Zimbabwe, using a small non-generalisable sample, reveal that although teachers had positive attitudes to inclusion, there is still a dire need for research and scholarship on practically including children with special educational needs in early childhood settings. Similar to Majoko (2017), studies by Soni et al. (2020) in Malawi, offer recommendations for the training of ECCE teachers to develop positive attitudes to inclusion through repeated opportunities for reflection and discussion of case studies. The authors also suggest the need to examine personal values and practically to support the inclusion and participation of all children, including those with disability or learning barriers. Studies like these done in Africa offer a springboard for research on how South African ECCE teachers may create an inclusive learning environment. As mentioned earlier, there is a dearth of research within the South African ECCE sector (Azzi-Lessing & Schmidt, 2019); however, studies done in countries like Zimbabwe and Malawi may be of considerable significance due to many similarities in geography and historical oppression. Following these studies, I identify a need for

teachers to become conscious of personal attitudes to children with disability or learning barriers and to recognise ableism as a barrier to inclusion and social justice. The subsequent section explores the models of disability that shape ideas that people have about disability.

3.2.2.1.2.1 Models of Disability

It is essential to be acquainted with the various models of disability that shape people's perceptions and ideas about disabilities. Scholars have not established consensus on what informs disability or how it should be defined or assessed (Mitra, 2006). Understanding the different models of disability is crucial for everyone in society to build positive attitudes and a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. The deficit and the social models of disability are two frameworks that have been referred to, in studies on inclusive education (Hayes, Elder & Bulat, 2020; Lawson & Beckett, 2020; Lebona, 2013; Neethling, 2015; Wahl, 2017). The medical or deficit model was prompted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) debate on the implications of disability terminologies such as handicap, impairment and disability (Wahl, 2017). Cologon (2013) and Swart and Pettipher (2016) contend that this model focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of pathology, and it involves the placement of a child in a specialised, segregated environment together with the labelling of a child according to a category of deficit.

As a result, in schools in South Africa, learners are labelled as LSEN or 'Learners with Special Educational Needs' due to this medical model which is a remnant of the previous South African education system. Despite worldwide criticism, and the move to inclusive education, this model is still influential (Swart & Pettipher, 2016; Wahl, 2017). Furthermore, this model was dominant in initial teacher education programmes before 1994, resulting in mainstream teachers' feelings of inadequacy to provide for learners with diverse needs (Wahl, 2017). The conceptualisation of a person's functioning and disability needed to be conceived of as an interaction between biological, individual and social perspectives (Swart & Pettipher, 2016), hence the advent of the social model of disability.

This criticism of the medical model of disability has led to the social model that resulted from a paradigm shift of disability from it being a problem within the person to a social issue (Swart & Pettipher, 2016). This model emphasises that everyone should have equal opportunities and people with disabilities can participate, and it is society that restricts their opportunities (Lawson & Beckett, 2020). The authors further add that the social model transfers the emphasis from a personal inability, to the societal barriers experienced by a person with vulnerability. As a result, Neethling (2015) maintains that society is inflexible towards people with disabilities and therefore he believes that within

a society, people with disabilities need to be accommodated. Thus, this study, instead of addressing the personal deficits of children, aims to address the effects of an inflexible ECCE centre with rigid organisational and physical barriers.

3.2.2.1.3 Diversity and Race or Skin Colour

In addition to diversity in socio-economic factors and diversity in ability, now over twenty-six years after apartheid, racism remains a significant issue in marginalisation. At the outset, it is essential to note that young children may not understand race, but they do notice differences in skin colour and hair texture from a very young age. Incidents of racism abound in South African news reports to this day. For instance, The following media report documents racism at an elite school in Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa (Masweneng, 2020). In this report, a learner states that she was mocked for her 'black' accent upon her arrival at the school.

> *"I had to fake a white accent. However, every now and then my accent will peep through in class when speaking or reading, leading to many white students laughing or mocking me. I have also been called a baboon by peers at times when I have been loud or excited (para. 22)."*

This article is one of many found in South African news reports. Notwithstanding twenty-seven years of democracy, incidents like these serve as a warning that race and skin colour are very much an element leading to marginalisation. The girls and women in the article mentioned above, presented a six thousand word public document that demonstrated an awareness of how power constructs "differences that make a difference" (Reygan, Walton & Osman, 2018, p. 15). These seventy accounts of institutionalised prejudice at the school (Masweneng, 2020) indicate that differences still seem to privilege whiteness and mock or exclude blackness. These students that Reygan et al. (2018, p. 4) refer to as the 'others'. were expected to be assimilated into the dominant culture of the school. They were offered support to meet the requirements of the dominant order, where the host institution remained "philosophically, pedagogically and ideologically unchanged." In this case, these girls were expected to assimilate themselves by changing their speech and hairstyles to fit in with the school's rules and ethos.

Consequently, in early years education, according to various studies, children as young as six months may be able to notice differences in the physical attributes of people such as skin complexion and hair texture (Katz & Koffin, 1997; Kemple et al., 2016; Miller, 2019; University of Toronto, 2017). Since their environments influence young children's beliefs (University of Toronto, 2017; Miller, 2019), early childhood teachers need to encourage dialogue regarding race and difference. Adopting a 'colour

blind' approach to differences tends to magnify bias and stereotyping of people who look different (Kemple et al., 2016; Stokke, 2021). Stokke clarifies that when people fail to discuss race, they are complicit in maintaining the status quo and in reinforcing negative beliefs about the racial 'other'. Therefore, successfully preventing racial and cultural prejudice from a young age involves more than the completion of a few tokenistic activities, but rather a deep reflection of the teacher's personal philosophy that permeates all aspects of the learning environment (Hansel, 2019). Joost (2019) makes the point that racism is learned and can therefore be unlearned. He further states that teachers are significant role players in promoting positive race relations as schools are a microcosm of society. I conclude that in early education discourses on race and privilege together with intentionally inclusive pedagogies disrupt harsh preconceived notions about race, skin colour and hair texture. Hence, in this study, I seek to foreground an awareness of ECCE teachers' ideologies and philosophies that impact on their pedagogic abilities to create a stereotype-free early learning environment that welcomes minority groups who are different.

3.2.2.1.4 Diversity and Gender

Gender is also a significant factor leading to exclusion. On the 17th of June 2020, President Ramaphosa addressed the scourge of gender-based violence in South Africa (Ellis, 2020). He stated that,

> *"In the past few weeks, no fewer than twenty-one (21) women and children have been murdered. Their killers thought they could silence them. But we will not forget them and we will speak for them where they cannot (para. 1)."*

According to the *National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide* (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2020, p. 2),

> *"South Africa holds the shameful distinction of being one of the most unsafe places in the world to be a woman. We have amongst the highest rates of intimate partner violence, and recently released data from Statistics SA show that rape and sexual violence have become hyperendemic. This is a scourge that affects us all: young and old, black or white, rich and poor, queer or cis, rural or urban. It pervades every sphere of our society."*

Although there are varied factors that contribute to gender-based violence, it is rooted in gender inequalities at the societal level and it is deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms that discriminate against women and girls (Care International, 2020). Besides violence against females, inequalities between males and females continue to persist in society, where a female is expected to be the home-maker and carer as well as a provider. Hence when children perpetuate these stereotyped gender roles in play, ECCE teachers need to challenge them.

In addition to discrimination based on gender, persistent inequities towards the range of sexual diversity in this country are often overlooked (Govender, 2018). Concurring with Govender's statement, Francis (2017) reminds us that LGBTQI+ youth in schools experience significant homophobia and transphobia in school environments (and in society at large) and that victimisation based on sexual orientation is widespread and includes verbal and physical abuse, even rape. Similarly, a study by the Human Rights Watch (2011) provides evidence that schools reinforced discrimination toward LGBTQI+ learners. Notably, children may deviate from being cisgender or come from different families that may not appear 'normative'; therefore, it is essential to address these diversities. This would also mean moving away from 'certainties' regarding gender or sexual normativity (Govender, 2018). As Freire said, "a pedagogy will be that more critical and radical, the more investigative and less sure of 'certainties' it is," (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.36). The early childhood teacher has a significant function to perform to challenge such certainties regarding gender, sexual orientation or family structure.

Additionally, in the early years, necessary attitudes regarding gender equity are constructed. A study by Freeman (2007) revealed that children aged three years were able to differentiate between girls and boys and by the age of five, children showed evidence of conforming to gender stereotypes more than their three-year-old counterparts. The study reports that this may be a response due to the attitudes of parents or teachers. Therefore, in ECCE, parents or teachers may promote stereotypical play, thus leading to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Devarakonda, 2014). Devarakonda states that parents or teachers may insist on their sons playing with cars and girls playing with dolls and 'home-making' types of play. The author also cautions that parents may become upset if these stereotypes are challenged, as this influences children's stereotypical or non-stereotypical gender play, that can affect the maintenance of the status quo. Therefore, teachers in ECCE need to challenge these stereotypical gender roles and they should aim to facilitate an environment that promotes gender equity and fairness.

3.2.2.1.5 Diversity and Language

Language undoubtedly has a bearing on the educational achievement of children (Awopetu, 2016; George, 2013; Joubert, 2016; Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). According to a community survey reported by Gordon and Harvey (2019), in South Africa about 81% of the population speak one or more of the African languages and English is not their mother tongue. The authors also report that English is the language of preference in education and is used in many of the nation's schools. They state that many children entering the education system are still learning English in their early years at school. In

addition, the language of instruction is an influencing factor in the educational performance of children, where colonial languages have been used primarily, and the mother tongue is neglected (Kretzer & Kaschula, 2020). The authors state that the *South African Constitution (1996)* declares eleven official languages; however, regardless of this, languages do not have the same status or power in South Africa.

Bearing the above in mind, language policy and language practice are value-laden; the term diglossia refers to a separation between two languages or language varieties (Ferguson, 1959; Kretzer & Kaschula, 2020). The authors declare that one is classified as "High Variety (H), mainly used in education, media or the workplace, whereas the Low Variety (L) is only used for private communication or religious purposes" (Okal, 2014, p. 223). Therefore, in the African context, we see that colonial language has a greater status and prestige than African languages, especially in education institutions (Ouane & Glanz, 2010). Essentially, the status of a colonial language like English has been privileged in South Africa and has become the preferred language of instruction in higher education institutions and commerce and government (Manyike & Lemmer, 2014). Studies have noted that inequality in basic education has been exacerbated, as many of South Africa's second language learners perform poorly in the National Senior Certificate examinations (Postma & Postma 2011). Poor results have also been recorded in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study [PIRLS] (2006; 2011) due to language-related difficulties among South African learners.

With this in mind, early childhood teachers must recognise the value of additive bilingualism to enable learning a second language in conjunction with the first language (Cummins, 1992; Enstice, 2017; Joubert, 2019). Hence the transition from the home to the preschool needs to be skilfully facilitated by teachers, as a language environment that differs from the home environment may have adverse effects on the young child if not addressed appropriately (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015).Teachers need to look at how these second language learners are provided with a sense of belonging from the initial stages of education. In line with the latter, Roberts (2014) states that monolingual spaces silence minority language groups. They explain that these children may feel that their own language may be primitive, less sophisticated and undervalued compared to the language of learning and teaching at the centre. Therefore, teachers in ECCE need to include all language groups within the classroom. Many teachers in ECCE are already conscious of the diversity of language in their learning environments but may be unaware of how this diversity in language can be used as a precious pedagogical resource to create inclusive learning spaces.

The above discussion highlights the current South African scenario in terms of diversity. The above list of diversities is not exhaustive, and many other types of diversities are relevant; however, a discussion including all forms of diversity is not practical or possible. Diversity is a broad concept, but it may be sufficient to note that diversities need to be welcomed and valued in a process that Freire distinguishes as 'cultural synthesis'. Hence in ECCE, cultural synthesis entails dialogue between cultures where diversity is embraced as a rich resource. For instance, in the learning environment and in the activities of the programme, the teacher should also be mindful of this.

3.2.2.2 Intersectionality of Diversity

In the above section on diversity, I referred to a wide range of diverse identities that characterise people. The theory of intersectionality originally proposed by Crenshaw states that the diverse identities of people intersect to create a whole that is different from the component identities of people (Bešić, 2020). Bešić states that to understand an individual's identity and experience, one must first accept that each aspect of one's identity is interconnected and complex. Diversity is therefore not straightforward, as groups of people may be classified into multiple categories each with a set of perspectives, affiliations, interests and social rankings (Carastathis, 2014; Coaston, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Vertovec, 2015). Consequently, not all identities are equally privileged in society as certain undervalued identities may experience marginalisation or oppression. The early years' professional needs to be aware of the intersectionality of these multiple identities that may compound experiences of oppression and marginalisation among certain groups of people (Reygan et al., 2018). I, therefore, emphasise that intersectionality leads to the compounding of identities, and each individual experiences this in a unique way that may be an advantage or a disadvantage. For example, a female black lesbian may experience more significant oppression than a white female lesbian. Essentially ECCE teachers need to heed the concept of intersectionality, as the combination of intersecting identities may put children at a greater risk of being discriminated against or of being marginalised.

3.2.2.3 Otherness

Discourses in diversity engage with the disempowering process where certain identities are constructed as an 'other' and by inference as a 'lesser' or 'inferior' other (Cologon, 2019). Robinson and Jones Diaz (2005, p. 24) and Kumashiro (2002) define 'other' "as those groups that have been marginalized, silenced, denigrated or violated, in opposition to the privileged and powerful groups that are identified as representing the idealised, mythical norm in society." Additionally, when people are 'othered' as an 'inferior' it leads to dehumanisation (Cologon, 2014). This process of dehumanisation

where people are viewed as being less than human - is often subconscious, unintentional and enculturated, and therefore this extreme discrimination is often tolerated. . An example of this would include attitudes towards people with disability, people who deviate from gender norms, females, non-English speakers and people living in poverty. Hence inclusion aims to improve the lives of marginalised groups who are 'othered' in this way (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2005). This practice of 'othering' is a form of exclusion that stands in the way of creating an inclusive learning environment. Understanding diversities that are frequently encountered in the South African ECCE centres and concepts of intersectionality and otherness assist in a better understanding of inclusion. The following section attempts to present literature to explore the concept of inclusion.

3.2.3 INCLUSION

Research done internationally often focuses on inclusion as the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream schooling (Ginja & Chen, 2021; Hehir, et al., 2016; Shevlin & Banks, 2021; Ozel et al., 2018). Similarly, studies conducted in South Africa are also centred mainly on the inclusion of children with disability or learning barriers (for example, Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2015; Mckenzie, 2021; Mncube & Lebopa, 2019; Neethling, 2015). However, as this study highlights, inclusion goes deeper than just disability. Walton (2018) clarifies that a narrow view of inclusion refers to the inclusion of children with disability and a broader view is that it includes all diversities. Earlier, Phasha, Mahlo, and Dei (2017) claimed that in Africa, the idea of inclusion needs to address fundamental questions of power, equity and difference where diversity cannot be swept under the carpet. These authors claim that learners cannot be treated as "universal subjects without identities of class, gender, sexuality, disability, language, race and ethnicity" (p. 2). Phasha and colleagues also suggest that teachers need to tap into the rich cultural resource base available in South Africa and highlight these contributions to inclusive schooling and education. Dickins (2014) claims that inclusive practice, policy and principles apply to all children regardless of the types of diversity. Hence in this study, you will find that inclusion is a philosophy that welcomes, celebrates and respects all diversity.

Keeping the above in mind, inclusion in its authentic form can only occur when its philosophy and values are deeply entrenched into society with a shift in thinking. This entails the removal of stereotyping, bias, prejudice or discrimination towards people who are different. Teachers need to be mindful of how they react to these diversities and they need to become conscious of dominant ideologies of power and privilege that may promote the marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups through the hidden curriculum. Also significant is that inclusion requires children to be treated equitably

and not equally because their needs vary in the early learning environment (Paul, 2019). Essentially an inclusive learning environment rejects approaches that are standardised and uniform. Uniformity and standardisation support deficit discourses, where the child is regarded as a problem (Lilley, 2015). Instead, our centres' rigid structures and standardised systems need to be addressed to accommodate all diversities. Hence to realise inclusion requires teachers to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach.

3.2.3.1 Inclusive Education

To attain inclusion, inclusive education needs to be practised. Like inclusion, a definition of inclusive education is problematic (Allan, 2014; Black-Hawkins, 2014; Walton, 2016) and depending on contextual factors, the definition is varied and fluid (Nel et al., 2016). Despite the uncertainty and contradictions that surround the concept of Inclusive education, for the purpose of this study, the definition by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPDP] seems appropriate. The UNCRPD (2016, p.3) identifies inclusive education as a process of:

> *"strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. It focuses on the full and effective participation, accessibility, attendance and achievement of all children, especially those who, for different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized. Inclusion involves access to and progress in high-quality formal and informal education without discrimination."*

In the early year's context, inclusive education ensures that all members in early education centres are valued and allowed to participate fully. According to Booth, Ainscow, and Kingston (2006, p.3), "inclusion in the early years and childcare is as much concerned with the participation of practitioners [teachers] as with the involvement of children and young people. Participation implies playing, learning and working in collaboration with others. It involves making choices about, and having a say in, what we do. More deeply, it is about being recognised, accepted and valued for ourselves." In addition, Agbenyega and Klibthong (2014) argue that this means that early childhood inclusion is about providing spaces that nurture the unique potential of children in all domains. Purdue, Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Madden and Surtees, (2009, p. 807) write that inclusive education involves "all children, families and adults' rights to participate in environments where diversity is assumed, welcomed and viewed as a rich resource rather than seen as a problem." In ECCE, inclusion also entails all role-players having a say and participating in the programme.

Many researchers (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Cologon, 2019; Nutbrown et al., 2013; Mahlo, 2017; Petriwskyj, 2010) claim that if teachers are able to deal with diversity in their learning

environments adequately, then the ideal of inclusive education will be realised. In addition, Landsberg, et al. (2019) succinctly sum up inclusive education as a reconceptualisation of values and beliefs that welcomes and embraces diversity, which is more than just a set of practices. Inclusive education advocates for a system wherein diversity enriches and fortifies the learning environment, where children are treated equitably and are permitted to reach their distinct potential. The central issue of being inclusive means that teachers need to harness the rich cultural differences and the varying lived experiences of all children. The following section outlines the development of inclusive education as an international agenda to desegregate schools.

3.2.3.2 Global Developmental Trajectory of Inclusive Education

Dyson and Forlin (1999) and Walton (2018) state that the concept of Inclusive Education can be traced back to parent activism against the segregation of children with disabilities in the Nordic countries in the 1960s and 1970s. The authors clarify that those human rights treatises that developed as a result of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, resulted in Article 26 that decrees the right of every person to a suitable education irrespective of gender, race, colour and religion. This right was also enshrined in the constitutions of all independent nations (United Nations, 1948). Other authors (Neethling, 2015; Ojageer, 2019; Phasha, Mahlo & Dei, 2017) state that in 1990 at a conference in Jomtien, Thailand, the concept of Inclusive Education was conceptualised and espoused by the Education for All (EFA) movement. The movement focused on both learners experiencing barriers to learning and learners excluded from mainstream education (UNESCO, 1994). *The Salamanca Statement* of 1994, called for inclusion to be the norm where ordinary schools need to make accommodation for all children, regardless of their language, socio-economic status, ability, gender or race (UNESCO, 1994). Hasan, Halder and Debnath (2018) state that the movement towards achieving EFA was then assessed at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 and among other goals it committed to,

> *"expanding and improving comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; as well as ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality"* (UNESCO, 2000, p. 8).

Following the Dakar conference, the initiative for education for all was emphasised in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000; and later replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in

2012. Bearing in mind that this study seeks to explore inclusive education within the South African milieu, I present a background to inclusive education in South Africa in the following section.

3.2.3.3 Contextualising Inclusive Education

In order to facilitate inclusive education in a genuine way, it needs to be located within a relevant context. Dickins (2014) elucidates that if we do not locate inclusive education within a relevant context, we can achieve a watered-down and fragile version of it. I, therefore, examine inclusion in the South African and ECCE contexts.

3.2.3.3.1 The Development of Inclusive Education in South Africa

Nel (2018) asserts that the above movement towards the adoption of Inclusive Education in the international arena profoundly affected the South African education scene. Since 1994, the principles of human rights and equality informed all educational policy developments (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel & Malinen, 2013). Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde (2012) outline that the inclusive education system can be traced historically to the original document, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 (RSA,1996). Section 29* (the Bill of Rights) declares that all people have the right to an education which the state has to make accessible. Landsberg, et al. (2019) outline a historical glimpse of policies that impacted on the advent of Inclusive Education in South Africa (figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 A historical glimpse of policies that impacted on the development of inclusive education in South Africa (Landsberg, et al., 2019)

After the apartheid era, the new dispensation was guided by the education policy documents and legislation of the *White Paper on Education and Training* (DoE, 1995). This document outlined new initiatives to promote a diversity of learners in the classroom, for instance, the language policy, Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and a Culture of Learning, Teaching and Services (COLTS) (Landsberg, et al., 2019). The latter further state that the *South African Schools Act of 1996*, stated all learners needed to have access to a school of their parent's choice without unfair discrimination against any group of children. However, gaps and weaknesses that promoted exclusion were identified

in these policies (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). In the *White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy*, access to the curriculum for learners with disability or learning barriers were emphasised (Office of the Deputy President, 1997). Here, the President expressed an "unswerving commitment to the upliftment and improvement of the conditions of those members of our society who are disabled" (Office of the Deputy President, 1997, p.1).

The above goals were further emphasised in the report issued by the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training [NCSNET] and the National Committee on Education Support Services [NCESS] (DoE, 1997). Engelbrecht (2006) states that in 2001, the *White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* was published (DoE, 2001a). This acknowledged the failure of the education system to respond to the needs of a substantial number of children. *The Education White Paper Six* (DoE, 2001a, p. 44) outlines that "all children and youth are able to learn with adequate support." It follows that all children have unique identities due to age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, ability or HIV status, and this difference is equally valued and is a typical human experience. Education structures, systems, and methodology need to meet diverse learners' needs while conceding that education may occur in formal and informal settings. The paper also clarifies that attitudes, behaviour, teaching methodologies, curricula and the environment must be adjusted to meet the needs of all learners and to heighten the participation of all learners by minimising the barriers to learning. Ultimately learners should be empowered to develop individually and to participate actively as creative and critical thinkers. The national curriculum guided by the Education White Paper Six is particularly sensitive to diversity, including poverty, inequality, race, gender, barriers to learning, and language and age (Lebona, 2013). In summary, this brief historical account of Inclusive Education highlights the attempts of the National government to ratify a social justice agenda using education as a tool. The concept of inclusion resonates with the values of the South African constitution as well as international initiatives driven by a global community. Sadly, twenty years later, the question still arises as to why the above-mentioned *Education White Paper Six* document has still not been translated into action (Makoelle, 2012; Ojageer, 2019). The publication of *Education White Paper 5* similarly outlined a framework for early childhood provision in South Africa. Since inclusion is context-driven in the section below, I explore the development of ECCE.

3.2.3.3.2 Early Childhood Care and Education

Early Childhood Care and Education comprises informal education that is home-based or centre-based before the Grade R year (DBE, 2015). This falls under the larger umbrella of Early Childhood Education, spanning from birth to nine years of age (DoE, 2001b; Kuhne & Fakie, 2019). The National

Departments of Social Development, Basic Education and Health govern the services for children in this sector. Globally, it is accepted that this phase is the most important and, according to the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for birth to four, builds "strong foundations for lifelong learning" (DBE, 2015, p. 5). Hence, a transdisciplinary approach is adopted in this sector as the young child requires education and care (Moodly, 2019). This alludes to the holistic development of young children in social, physical, emotional, language, and cognitive domains. The following section offers a brief overview of the ECCE / ECD sector within the South African context and further explores the importance of quality early years education.

Historically, the laws and policies of apartheid (Carrim, 2018) created an oppressive climate for most South African people, where the standard of living was largely dependent on skin colour for many centuries. The majority of black South Africans' fundamental human rights were infringed upon, which impacted mainly on the most vulnerable in society. Atmore (2013 p. 152) claims "that young children lived a life of hunger and malnutrition; insecurity and trauma; instability, family breakdown and dislocation of communities; a lack of primary health care and educational opportunities; and the absence of adequate housing, electricity, running water and sanitation." South Africa's bitter history of racial discrimination also had a pronounced effect on early childhood education provisioning that was primarily determined by race. According to Phatudi (2007) the years between 1950 and 1970 were characterised by a lack of early education for non-white people.

This lack of facilities for the majority of South Africans created disquiet among concerned citizens. After the 1970s, several non-governmental organisations mobilised Early Childhood Development centres for people of colour - with no funding from the government (Moodly, 2019). From 1994, significant developments impacted on the lives of young children in South Africa, starting with the adoption of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* on 16 June 1995 (Atmore, 2018). This was the first international treaty that was ratified by the new government and it affirmed the rights of all children. After that, the government provided free medical and health monitoring of pregnant women and children younger than six (Atmore, 2018). The *White Paper five* (DoE, 2001b) outlined a strategy for collaboration among various sectors to improve provisioning for the youngest members. Furthermore, the development of the NIECDP (DSD, 2015) supported the National Development Plan to use ECD as a tool to significantly reduce poverty among vulnerable communities. In addition, the NIECDP aimed to support the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Four* (SDG 4) to address imbalances, claiming that "inequality within and between populations has its origins in poor early childhood experiences" (DSD, 2015, p.21). Hence "investment in early

childhood development that targets the underlying social and economic causes and consequences of risk factors can limit inequality at its source" (Rudolph, Millei & Alasuutari, 2019, p. 2).

Despite these lofty ideals, the South African government has failed to deliver to the most vulnerable in our country. Despite the progress made in early childhood development since the new dispensation in 1994, poor children face enormous challenges regarding centres' infrastructure, poor nutrition, lack of ECCE teacher development, and funding (Atmore, 2019). Aubrey (2017) concurs that in our country, since the end of apartheid, income disparity and high unemployment rates persist, with two-thirds of black children living below the poverty line, compared with two per cent of white children and he emphasises that ECCE has widened the gap where the most disadvantaged and most deserving of high-quality services could not access ECCE facilities and that this has not levelled the playing field.

Moreover, for ECCE centres to receive state funding is a complicated procedure. Involving regulations that discriminate against the poor (Vorster, 2019). For instance, the government requires centres to produce the property title deeds, lease agreement or a Permission to Occupy document (Ilifa Bantwana, 2017) and centres located in informal settlements or on land not designated for human habitation are unable to do this. As a result, this magnifies the prejudice against people who have historically experienced discrimination and marginalisation in our country. Vorster's media report, similar to many others, divulges cases where government officials from the Department of Social Development make decisions regarding the closure of centres with no interest in facilitating development. A lack of remedial facilitation by the government prevents these ECCE centres from receiving the funding they require. I concur with Atmore (2019) that a lack of interest in the ECCE sector is a crisis in the making.

3.2.3.3.3 The ECCE Learning Environment

The ECCE learning environment is a reflection of the professional expertise of the teacher (Paniagua & Istance, 2018). Consequently, the learning environment refers to the "diverse physical locations, and contexts, and cultures in which students learn" (Bates, 2019, p. 445; Glossary of Education, 2013). Hence, children in the early years learn in various contexts; for instance, at the jungle gym or during sand and water play or block play. 'Learning context' is often used instead of a classroom, which has more limited and traditional implications. The sources further allude to the fact that learning environments include "the culture of a school or class - its presiding ethos and characteristics, including how individuals interact with and treat one another - as well as how teachers may organise an educational setting to facilitate learning" (Bates, 2019, p. 490). The *MRQECDE (DHET, 2017, p. 4) states that teachers need to*

"create an effective learning environment, including arranging suitable physical space, where needed, designed to foster learning through exploration, play and appropriately challenging experiences in a context that respects diversity in backgrounds, family structure and the special development needs of babies, toddlers and young children."

With the above in mind, in creating a positive learning environment, teachers need first to examine their own value systems and attitudes (Benes & Alperin, 2016). These beliefs and values shape their daily pedagogical decisions that contribute to the creation of the learning environment. An inclusive learning environment is thus a method of structuring classroom pedagogy to enable the learning and participation of all children, including those who belong to marginalised groups in society (Unlu, 2017). I concur with Phasha, Mahlo and Dei (2017) that to create an inclusive learning environment, teachers need to think independently and to widen their perspectives by embracing the concept of a single humanity and engaging in critical questions of power and privilege. The latter mentioned authors declare that in the inclusive learning space, instances of marginality and exclusion must be identified and strategies need to be developed to include all children. At the outset in the creation of inclusive learning spaces, Slee (2011) advocates that teachers need to question "the power relations articulated through the structures, processes and culture of schooling" (p. 157) and that they need to recognise "the unequal social relations that produce exclusion" (p. 39). Thus this study emphasises the need for teacher awareness of power relations as well as awareness of their attitudes towards diverse groups of people. Notably, the learning environment goes beyond the layout and physical space of the classroom and encompasses two other elements.

Chapter one highlighted three components of a learning environment in early childhood education settings, which include the physical, social and temporal aspects (Schwartz, 2019). Firstly, the physical component of the early learning environment comprises the physical indoor and outdoor spaces. This enables children's voices and creates opportunities for risk-taking, challenge and multisensory exploration in the natural environment (Mistrett, 2017). Hence, an inclusive physical environment will contain resources that represent the diversity in the class group, as well as physical accommodations to cater to the needs of each child. Secondly, the temporal environment encompasses the timing of routines, for instance, the sequence and duration of routines and activities that form part of the daily schedule. This includes the schedule of activities such as arrival time, greeting ring, playtime, snack time, rest time, both small- and large-group activities, and the many transitions that hold them all together. Hence an inclusive temporal environment will adjust these routines and transitions to cater for the individual diversity of the group. Thirdly, the social learning environment consists of all the relationships and interactions between different role-players in the ECCE centre. The inclusive social

environment thus fosters trust, open communication and welcomes all diversities of children, families and teachers. Figure 3.2 illustrates the components of the learning environment in the ECCE context based on Mistrett's model. For the purpose of this study the ECCE centre, should be an inclusive learning environment that is created by the teacher and is dependent on the awareness of diversity, and on awareness of the underlying issues of power and privilege that are allocated to specific groups more than to others in society. It encompasses the ability to value and embrace all diversities and teach with awareness of these deep-seated ideologies.
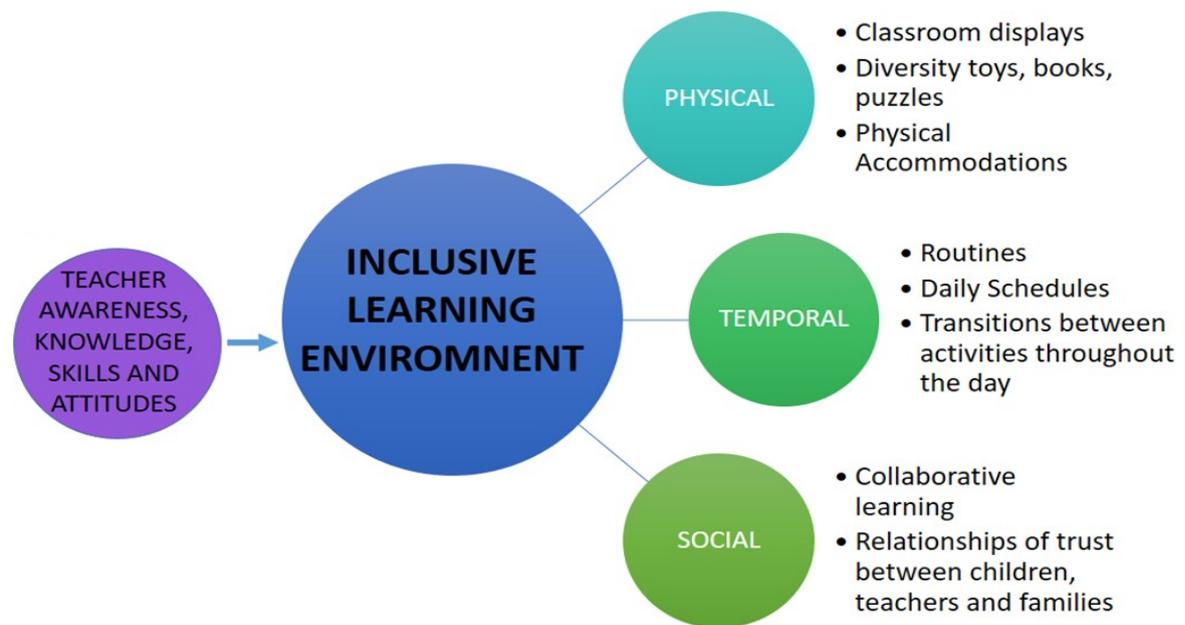
Figure 3.2 The components of an inclusive learning environment
(Source: Mistrett, 2017)

3.2.3.3.4 Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education

In keeping with the critical nature of this sector, the inclusion of diversities in the early learning environment has to be explored. The experiences of young children in early learning environments inform the most powerful lessons they learn, and these lessons are often outside the visible curriculum and are embedded in attitudes and values signalled by those experiences (Bath, 2009). Bath maintains that although difficult, these attitudes and values need to be examined by teachers and should be reflected upon when teachers design early pedagogical experiences. In addition, supporting diversity in early childhood programmes is beneficial by helping all children to feel good about themselves, their families, and their communities (Devarakonda, 2014). This entails allowing children exposure to differences, unfamiliar things, and experiences that surpass their present lives. Wardle also states that these experiences need to be real and concrete in early childhood programmes and

they need to challenge young children's stereotypical thinking continually. He further alludes to the fact that respect for diverse groups need to be consistent, not merely addressed as an add-on to the curriculum. Seeing that these early interactions have long-lasting ripple effects on development across the life course of children (Gadsden, Ford, & Breiner, 2016) teachers need to be cognisant of their attitudes to diversity, and issues of power and privilege among diverse children in the early learning environment. Whilst the issue of being inclusive is essential to address in early learning contexts, , due to the scarcity of South African research and scholarship, there is a critical need to create a knowledge base on inclusive learning environments in the South African ECCE milieu.

3.2.3.3.5 Global Movements for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education

In the United States of America, the work of Derman-Sparks (1989) demonstrates a social activist and human rights agenda in ECCE. The author encourages inclusive education through a process of diversity literacy and critical consciousness. This anti-bias movement arose from dissatisfaction with the multicultural education movement (Banks & Banks, 2012) in the late nineteen eighties, with a focus on the inclusion of children of diverse identities in an American kindergarten school, Pacific Oaks. The purpose of this approach was "to ensure equitable individual participation in all aspects of society and to enable people to maintain their own culture while participating together to live in a common society" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005, p.8). Reflecting on the anti-bias approach, Kissinger (2017) regards the movement as the "work of the human mind and spirit" (p.19). Kissinger also reports, that the anti-bias/anti-oppression journey begins with more than just transforming our early childhood classrooms but rather it is an approach that begins with the inner change of teachers. Five anti-bias learning goals for teachers which include the awareness of self-identity of the teacher and secondly a reflection on their personal feelings towards people who are different (Hong, 2017; Derman-Sparks, 2010). Thirdly, the teacher examines their level of privilege in terms of racism, sexism, religion, sexual orientation, class or ability. The fourth and fifth step is to become an activist for social justice and to create opportunities for discussion and dialogue around privilege, power and difference. The curriculum for children includes four goals including self-awareness, comfort with difference, and the ability to recognise unfairness and to act against it. The groundwork at the Pacific Oaks early learning centre makes a vital contribution to issues of inclusion of diversity in the ECCE context. It is noteworthy that the research of Derman-Sparks runs parallel to the philosophy outlined by Freire in chapter two of this thesis and may offer a significant guideline to South African ECCE teachers.

In Australia the Early Years Learning Framework (ELYF) (DEEWR, 2009), Framework for School Age Care (DEEWR, 2009) and the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and

Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011) outline a transparent commitment to an inclusive philosophy. The fourth principle 'respect for diversity' was one of the five principles that formed the basis for the framework. Although the EYLF does not use anti-bias education, the policies encourage inclusive worldviews with a transformative agenda in schools and society at large. Educational experiences provided to children reflect social and cultural relevance (Keengwe, 2010) and all teachers are required to implement Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice (Australian Government, 2018). This is an approach to teaching that is responsive to a diversity of student abilities. Cologon (2019) claimsthat these inclusive education policies demonstrate consistency with the CRPD and its central positioning of Article 24 of the CRPD that asks for phasing out of all forms of segregated education. The author states that despite these policy commitments of the Australian Government to inclusive education, from early childhood through to adulthood, segregation of children in specialist and mainstream schools is a continuing practice. Cologon also states that common misunderstandings ofinclusive education at official policy level have resulted in segregation being misrepresented as inclusion. Of particular concern to the author is the presenting of state 'inclusion' awards to segregated schools in Queensland and Victoria that has demonstrated the government's misunderstanding of *Article 24* of the CRPD. (Queensland Government, 2018, 2019; Victoria Government, 2018, 2017).

Besides issues in Australia, in the 1990s, inclusive education received attention in early childhood education in Korea due to the establishment of a more diverse Korean population (Seong, 1995). The *Multicultural Family Support Act* was passed in 2014 and subsequently there was the formation of centres for supporting multicultural families (Hong, 2017). In terms of ECCE, a study conducted by Kim (2010) examined preschool teachers' perceptions of anti-bias education using a questionnaire survey. Kim's study revealed that ECCE teachers perceived themselves to be inadequately trained for the growing diversity of children and highlighted the lack of training opportunities for these teachers. Following this study, Hong (2017) conducted a qualitative interview study to investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and teaching practices concerning inclusive practice in Seoul, South Korea. Teachers used the principles of the anti-bias curriculum, and the challenges they faced mostly resulted from a lack of knowledge, support systems, and time. Hong's findings suggest that policymakers should consider providing effective support systems for teachers, such as translation services, and resources needed to be developed to provide effective teacher education programmes.

The above global issues are worthy of attention. The anti-bias work of Derman-Sparks has glaring similarities to the conscientisation of critical pedagogy and the critical consciousness mentioned in chapter two. Derman-Sparks speaks of the importance of inclusion being an inner journey of

conscientisation (Freire, 2000) or personal awareness of diversity and the critical position of teachers as drivers of inclusion among the diverse children in their care. Similar to South African trends, the Australian policies on inclusive education are not totally realised, similar to the implementation of the *Education White Paper Six* in South Africa. In Korea, the need for greater in-service and pre-service training of teachers in diversity work is suggested for the creation of inclusive learning environments. Bearing these essential contextual considerations in mind, I now elaborate on the barriers to inclusive education.

3.2.3.4 BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Certain barriers have been identified as hindrances to realise the dream of the *Education White Paper Six.* Implementing an inclusive pedagogy is not clear cut and demands transformation to facilitate adjustments in the learning environment (Sharma, Loreman & Forlin, 2012). Moreover the Education White Paper Six (DoE, 2001a) itself, as well as the SIAS document (DBE, 2014) asserts that an inflexible curriculum serves as a significant barrier to achieving an inclusive education system in South Africa. Consistent with this, Nel (2018) states that flexibility in a curriculum promotes active and critical learners rather than traditional banking methods (Freire, 2000). Consequently, traditional methods like banking lack sensitivity to diversity issues such as poverty, race, gender, language, age, disability and other factors. Additionally, the centralised control of curriculum by the DBE has inevitably led to a lack of teacher agency (Ebrahim, Verbeek & Mashiya, 2011) and professional autonomy (Knoop, 2013) that results in teachers becoming passive deliverers of the curriculum.

Besides an inflexible curriculum in formal education (Hodgson & Khumalo, 2016; Mokaleng & Möwes. 2020; Motitswe, 2014; Nel, 2018; Zwane & Malale, 2018), poor attitudes to inclusion (Bornman & Donohue, 2014; Greyling, 2009; Hodgson & Khumalo, 2016; Maher, 2009; Mokaleng & Möwes, 2020; Pather, 2006; Pather, 2011; Tembo & Ainscow, 2001; Saloviita, 2020),overcrowded classrooms (Marais, 2016; McLeskey, Waldron, & Reddy, 2014; Zwane & Malale, 2018), poverty and inequality (Buck & Deutsch, 2014; Plagerson & Mthembu, 2019; Van der Berg et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2020; Zwane & Malale, 2018), language difficulties (Dreyer, 2017; Mudaly & Singh, 2018; Saneka & de Witt, 2019; Sibanda, 2017; Nel & Theron, 2008), poor support structures (Mkhuma, Maseko & Tlale, 2014; Nel et al., 2016; Ojageer, 2019), child abuse and violence (Humm, Kaminer, & Hardy, 2018), poor training of teachers (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, Koskela & Okkolin, 2017; Hong , 2017; Ozel, Ganesan, Daud, Darusalam & Al, 2018; Sánchez, de Haro-Rodríguez, & Martínez, 2019) and child-headed homes (Mthethwa, 2009; Phasha & Condy, 2016) are identified as barriers to the creation of inclusive learning environments. On a more positive note, research (Florian, 2010; Florian & Black-

Hawkins, 2011; Makoelle, 2012) concede that teacher attitude to inclusion improved with continuous and adequate support and training. Using both local and global research, I now contemplate on how inclusive learning environments have been created in ECCE (global) and in the formal education sector in South Africa.

3.2.3.5 Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

The previous section of the literature review addressed the first research question by exploring the current South African context of exclusion due to diversities and thus revealed a need for this study to create inclusive learning environments for the youngest members of society. The following section looks at how inclusive learning spaces have been created in formal education settings. As mentioned earlier, due to the informal nature of ECCE, there is a paucity of research on inclusion in the South African ECCE context. Global research primarily deals with inclusion in a narrow sense, focusing on children with disabilities (Ferreiraa, Mäkinenb & de Souza, 2018). Consequently, at times there is a need to relate practices from formal education sectors to the ECCE scenario. Hence the following sections draw from the formal sector and attempt to understand how inclusive learning environments are created. The literature pinpoints that teacher awareness needs to be raised in the first instance.. Then changes can be made to the curriculum, pedagogical approaches and teacher communication. The section also emphasises the social domain and valuing human relationships as part of moving towards inclusion.

3.2.3.5.1 Creating Awareness

It is important to reiterate that in ECCE, inclusive learning environments go beyond the scope of the physical space and the arrangement of learning corners or play areas and equipment. It is an environment designed by the teacher as a product of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills acquired. Earlier I distinguished between "surface inclusion led by policy, second level inclusion that focused on changes to environments and curricula, and deep level inclusion which restructures the hidden curriculum" (Corbett & Slee, 2000; Petriwskyj, 2010, p.1). Significantly teacher positioning towards diversity is pivotal in creating an inclusive learning environment. Negative attitudes to and stereotyping of differences are mentioned in the *White Paper Six* as a barrier to inclusion (DoE, 2001a). Hence the value and need to engage teachers in a critical reflection on their biases and their desire for pedagogically useful tools to engage with diversity issues (Francis & Hemson, 2007; Kumashiro, 2002). This deep level of inclusion strives to conscientise ECCE teachers to create a learning environment that welcomes and embraces diversity and difference as a strength.

In chapter two, the concept of conscientisation (Freire, 2000) was discussed as a theoretical underpinning of this research. The process of conscientisation allows awareness to emerge among teachers. Reygan et al. (2018) believes that the process of conscientisation allows teachers to engage with their own biases as this often impacts on classroom discourse that may perpetuate the exclusion of certain groups of children. Jansen (2009, p, 258) declares that a teacher is not

> "some empowered teacher who has figured out the problems of an unequal world and stands to dispense this wisdom to receiving students….the teachers are themselves carriers of troubled knowledge, and this has serious implications for critical education."

In this ECCE study, to gain a deep level of inclusion in the learning environment, teachers need to engage in a 'forced introspection' (Kiguwa, 2018) of ones' biases and stereotyping of people who are different. I propose that teachers' positive overt and covert responses are shaped by their attitudes to diversity, that are critical in creating inclusive learning spaces. I explore three notable studies that have successfully created this conscientisation in teachers towards diversity and difference.

Firstly, in a ground-breaking qualitative study at the University of Alabama by Petrovic and Rosiek (2003), a sample of fifteen pre-service teachers were asked about their initial feelings toward the inclusion of LGBTI+ in the school curriculum. These teachers then engaged in videos, articles and conversations about the inclusion of these marginalised groups. Following that, they engaged in guided reflection and dialogue that highlighted how heteronormative and heterosexual attitudes were habituated and deeply ingrained in their beliefs. The study also emphasised how these often unconscious beliefs shaped classroom practices and contributed to the hidden curriculum. This research further included specific ways to incorporate LGBTQI+ themes into the curriculum and to expose the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity and heterosexuality in the subject content. The study was noteworthy as it encouraged the engagement of pre-service teachers in reflection and dialogues about LGBTQI+ issues that addressed the "malignant silences as well as the espoused bigotry in their thinking" (p. 168). This study calls attention to the use of dialogue and reflection as a means of becoming conscious of sensitive issues relating to heteronormativity and heterosexuality as dominant discourses that silence the 'other'. Although this study centralised on gender and sexual diversity, the same type of teacher dialogues in the study are worth noting for the interrogation of teacher attitudes towards *other* diversities, including those of diverse language, culture, ability and socio-economic status. In the context of this study, this method of creating consciousness through dialogue and reflection may play a pivotal role in allowing ECCE teachers to engage openly with deeply inscribed habits of feeling and thinking determined by dominant societal ideologies.

Secondly, building on the above study a report by Moletsane, Hemson and Muthukrishna (2004) was based on a colloquium held by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This colloquium sought to foreground existing work and to stimulate new research on diversity issues in South African schools. The researchers provided several relevant case studies that indicated the acute difficulties experienced by schools around diversity issues. What is significant is that the case studies highlighted the complicated nature of engaging with diversity issues in education and the lack of preparedness among teachers to teach in diverse settings. The authors emphasise that teaching and learning can be detrimentally affected when power relations and various forms of oppressive behaviour are not addressed. Moletsane and her colleagues also proposed that these factors do not act alone but are interconnected and intersect, creating complexity in classrooms and this points to the need for a framework that encompasses an awareness of all forms of diversity and marginalisation. This study builds on the previous study that focused mainly on heteronormativity and calls for teachers to understand the complexity and interconnected nature of various diversities.

Thirdly, following the study by Moletsane et al., and considering their recommendations for a structure to create an awareness of diversity, Steyn (2015) spent a decade developing a framework based on Freire's concept of conscientisation (c.f. 2..2.2.3.5) . This 'reading practice,' which is historically aware, analyses the issues of power and privilege that intersect due to different diversities that interact with each other. Drawing from this framework, a South African study conducted by Kiguwa (2018) and her students uses photo essays to reflect on how social positionalities result in axes of oppression or privilege. The study followed steps where students were initially guided through content mastery, which involved developing a skill set to engage in knowledge production. Building on the foundation of content mastery, students were then able to analyse the intricacies of power to gain a deeper understanding of not only their contextual reality but an interrogation of their individual framing. Sound critical thinking thus resulted in effecting social change through action. Kiguwa's study resulted in the process of self-reflection that enabled a deeper understanding of how personal differential privileges and oppressions are enacted in the classroom. This resulted in a greater awareness of multicultural group dynamics and emphasised teaching methods that differed every semester according to the author's unique group of students. This study outlines how Kiguwa and the students re-imagined diversity as a process where personal reflections regarding difference, power, privilege and oppression allowed the pre-service teachers to re-engage in the classroom and the world uniquely. Although this study worked with pre-service teachers, it offers a valuable insight into how teachers could reflect on their perceptions of diversity and the impact of their own feelings on the concept of the 'other' in the classroom. This study is relevant as a similar strategy may be useful to interrogate

how ECCE teachers can be conscientised to develop an awareness of these underlying power issues that may lead to the oppression or privileging of the 'other' in the learning environment. The development of such awareness discussed above, no doubt, has implications for a teacher's classroom practice. Learning in the early years occurs informally through play-based pedagogies, and it is here that teachers may use opportune moments to embrace and welcome diversity.

3.2.3.5.2 A Pedagogy of Play

This conscientisation process mentioned above results in a greater awareness of inclusion that has an impact on a teacher's practice in the early years. In addition to self-awareness, early childhood teachers need to centralise learning around play (de Witt, 2021; Excell & Linington, 2015; Istianti, Abdillah & Ismail, 2019; Moodly, 2019; Pramling et al., 2019) rather than 'schoolification'. The term 'schoolification' represents discourses that focus on ECCE as a 'preschool' activity with goals to produce school readiness (Ebrahim et al., 2019; Ring, Sullivan & Wall, 2020), implying that ECCE has no legitimacy besides preparation for formal schooling. MRQECDE (DHET, 2017, p. 38) outlines ten knowledge and practice standards or core competencies found in South African ECCE qualifications. One of the required competencies is the planning and facilitating of learning through play and other transformative pedagogies. Consequently, play-based learning is an integral part of pedagogy in the early years (DBE, 2015) and has many benefits, including creating an inclusive learning environment. Ali, Constantino, Hussain and Akhtar (2018) claim that play is the intrinsic channel for young children to learn and to develop and that it affords children opportunities to traverse through varying roles relating to others and to exercise their understanding of the world.

The NCF (DBE, 2015) outlines the stages of play in babies, toddlers and young children based on the 1920's research by Mildred Parton in America. Parton maintained that as young children develop, their play becomes more complex and social, moving from solitary, spectator and parallel play to greater associative and cooperative play (de Witt, 2021; Moodly, 2019; Excell & Linington, 2015). When young children start to engage in cooperative fantasy play, they play out different roles and, in this way, they can express their experiences and impressions of the world (de Witt, 2021). MacNaughton (2003) believes that play often exposes power relationships between children, and each child's attitude to free participation is dependent on deeply entrenched attitudes about the 'other'. The author outlines in research that during play, imbalances in power relationships are caused by the interplay of various factors, including racism, sexism, homophobia and classism, for instance. Furthermore, Nutbrown et al. (2013) claim that young children are aware of the difference in their play, and it is the aim of early

childhood teachers to foreground diversity as something positive rather than negative. Consequently, play offers opportunities for children and teachers to embrace diversity and to challenge stereotypes.

Early Childhood teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to challenge inappropriate attitudes and practices demonstrated by children during play. Within the approach of a play-based pedagogy, play is planned and scaffolded by the teacher (Hardman, 2016). This means that the child is supported and challenged by the teacher who designs appropriate activities. Hence in this approach both are fully engaged in the play-based programme.

Wood (2009) endorses a blend of adult-directed and child-initiated activities, which emphasises planned and purposeful play. Similarly, Excell and Linington (2015) articulate that a pedagogy of play allows the teacher to become an active part of a playful process instead of merely overseeing children's play. So, if children are engaged in stereotypical behaviour, the attitudes underpinning this behaviour needs to be pointed out during opportune moments (Excell & Linington, 2015; MacNaughton, 2003; Nutbrown et al., 2013). Through active observation, dialogue, careful selection of language and self-reflection, the teacher may be able to identify teachable moments creating a more definite role in the learning environment.

Conversely, the concern is raised that these instances of teacher-facilitated play may refute the very nature of play which needs to be uninterrupted, autonomous and intrinsic. Therefore Wood (2009) suggests that future research needs to ascertain how free play needs to be balanced with purposeful play where the teacher mediates and co-constructs knowledge. The author suggests that future research needs to interrogate the concept of a pedagogy of play and how to facilitate opportunities for both learning and teaching in early childhood settings. Thus, attaining this balance results in an ECCE learning environment that welcomes diversity and minimises stereotyping and bias. Play also allows a greater opportunity for teachers to adopt a participatory pedagogy.

3.2.3.5.3 A Participatory Pedagogy

Not only do play activities allow young children to make sense of their worlds, but play offers teachers an opportunity to use a participatory pedagogy in the early learning environment. Participatory pedagogy (de Sousa, Loizou, & Fochi, 2019; Meyer, 2018; Simmons, Barnard & Fennema, 2011) or pedagogy in participation (Oliveira-Formosinho & Barros Araújo, 2011), participatory learning (Excell & Linington, 2015) or participatory democracy (Linington, Excell & Murris, 2011) uses principles from critical pedagogy. These approaches promote respect for diversity in ECCE. The philosophy of participatory pedagogy resonates with the work of Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* outlined in

chapter two (2000). Therefore, the teacher uses dialogue and a problem-posing approach in the classroom, which discourages passive 'banking' methods. Linington, Excell and Murris (2011) remark that participatory pedagogy challenges early childhood teachers to enable the child's voice to be heard and to advance the participation of the child as a thinker. The authors state that this often challenges the role of teachers to take up new dimensions as "co-enquirers, democrats, guides and listeners" (2011, p.36).

Thus, educational change and participatory pedagogy are central to inclusion as these challenge power imbalances and seek to provide equitable learning and participation for all groups of learners (Ainscow, 2005; Slee, 2006; Liasidou, 2007, 2015; Armstrong & Barton, 2008). Giroux (2009) declared that educational settings represent social and political sites involved in the struggle for democracy. Liasidou (2015) proposes that central to inclusion is the creation of a participatory ethos characterised by the values of collegiality, equality of opportunity, and democratic decision-making. The author adds that inclusion prioritises the enactment of socially just, participatory and equitable forms of schooling. For a truly inclusive learning environment, participatory pedagogy can radically transform educational settings resulting in social change due to a heightened awareness of the power relations and inequalities in the classroom. Simpson (2018) believes that participatory pedagogy operates on the basis of principles of equity, equality and co-agency in institutions of learning, with ripple effects across wider society. When using a participatory pedagogical approach, children take ownership of their learning and demonstrate a sense of belonging and a feeling of inclusion in ECCE settings. Participation is central to inclusion as a democratic right, which promotes educational change due to the full involvement of all children (Dickins, 2014). This study strives to understand how ECCE teachers are able to adopt the principles of participatory pedagogy in the attempt to create an inclusive learning environment within the South African ECCE context.

Participatory pedagogy facilitates classroom practice that embraces learner diversity and that welcomes all groups into the ECCE learning environment, which Freire describes as 'cultural synthesis'. Similarly, Delpit (2006) coined the term 'responsive teaching', and the author's research showed that learners must be able to connect the school with their lived experiences. Delpit claims that teachers need consistently to create activities where students' lives are brought into the classroom and connections are made between their lives and the content being taught. For example, a study by Gunn et al. (2020) emphasises the importance of children seeing people who look like them in the books that they read. The authors describe the excitement of a young Mexican boy who comes across a book about a piñata and shows immediate interest in reading it. Oemig and Baptiste (2018) argue

that this practice validates children's prior knowledge and makes new concepts easier to understand. Hence, in the ECCE learning environment, these participatory approaches ensure that learning experiences fit into the child's life experiences. Deep learning takes place when children make connections between the school curriculum and their lived experiences. The following section explores the role of curriculum in promoting inclusive learning environments.

3.2.3.5.4 The Curriculum of the Early Years

An inclusive education curriculum must be innovative and flexible, emphasising the need to cater for individual needs and strengths (Badza & Chakuchichi, 2000; DoE, 2001a; Makoelle, 2012; Mpofu & Molosiwa, 2017; Ojageer, 2019; Phasha & Condy, 2016). The NCF (DBE, 2015) is driven by a transformative agenda that foregrounds equity, diversity and the indigenous African experience that the children in South Africa can identify with (DBE, 2015). The framework highlights six Early Learning Development Areas (ELDAs) that are integrated with the three themes and twelve principles that organise children's development and learning opportunities. The NCF states emphatically that these are merely guidelines for observation and planning of the early learning programme, taking into cognisance that all children are unique in their individual learning needs. Therefore, the activities are not prescriptive and offer a great deal of flexibility to ECCE teachers. Additionally, the NCF focuses on learning as well as on personal and social competencies required throughout life. The NCF also emphasises that the needs of little children are different from children in formal schools and that the curriculum must promote development in all areas (DBE, 2015). As recommended by scholars, a holistic approach focusing on all aspects of the child's development, including health promotion, affective, physical, social and cognitive aspects of development (Atmore, 2018; Fadlillah, 2019; Moodly, 2019) are outlined by the ELDAs in the NCF. The *Education White Paper Six* also outlines that central to the accommodation of diversity in our schools and early childhood learning centres, is a flexible curriculum and assessment policy that is accessible to all learners, despite differences in their learning needs. Curricula create a significant barrier to learning for many and the most effective way of addressing barriers arising from the curriculum is to ensure flexibility to accommodate different learning needs and styles (DoE, 2001a; Makoelle, 2012).

Besides flexibility, curriculum content needs to be underpinned by inclusive values. Zakin (2012) demonstrates the importance of curriculum content in the creation of an inclusive early learning environment. In the author's study, through the use of artistic exploration, children were taught to value their identities and differences in relation to their peers. The study revealed that children are aware of differences from a young age but their observations are free from value judgements. These value

judgements occur later. The author also claims that social justice incorporates the ability to treat others with fairness, even if that means putting others' needs before one's own. This study outlined effective ECCE activities that involved the mixing of skin tones to paint hands, reading children's literature representing diverse groups and learning about different traditions. Hence the ECCE teacher should be able to adapt the curriculum to the diversity of the current group and inclusion needs to be a consideration in all activities. Dickins (2014) alludes that these values of tolerance and social justice are often absent in the curricula of exclusionary settings. In inclusive learning environments, the curriculum needs consistently to promote the inclusion of diversity from a young age.

3.2.3.5.5 Terminology and the Language of Inclusion

Following the development of teacher awareness, I discussed play-based and participatory pedagogical practices and a curriculum that creates an inclusive learning environment. Besides these, how teachers speak in class and how language and terminology is used, is salient in creating inclusive spaces (Makoelle, 2020). The words teachers use, and how these words are used have a critical impact on children. In line with this, Makoelle (2020, p. 2) proposes that language is a socio-cultural artefact "that has an impact on how people would make meaning of and interpret their interactive situations." Steyn (2015) advocates for the ability to develop a 'diversity grammar' that enables teachers to address diversity correctly, and ultimately to create inclusive learning spaces. She also contends that the ability of teachers to speak confidently and to engage with issues of power and privilege in relation to diversity, is essential in navigating difficult conversations. The author also comments that "power never names itself as such" (p. 386) and hegemonic practices are often implicit, resulting in the exclusion of certain groups. Consistent with this, language and vocabulary used, is more than an expression of reality, but serves as a bedrock for systems of power (Giroux, 1981) that are not often discernible by the speaker but serve to "co-opt, contain and curtail oppositional discourses" (Steyn, 2015, p. 386) that contribute to the overall agenda of exclusion.

These instances of hegemony compounded by language was elucidated in a study by Schneider and Hacker (1973) where university students were asked to interpret the notion of 'sex role imagery' from pictures, cartoons, illustrations, advertisements, and photographs taken from magazines and newspapers. The study concluded that female students felt excluded by the generic use of the word *man* that was seen as a means to reinforce and perpetuate male dominance in society. Similar studies on the generic uses of 'he' by Mackay (1980), Moulton, Robinson and Elias, (1978) and Stout and Dasgupta (2011) revealed similar findings that excluded people of feminine gender. This use of

language for gender exclusion was also extended to other marginalised identities e.g. disability (Ben-Moshe, 2005) racism (Bonnilla-Silva, 2006) and homophobia (Takács, 2006).

Another key point is that the selection of certain historically used language and terminology is inherently exclusive when examined closely (Makoelle, 2020). Makoelle (2015) outlines two examples of these; the use of the word 'dis*ability* 'and the use of the phrase '*special needs'*. Makoelle states that disability is a social construct that implies that disabled people lack ability. Makoelle contests the use of the term special needs as it singles out children and negates that *all* children have unique and special needs. Also of significance, McDevit (2018) states that the use of people's -first language reinforces that a person is a unique individual with their own set of characteristics. The author states that people with different abilities don't want their disability to become their main identifier. For example, when addressing a child diagnosed with autism, it is suitable to say 'a child diagnosed with autism' instead of the 'autistic child'. Therefore in the ECCE context, to be truly inclusive, teachers need to rigorously and continuously examine their use of language as "language not only expresses ideas and concepts but actually shapes thought" (Moore, 1976, p. 166). It is crucial that teachers interrogate language usage and become aware of how language may covertly or overtly alienate and ostracise groups thus creating and reinforcing the 'other' in early learning environments.

3.2.3.5.6 Relationship Building

Early educational settings are not simply buildings or educational institutions, but rather spaces where relationships are built through interactions between people (Booth et al., 2006; Cologon, 2019; Jones, 2004; Nutbrown et al., 2013). Veritably De Witt (2021) explains that the early years setting plays an important role in community building, as it is the initial contact between home and school. Consistent with this, Dickins (2014) suggests that everyone should feel welcome with parents and members of the local community becoming involved in the activities of the setting. The author also states that staff need to promote inclusive values collectively with high expectations for all children. Relationships between adults and adults, children and children, as well as adults and children need to be positive where discrimination is curtailed (Jones, 2004; Booth et al., 2006). Gunn et al. (2020) state that the demonstration of care in building relationships goes deeper than just concrete acts like providing snacks or a hug. Aligned with inclusive communication, it also means listening to and engaging in dialogue with the child. The authors (p.4-5) also state that "caring requires that teachers truly know the children in their classroom as well as knowing about their parents (caregivers) and the communities they are in now, as well as any communities they may have come from." The building of responsive relationships is critical for developing an inclusive ECCE centre.

Several studies allude to the fact that relationships of trust and affection create a positive and inclusive classroom environment. Studies by Santos, Longobardi, Pasta, Sardinha, and Gastaldi, (2010) claim that positive relationships between children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their teachers led to a greater degree of peer acceptance, than children who had poor relationships with their teachers. Similarly, studies on preschool children by Howes, Hamilton and Matheson (1994) revealed that prosocial behaviour and withdrawing behaviour toward peers were associated with the quality of the relationship with the teacher. Similar studies by Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) and Santos, Sardinha and Reis (2016) on preschool children emphasised how relationship building contributes to academic success and a classroom climate of belonging and inclusion.

Keeping the above in mind, Kissinger (2017) in her writings on anti-bias, asserts that teachers are liberated by creating inclusive thinking for themselves, the children and other adults in the lives of young children. Kissinger also emphasises that it is not the place of teachers to 'fix' people as the exploration of inclusion of diversity is an internal and personal journey. I therefore concur that ECCE is the foremost space where relationships are built and it is critical that difference is embraced by creating an environment of mutual respect and dignity for all role-players. For the purpose of this research, I seek to ascertain how relationships are built among different role-players in ECCE centres, and how these relationships contribute to the creation of an inclusive learning environment. The following section explores why we need to create inclusive learning environments. I shall explore what current research has indicated regarding the benefits of inclusion.

3.3 THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

A substantial amount of research evidence that proposes benefits of inclusion in the narrow sense, pertaining to the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has been published (Cologon, 2020; Hehir et al., 2016; Kart & Kart, 2021; Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Karwowski, 2017). Research on children with disability or learning barriers placed in inclusive learning environments has indicated benefits for children with learning barriers and 'regular children'. However, inclusion within the narrow sense deviates from my study as I seek to understand inclusion as a human rights initiative adopting a social justice perspective. This agenda of Inclusive Education aims to improve the world with people becoming more civilised towards the 'other' and where:

> *"civilization is the process in which one gradually increases the number of people included in the term 'we' or 'us' and at the same time decreases those labelled 'you' or 'them' until that category has no one left in it"* (Grossman, 2008, p. 35).

In the above quotation the notion of inclusion appears to be simple and justified, as a means of improving relationships between people who are deemed to be different. These groups are excluded due to deeply entrenched ideologies of society.

An inclusive approach therefore aims to acknowledge and interrogate the issues of power and privilege related to diversity and to remove stereotyping and bias from our learning environments in ECCE. Besides developing countries like South Africa, many western countries (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 2015) grapple with issues of inequity and bias towards marginalised, minority groups. The Derman-Sparks and Edwards write:

> *"Inequity of resources in society, and the biases we use to justify that inequity, have an enormous impact on children's lives. The dynamics of advantage and disadvantage, deeply rooted in our history, continue to shape the degree of access children have to education, medical care, security"* (p. 11).

In addition, Ebrahim et al. (2019) allude that the early years are crucial and that interventions early in a child's life are most effective in improving outcomes and life chances. Consequently, teaching children early about differences "secures maximum impact and greatest long- term sustainability" Dickins (2014, p. 50). In addition, Levin (2008) states that teachers have a critical function to shape children's thoughts regarding difference. Children are no doubt aware of difference from an early age but significant adults are responsible for developing positive attitudes. She asserts that children learn to have a solid self-identity and to stand up for themselves and others in the face of injustice. She further claims that this will assist children to develop the strategies they need to break the cycle of violence and injustice against those who are vulnerable, and to create a peaceful society in the future. For children to develop into caring members of society where diversity is valued, the foundational work needs to be laid early in life and inclusion can be used as a base to develop social identity, a sense of citizenship, human rights and transformation to a more peaceful world for all.

3.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I engaged with literature that clarified the concepts of exclusion, diversity and inclusion. I also used these concepts to inform my research questions and identify a need for this research. I saw a need *firstly* to understand the concepts of exclusion and to gain a complete conceptualisation of what does not constitute inclusion. I outlined segregation as an explicit macro-exclusion that entails a separate location for those who are deemed as 'unfit' or 'other'. In addition, micro-exclusion, a more insidious exclusion, is often misconstrued as inclusion. For instance, micro-exclusive practices of integration, assimilation and celebration call for a deeper inclusion that values individuality and for a

rejection of tokenism. This is significant because the mere presence of diversity in an ECCE centre, does not guarantee inclusion. Hence exclusion is not an issue of location, as those who are present in settings may still be excluded.

Secondly, I looked at diversity as complex and intersectional as groups of people may be classified into multiple identity categories. Consequently, I placed emphasis on the South African ECCE context and drew on diversity in race, language, gender, socio-economic status and ability that may result in 'othering'. This chapter also highlighted the need for diversities to be welcomed and valued as a rich resource, in a process Freire distinguishes as 'cultural synthesis'. *Thirdly* in this chapter, I also outline the concept of inclusion as a process of welcoming all groups of children to our ECCE centres. I also described inclusive education as a system that ensures access, participation, achievement and respect for all groups in our centres. A historical trajectory of inclusive education in local and global contexts, revealed to me the mobilisation of an inclusive agenda in local and global educational contexts. Since inclusion is context dependent, I explored ECCE and common issues that prevail in the sector. One vital finding was the lack of attention and funding given to this sector by the South African government. The review also revealed a paucity of research in the South African ECCE milieu and a need to explore the current ECCE situation regarding the inclusion of diversities. This is mainly due to the lack of formalisation and professionalisation of this sector, where teachers are given the status of mere nannies and caregivers.

I further deliberated on the various methods to create inclusive learning environments using research from the formal education sector as well as international ECCE research. From this review, I identified a clear gap in the South African ECCE context with regard to how teachers create inclusive learning spaces in ECCE. From the literature that I surveyed it is clear that there is a lack of research studies using participatory methodologies where there is a collaborative exploration of inclusion. Further to this, studies on inclusion often focus on learners experiencing barriers and disability. This study is unique as inclusion adopts a broad perspective that requires a re-evaluation of teacher values and beliefs that embraces *all* diversity. This review describes inclusion as a process of unlearning and relearning and calls for awareness of our own bias toward those we consider as 'other'. Thus, inclusion is deep-rooted and more than just a set of mechanical practices for the ECCE teacher. This teacher awareness facilitates learning environments where teachers and children will welcome diversity. Within this inclusive learning environment, , individual needs should be met, and every student should have an opportunity to succeed. Finally, I explored the benefits of inclusion as an early intervention

to create a more fair and equitable social order. From various studies I deduced that inclusion serves as a benefit to *all* children and to society at large.

As the researcher, I found the exploration of this chapter an uncomfortable process of becoming more aware of my personal feelings towards the inclusion of groups of people. To continue with this research, I needed to examine my own bias and my stereotyping of people I considered as 'other'. This was an awakening as I could also identify my own privilege and how it impacted on my attitudes towards diverse groups. To continue with this research, I had to remind myself of *'aikyam'* a Sanskrit word that alludes to the unification of all beings. This idea was born from the Maha Upanishad, an ancient Indian text, considered to be the highest Vedanthic thought integral to Hindu philosophy. Hence firstly, I need to embrace this philosophy of oneness and inclusion of all people, into my personal life as this would underpin my future interactions in my research agenda.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter engaged with literature that I found relevant to the topic of this research. The literature review initially clarified the concepts of exclusion, diversity and inclusion in the Early Childhood Care and Education milieu. The chapter also outlined an historical account of inclusive education in local and global contexts as well as literature pertinent to the research questions. In this chapter, the questions of research paradigm, research approach, research design, data generation and sampling are addressed. In my study: *An Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education: A PALAR study,* I attempt to answer the following critical questions:

- What is the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE?
- How do we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE?
- Why do we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE the way we do?

To do this, I adopted a qualitative research approach and used a PALAR design that was propelled by a critical emancipatory research paradigm. In chapter one, I presented an introduction to the research methodology. However, in this chapter, I intend to provide a more detailed exploration of the key concepts. Table 4.1 illustrates the relevant aspects that this chapter explores:

Table 4.1 Outline of research methodology

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	
RESEARCH PARADIGM	Critical Emancipatory Research
RESEARCH APPROACH	Qualitative Approach
RESEARCH DESIGN	PALAR
CO-RESEARCHERS (RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS)	6 ECCE Teachers 2 ECCE Teacher Trainers
INSTRUMENTATION	Baseline Checklist Reflective Drawings

	Reflective Journals
	Purposeful Conversations
	Photovoice

4.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Paradigms are frameworks that guide researchers in identifying and clarifying their beliefs regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, ethics, and methodology (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell 2018; Kamal, 2019; Mertens, 2010). Chapter two defined the concepts of ontology, epistemology and axiology in terms of critical theory. Similar to critical theory, the ontological assumptions of critical emancipatory research indicate that reality is socially constructed; however, truth is established from more than just critiquing the social world. It is through a process of reflection and action prompted by the factors that could foster or impede transformation that results in the establishment of truth (Freire, 2000). Epistemologically, as with critical theory, knowledge is valid if it can be turned into practice or mobilisation and empowerment of people's lives through a process of 'collective meaning-making' between the co-researchers and the researchers. Hence, epistemic democracy (McAteer & Wood, 2018; Rothstein, 2019; Schwartzberg, 2015) is acknowledged, where not all esteemed knowledge comes from academics or researchers, as practitioners also offer a wealth of knowledge. The axiological assumptions in accordance with critical theory emphasise principles of democracy, social justice, human rights and transparency in research. Table 4.2 provides a brief summary of these assumptions.

4.2.1 Critical Emancipatory Research

Researchers concur that critical emancipatory research serves as an umbrella term for a participatory research perspective that seeks to benefit the participants (Noel, 2016; Mahlomaholo, 2009; Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018; Behar-Horenstein & Feng, 2015). Conventional research does not always transform people's lives, nor does it lead to the relative freedom of the participants. Conversely, traditional research can be intrusive, extractive and self-serving (Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018). Critical emancipatory research, however, is conducted to promote social justice and to rearrange the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched (Behar-Horenstein & Feng, 2015). Consequently Noel (2016) assumes that this framework reflects that there are multiple realities and that knowledge is not only created by an 'elite' researcher. Nkoane (2012, p.99) therefore contends that

> *"the researcher and the participants are interested in transforming their social stations to foster and advance democracy, liberation, equity and social justice in a manner that meets the methodological expectations of both the researcher and the participants."*

Hence from the preceding discussion I can conclude that critical emancipatory research aims not merely to gather or to critique knowledge, but to transform and empower a marginalised sector of the population. The participants are co-researchers who improve their skills by actively participating in their own learning and by producing knowledge in a transparent and democratic manner. Critical emancipatory research has its origins in critical theory which underpins the study as a theoretical framework (chapter 2).

Table 4.2 Summary of the philosophical assumptions of critical emancipatory research Source: Author

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE CRITICAL EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH PARADIGM	
Ontological Assumptions	Reality is socially constructed. We understand the world through the experiences of people in relation to each other (Wood, 2019). Truth arises from more than just critiquing the social world rather it arises through reflection and action upon the factors that could foster or impede transformation (Freire, 1970).
Epistemological Assumptions	Knowledge is true if it can be turned into practice or transform and liberate the lives of people (Wood, 2019). CER seeks to gain knowledge through a process of collective meaning making (Zuber-Skerrit & Wood, 2011). Encourages "epistemic democracy"(McAteer & Wood, 2018)
Axiological Assumptions	Democracy Transparency Participation / Inclusion / Transparency
Methodological Implications	Participatory Plan, act, observe and reflect cycles Benefits all members of the ALS

Building on the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School it was Habermas who supplemented critical theory by building on the inadequacies of Horkeimer, Marcuse and Ardorno. Dube (2016, p. 20) remarks that

> "Habermas added a new dimension to the Frankfurt School, focusing on the reduction of the suffering of people through the concept of emancipation. More importantly, he began to interrogate power structures embedded in society towards the emancipation of people affected by coercion and by general problems of society."

The concept of emancipation has a two-fold relevance for my study. I seek firstly to emancipate learners who are excluded and marginalised within ECCE centres and secondly to redress social attitudes towards a disparaged group of teachers in this sector. To foster a deeper understanding of critical emancipatory research, I find it pertinent to probe into the principles that govern critical emancipatory research.

4.2.2 The Principles of Critical Emancipatory Research

The following section highlights the tenets of critical emancipatory research that allows research to be a "humanising experience and one from which the researcher emerges more human, more humane, more cautious, more respecting and more open-minded to signals and messages coming from a very diverse list of sources" (Mahlomaholo, 2009, p. 225). Although flexible and fluid, as declared by Dube (2016), critical emancipatory research has common guiding principles. Noel (2016) clarifies that some of the key principles of this research paradigm are openness, participation, accountability, empowerment and reciprocity. Nkoane (2012) similarly maintains that critical emancipatory research seeks to promote social justice and democratic citizenship with the aim of showing respect to the participants thus enhancing humanity, social values and equity. Dube and Hlalele (2017) in their study on using critical emancipatory research to mitigate school violence, state that the principles of critical emancipatory research not only aim for social justice and social transformation but the need to eliminate false consciousness. In addition to these, Dube (2016) mentions improving the human condition and emancipation as other essential tenets of critical emancipatory research. The five principles outlined by Dube (2016) inform this research and justify critical emancipatory research as a research paradigm for this PALAR study. In the following sections I will address these five principles that are relevant for my study.

4.2.2.1 Emancipation

Marxist thought had a profound influence on the concept of emancipation. Historically, emancipation was a concept in the ancient Roman legal terminology where the performance of a ritual enabled a

son to be released from the overall authority of the father (Nicholas, 2015). Later in the early writings of Karl Marx the self-emancipation of the proletariat class was a central theme of his political thoughts. Marx stated that:

> *"every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself. Human emancipation will only be complete when the real individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (forces propres) as social powers so that he no longer separated his social power from himself as political power* (Tucker, 1978, p.46).*"*

For Marx, human emancipation entailed more than just individual empowerment. It also involved a profound spiritual experience of becoming a '*species being'* as an agent to uplift the community around him or her. This resonates with my study as teachers working with children who have diverse needs, have a responsibility to raise themselves above their own subjective individualities and to seek solutions to promote the basic human rights of minorities or marginalised groups of children within their communities.

Following Marx, the concept of emancipation further evolved into a key tenet of critical theory in the 1960s. This followed Habermas' inaugural lecture on *Knowledge and human interests*, where the critical sciences were defined as emancipatory. For Habermas "emancipation is a cyclical process involving progressive realizations and developments of humanity over time" (Broniak, 1988, p. 195). This cyclical process, according to the latter, examined "four transitional phases of the emancipation process: from domination to exploitation; from exploitation to alienation; from alienation to liberation; and from liberation to emancipation" (p. 195). In addition, Dube (2016) declares that emancipation occurs in a context where domination is prevalent. The author defines domination as a phenomenon that retards growth, novelty and sustainable solutions to human problems in society.

Emancipatory research is an approach to research inquiry that allows for those who were previously minoritised and 'researched' to assert themselves (Behar-Horenstein & Feng, 2015). Consequently, critical emancipatory research has a political agenda; to liberate the oppressed who are unable to achieve this on their own. (Chidarikire, 2017, p. 30). However, people can only become emancipated and improve their circumstances if they are provided with an arena that affords them opportunities to raise their voices (Moleko, 2014). Essentially, then 'emancipation' involves releasing people to exercise power over their life and for them to realise their own potential. The question arises as to how this impacts on the Early Childhood Care and Education context.

Thus, in this study, one of my values as a researcher is to give equal voice to the various role players in my study irrespective of their education, position, or cultural identity. The sector constitutes an undervalued and marginalised portion of the education workforce, with qualifications at National Qualifications Framework levels 4 and 5 (Ebrahim et al., 2013). I created a platform where my participants should have been able to communicate freely without fear or judgement. Ultimately all participants' inputs were valued concerning creating an inclusive learning environment for a diverse group of children. Throughout the various research processes of data gathering and interpretation, transparency was promoted. Therefore, all role players in this study were given the opportunity to be part of transformation, hence challenging the status quo regarding inclusive practices. In the following section I look at critical emancipatory research and the principle of transformation.

4.2.2.2 Transformation

The principal of transformation lies at the core of this study, the SDG4 goals, inclusion and the ECCE sector. In 2015, during the World Education Forum, the agenda for sustainable development, recognised education to play a fundamental role in the realisation of their transformative goals to eradicate poverty by 2030. This ambitious target could be achieved by ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, with prominence given to ECCE. As a result, ECCE is currently being targeted as South Africa's means of social and economic transformation as proposed by the Sustainable Development Goals. (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 2014; SDG Compass, 2018; UNESCO, 2018; UNESCO, 2000; Unterhalter, 2019). Hence, the principal of transformation is relevant to this study on inclusion, as I sought to transform the lives of the ALS and the lives of the children in their care.

Historically, Marx noted that philosophers interpreted the world in various ways but made little effort to change it (Tucker, 1978). However Marx was not regarding philosophy as irrelevant but rather he emphasised that philosophical problems arise from real-life conditions. Consequently, these problems can be solved by changing conditions and by transforming society (Tucker, 1978). Habermas concurred with Marx that the purpose of this critical stance was not merely to comprehend situations, power and phenomena but to enable transformation by reducing inequality. Significantly, critical emancipatory research aims at praxis whereby the insights gained through critical reflection are used to effect change or to improve the action. This idea of transformation is vital as administration of the current ECCE sphere is in the process of migration from the Department of Social Development to the DBE. As a result of this, many South African Higher Education Institutions are being mobilised to

develop programmes to professionalise this sector (Ebrahim et al., 2018). It is an area of current attention and rapid change.

Similarly, on a more personal level, I found that this study precipitated my inner transformation, especially regarding my awareness of inequality and injustices towards people from minority groups. This inner transformation also allowed me to approach my research with a greater sense of epistemic justice. Essentially, drawing from my personal transformation, this paradigm could guide researchers to "prioritise social justice and the furtherance of human rights" for the participants (Mertens, 2010, p. 469). In the following section, I examine the principle of social justice.

4.2.2.3 Social Justice

There are varied definitions of social justice in different contexts. The general definition is that individuals and groups should receive non-discriminatory treatment and an equitable share of the benefits of society (Hemphill, 2015). Social justice research challenges science to democratise and to contribute meaningfully to overcoming unjust conditions and discrimination (Peñaranda, Vélez-Zapata & Bloom, 2013). Markedly, Sandel (2009) states that social justice decisions are moral decisions. These moral standards therefore refer to conduct regarding what may establish acceptable human behaviour. Social justice and morality share a common thread of furthering human rights and freedom from discrimination for all.

The principle of social justice also resonates with Freire's critical pedagogy. Consequently, critical emancipatory research is "opposed to any classroom practices that undermine the rights of students" (Nkoane, 2011, p.113-114). In other words, in light of social justice, a particular focus on the critical pedagogy principles of dialogue and dialectic voice needs to be maintained. This dialogue between the teacher and child equalises power relationships and enables epistemic justice. As mentioned in earlier chapters, teachers need to be 'conscientised' regarding democracy and transformation to embrace diversity and to attain social justice (Freire, 1974). Essentially, for teachers to facilitate social justice, there needs to be an awareness of unjust practices that exclude children who have diverse needs. In ECCE settings, an inclusive learning environment entails equal opportunities and access for all learners, irrespective of race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, trauma, learning styles or disability (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2016).The exclusion of minority groups of children with disabilities, language, race, gender and socio-economic barriers represents a disregard for social justice. In the next section, I look at the principle of elimination of false consciousness.

4.2.2.4 Elimination of False Consciousness

Historically the enlightenment era in Europe was dominated by the philosophical work of Rene Descartes, who famously articulated the maxim 'cogito, ergo sum - I think, therefore I am' (Hardman, 2016). "Engels and Marx opposed this by stating that ideas came from somewhere and claimed that one does not get them out of nowhere, independent of place and time, by the sheer power of one's brain. They, therefore, advocated that ideas and knowledge arise as the result of changing social conditions" (Van Zoonen, 2017, p. 4). Van Zoonen further clarifies that to Marx and Engels, the idea of false consciousness meant having the mistaken notion that ideas exist without a social basis, while later they concluded that false consciousness comprised having the incorrect ideas due to one's membership of the ruling class. Crossman (2019a) declares that false consciousness is a view of oneself as an individual entity engaged in competition with others of one's social standing rather than as part of a group with allied goals. False consciousness is then a means of maintaining the status quo, preventing the ability of groups or individuals from critiquing and resisting oppressive regimes of power. Cohen et al. (2018) conclude that false consciousness brings an individual or society to a state of power or powerlessness, and we need to question the legitimacy of this.

In education, hegemonic practices include endeavours by a dominant class to obtain control through the education system (Moodley, 2012).Thus the agenda of critical emancipatory research is to examine and interrogate how schools perpetuate or reduce inequality. Through resources, games, displays, books and curricula schools determine dominant ideologies and which knowledge is worthwhile (Cohen et al., 2018). Through this PALAR study, stakeholders in ECCE were engaged as a community in democratic discourse regarding inclusion. Since consciousness is a process of awareness influenced by social interaction and reflection, teachers should be conscientised regarding democracy and transformation within the classroom. The principle of elimination of false consciousness in this study on inclusion challenges assigning hierarchical values to people, whereby some are considered more notable than others (Carrington, Mercer, Iyer & Selva, 2015).

4.2.2.5 Improving Human Lives

In emancipatory research, the research belongs to the researched (Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018). Research is attuned to the needs of the people being researched, enhancing the validity and relevance of the study (Bangdiwala, Villaveces, Garrettson & Ringwalt, 2012; Cook, 2008; Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018) as well as the quality of their lives. Habermas constructs his definition of valuable knowledge around three cognitive interests (Cohen et al., 2018). According to the authors, the theorist named these the technical, the practical and the emancipatory interests respectively. Habermas declares

that the emancipatory interest subsumes the two prior paradigms, where the first two are requirements, but the third goes beyond them. According to Habermas the dual purpose of this paradigm is to expose the operation of power and to bring about social justice as domination and repression, do not lead to the improvement of human lives (Cohen et al., 2018).

This study concerns itself with the improvement of the lives of the ECCE role-players in my study. In the South African ECCE context teachers remain a vastly 'unprofessionalised' sector due to a lack of training and widespread funding constraints (Aubrey, 2017; Kuhne & Fakie, 2019; Moodly, 2019). The principle of critical emancipatory research will guide this study as it should improve the position of my co-researchers, who are developing skills, values and acquiring knowledge to uplift themselves and others in their field. With the publication of a handbook based on this study, valuable knowledge from the ALS will be cascaded to the sector. The pivotal point of this study is to look at the interests and context of the co-researchers and to improve their lives as well as others in the sector. Furthermore, inclusion should lead to improvement in the lives of children from vulnerable groups. Inclusion should allow for consideration to be given to the child's best interests by all responsible parties, including government officials, principals, teachers, and parents (Martinez, 2019). The following section explores the qualitative research approach that I used for this study.

4.3 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

The above discussion on the research paradigm impacted on my selection of a research approach. This study was prompted by a critical emancipatory research paradigm, an ontological assumption of multiple realities, and collective knowledge acquisition that demonstrates coherence with qualitative approaches. Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) allude to the fact that this approach assists in an exploration and understanding of the unique meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Additionally, emphasis on the research context is highlighted in qualitative research approaches (Mzimela, 2017). Therefore using a qualitative approach allows me to understand the meaning people construct and "how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

Qualitative researchers typically use non-statistical methods and a wide variety of methodologies to answer questions that positivism is ill-equipped to answer (Prasad, 2018; Yin, 2018). The authors also state that a vast array of data collection and analysis methods together with a variety of theoretical orientations pervade this approach. Additionally, this approach is flexible and unique, and continues to change throughout the research process with no prescribed steps to follow (Neethling, 2015). Similarly, Ramson (2015) believes that in contrast to a quantitative approach where the research aims

to determine cause and effect or to predict and to generalise results, qualitative research seeks to assimilate a certain phenomenon in a specified social context. The author also states that this approach does not utilise numerical data, but rather includes accounts of the life experiences of individuals, and the world from the individual's unique perspective. In this study, I aim to understand the unique experiences of inclusion from my co-researchers in the specific context of ECCE.

4.4 PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH

This section explores participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) which was briefly discussed in chapter one as the research design for this study. PALAR can be described as a way of living rather than as a research design (Setlhare-Kajee, 2018; Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Neethling (2015) and Zuber-Skerritt (2011) state that PALAR is the authentic and full engagement in lived experiences that enables sustainable learning, teaching and research. These lived experiences, which are the product of self-reflective action research, influence our research behaviour and our professional practice. PALAR is underpinned by participatory action research [PAR] which aims at collaborative transformation and empowerment of community members (Neethling, 2015; Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) where the knowledgeable voices of the co-researchers are heard (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). My choice of PALAR as a research design was motivated by my intention for the co-researchers to voice their experiences regarding inclusive education, as well as for them to flourish as leaders and activists for inclusion within the ECCE sector.

4.4.1 The Origins of a PALAR Design

PALAR is more than just an amalgamation of action learning and action research (ALAR). It is rather a hybrid of all the concepts and principles of the action research genre, that together form a participatory agenda (Neethling, 2015). Through a process of reflection and action PALAR design serves as praxis or a bridge between theory and practice (Freire, 2000). To better understand PALAR then, I find it essential to explore the development of research in this genre. Putman and Rock (2018) state that action research was conceptualised by Kurt Lewin as a process of combining experimental approaches for research, with social programmes intending to advance theory and action for social transformation. They also claim that Lewin devised an iterative, cycle of reflection on practice, acting, reflecting once more and then instituting further action.

Hence this process is described as a 'look, think and act' spiral where one cycle has a bearing on the next (Mertler, 2012). This action research spiral comprises four major phases which are plan, act,

observe and reflect (Zuber-Skerritt & Wood, 2019). The authors describe the planning phase as a process of identifying a problem or need and consequently preparing a strategy to solve the problem. Following the steps above, Putman and Rock (2018) describe the action step as a thoughtful and deliberate implementation of the plan. Thereafter the authors describe the observation step as a process of turning the spotlight onto the effectiveness of the action within the context of the phenomenon. They emphasise the necessity for the gathering of systematic documentation to provide a basis for critical reflection. In addition, Mertler (2012) claims that the reflection process occurs when the co-researchers review the action and make decisions for future action research cycles. Figure 4.1 below represents the three cycles of inquiry for this research project.

Building on these concepts of the cyclical inquiry of action research, participatory action research, further involves collective inquiry and experimentation towards a shared goal. Participatory action research is a philosophy where not just the researcher but also the co-researchers determine their own development and participate meaningfully in the process of analysing their own answers in order to lead to development (Attwood, 1997). Consequently, the outcomes of this genre of research is difficult to predict in advance.
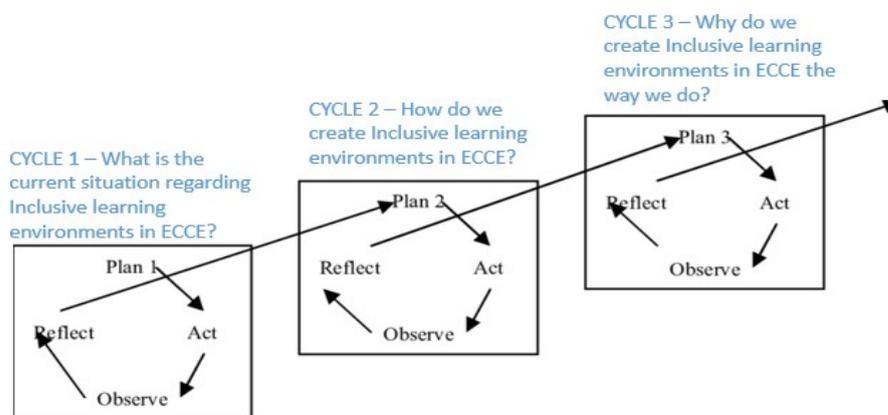
Figure 4.1 The plan, act, observe and reflect cycle (Adopted from Zuber-Skerritt, 2001)

Also impacting on PALAR, is the concept of *action learning* which originated in the coal mines of Wales in the 1940's. According to Zuber-Skerritt and Wood (2019) this process involved workers who brainstormed problems, took action and then reflected upon their actions. The authors explain that scholars and practitioners embraced the concept and began applying the principles of mutual support, advice and criticism in order to achieve new insights and learnings to mutually resolve problems at hand. The cyclic action also resonates with the work of Freire and his culture circles. Freire's concept of cyclic and continuous learning is the basis of PALAR. PALAR asserts that any individual can learn

skills and create knowledge through experiential learning (Castle & Buckler, 2021). PALAR also has an element of *lifelong action learning*. Lifelong action learning focuses on sustained development through mutual interaction and collective effort. In essence, the learning aspect of PALAR, comprises both action learning and lifelong learning, where lifelong learning is geared toward sustained personal transformation and the cascading of knowledge to others. It is important to remember that PALAR is not just learning but has a research component as well. With the emphasis on lifelong learning in addition to participatory action research (PAR), PALAR offers a unique design for research and learning. This combination, therefore, sustains authentic participation with a strong social justice and emancipatory agenda (Zuber-Skerritt & Wood, 2019). The following section explores the key principles that advance a PALAR methodology.

4.4.2 The Guiding Principles of a PALAR Design

PALAR constitutes more than a research methodology. It is a philosophy with the underlying belief that all people can learn and self-actualise, irrespective of their level of formal educational qualifications (Wood, 2019). Wood further states those most affected by a particular phenomenon are the most appropriate people to address the phenomenon, and theory is valid only when used to engender positive change. The author also professes that mutual learning and development among all co-researchers would ensure lifelong learning and the capacity to lead others to co-create knowledge that is relevant, contextual and useful. Zuber-Skerritt (2018) believes that in order to realise the above philosophy, a structured model is required. To assist PALAR researchers Kearney,Wood & Zuber-Skerritt (2013) and Zuber-Skerritt (2018) identify the three R's of PALAR and the seven C's of PALAR. On deeper exploration through the literature, I have found that the three R's of relationships, reflection and recognition are interwoven with the seven C's of PALAR research.

4.4.2.1 Relationships

It was Aristotle (c.f. 3.2.3.5.6) who once remarked that humans are social creatures implying that part of the intrinsic make-up of humanity is to connect with others socially., Moseley (2015) claimed that relationships are a fundamental part of humanity where communication and a shared sense of belonging is established. In addition, Zuber-Skerritt (2018) states that the building of trust, collaboration and team spirit are essential for the ongoing success and sustainability of a project, with relationship building as an essential foundation (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Wood (2020) states that the essence of PALAR is the building of relationships among the co-researchers and in the absence of democratic, trusting and purposeful relationships, PALAR cannot truly take place. Many PALAR projects have emphasised the importance of relationship-building in the research process

(Luthuli, 2019; Luthuli & Wood, 2020; Neethling, 2015; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018; Wood, Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2017). Setlhare-Kajee states that it is during this critical initial step that respect between participants is fostered which assists with *collaboration* between the participants. Participants, thus 'buy-in' and establish *commitment* if sound relationships are built. This relationship-building occurs throughout the process and also involves sharing and *coaching*, to improve the skills of the ALS. During the interactions co-researchers learn to *compromise* by listening with greater empathy reaching mutual agreement. Sound dialogical *communication* is vital to establish these relationships. Wood (2020) emphasises that good communication is not just listening to what is said, but it involves reading between the lines and ascertaining the implied meanings. The author also states that the co-researchers respect for each other's individual goals as well as the collective goals, purposes and expectations for the future of the project are established. It is through the building of relationships that allows PALAR to be a more humane way of doing research. The onset of COVID-19 during my research compelled the use of digital engagement throughout the relationship-building process. This was an initial challenge as relationship-building in this way required more time and creative thought on my part.

4.4.2.2 Reflection

Reflection on private and professional life is the ability to turn the mirror upon oneself with the intention of self-improvement. Heidegger (2010) claimed that self-reflection allows one to view present behaviour and to plan for future behaviour. Zuber-Skerritt (2018, p. 519) claimed that reflection is necessary in "designing, implementing, learning through, and evaluating a PALAR research project." The author claims that *critical reflection* on the research process enables the participant to learn about themselves, others, the knowledge they have co-created as well as requirements for further action. PALAR interrogates current ways of thinking and can be a tool for personal transformation (Wood, 2020). Personal and communal reflection is an essential requirement in critical reflection. Co-researchers were involved in critical reflection through confronting probing questions throughout the research process as well as through guiding questions in a reflective journal at the end of each cycle. These resulted in the shaping of the subsequent research activities and contributed to the emancipatory agenda of the research project.

4.4.2.3 Recognition

Recognition of successful contributions and competencies is also a key principle of PALAR (Wood, Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2017). The affirmation of the group's achievements needed to be rewarded and celebrated by a publication about the research phenomenon (Zuber-Skerritt, 2019). The author

further claims that these publications may inspire further research and inquiry to shape a new cycle of learning. The co-researchers in my action research set were recognised for the completion of each cycle in the PALAR process. The communal findings were shared and discussed collaboratively at the end of each cycle. The recognition of the achievements of the co-researchers promoted agency and contributed to the emancipatory outcomes of the research. The publishing of co-researchers' photographs, captions and drawings cascaded knowledge of inclusion to others in this context. Each participant was recognised as a contributing author. The table below offers a visual representation and synthesis of the three R's and seven C's of PALAR. The use of the infinity sign indicates lifelong continuous learning, which is at the core of PALAR. Figure 4.2 demonstrates that relationship-building in PALAR requires communication, compromise, commitment, coaching and collaboration among the members of the ALS. Secondly, the reflection requires a critical evaluation on personal and collective learning. Finally PALAR calls for a continuous process of recognising the competencies of the members of the ALS.
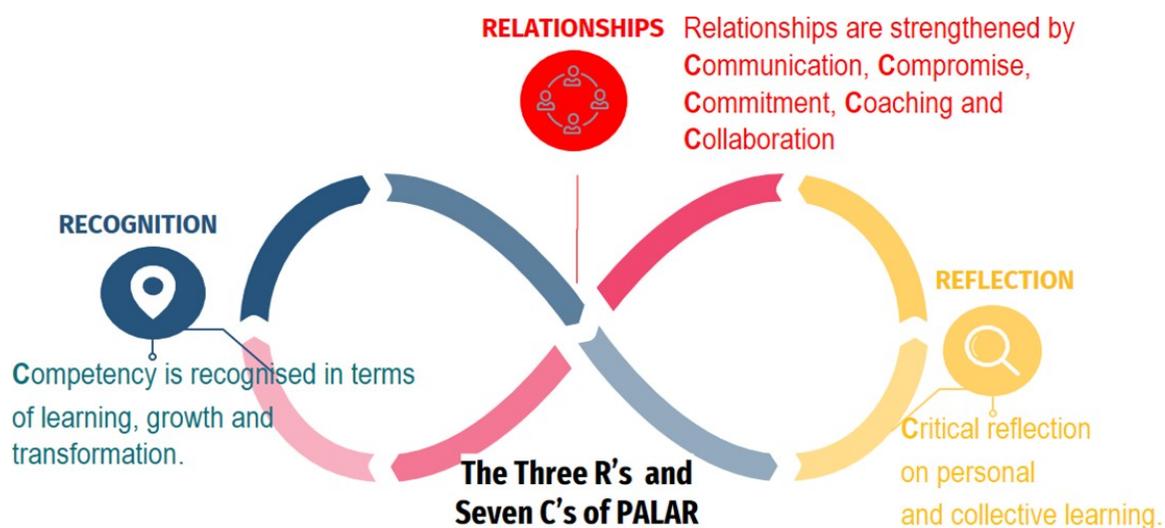
Figure 4.2 The three R's of PALAR research
Source: Author

4. 4.3 The Action Learning Set

As discussed earlier, the action learning set (ALS) refers to a group of people coming together to work on real challenges, using their individual knowledge and skills to facilitate deeper learning (Morrison, 2017). The PALAR methodology advocates a critical and emancipatory paradigm where personal change is central to the research group. Wood (2020) declares that within the ALS, the co-researchers use their skills to facilitate their lifelong learning as well as the development of other group members.

Zuber-Skerritt (2011) maintains that this lifelong learning is sustained when the co-researchers become effective leaders who make positive contributions and influence others in their communities. Since PALAR aims not just to improve the situation of the researchers, but also to focus on the learning that "emanates from participants' critical and collaborative reflection" (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013, p. 7), there is a need to create a suitable learning climate for the participants in an ALS.

The authors emphasise that much of the success of the project is dependent on the creation of an ALS who are the core participants and drivers of the project. Wood (2020) states that the ALS should not be too large and should remain consistent throughout the project. Thus, the ALS consisted of eight ECCE role players who were purposefully selected for the project. The participants comprised previous or prospective ECCE students, as well as two trainers from an ECCE training centre. Due to the restrictions of COVID-19, all interactions were virtual using WhatsApp as a low cost platform for the research. Having no face-to-face contact required a great deal more time for the relationship building process as members needed to get to know each other and formed important bonds that areintrinsic to PALAR. Wood (2020) claims that an ALS of six to eight members is the ideal size for an ALS and that a group with over six participants requires a facilitator. The members of the ALS chose various roles that required facilitation and leadership at various points. Table 4.3 outlines the biographical details of the ALS at the commencement of the research.

Table 4.3 - The biographical details of the ALS

NAME	AGE	GENDER	WORK EXPERIENCE	OCCUPATION	MOTHER TONGUE & LOLT	QUALIFICATION
Annerly	22	Female	Teacher 2 years	ECCE Teacher	Mother Tongue: English LOLT: English	NQF LEVEL 4 ECD Certificate
Amina	28	Female	Centre Owner & teacher 7 years	ECCE Teacher & owner	Mother Tongue: English LOLT: English	Bachelor of Education Student NQF LEVEL 5 ECD Certificate
Bahle	27	Female	Teacher 4 years Trainer 2 years	ECCE Teacher & Trainer	Mother Tongue: IsiZulu LOLT: English	NQF LEVEL 5 ECD Certificate
Jessica	34	Female	Teacher 12 years Trainer and Assessors 4 years	ECCE Teacher, Trainer and Assessor	Mother Tongue: English LOLT: English	NQF LEVEL 6 ECD Certificate
Kaveri	49	Female	Teacher 20 years	ECCE Teacher	Mother Tongue: English LOLT: English	Matric Prospective Student

Lihle	26	Female	Teacher 5 years	ECCE Teacher	Mother Tongue: : IsiZulu LOLT: English	NQF LEVEL 4 ECD Certificate
Raadia	28	Female	Teacher 7 years	ECCE Teacher	Mother Tongue: English LOLT: English	Matric Prospective Student
Ranjeni	42	Female	Teacher 14 years	ECCE Teacher	Mother Tongue: English LOLT: English	NQF LEVEL 6 ECD Certificate

4.4.3.1 My Positionality as the Facilitator of the ALS

Positionality reflects how a researcher is situated within a research study (Holmes, 2020). This is influenced by the ontological and epistemological assumptions that govern the researcher's belief system and interactions with the environment (Scotland, 2012). According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) a researcher's positionality is never fixed and assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge are transformed during a study. Indeed the use of a reflexive approach is required for researchers to be conscious of their positionality and transformation throughout the research process (Holmes, 2020). To reflect on my positionality, I therefore needed to interrogate the complex matrices that shaped my socialisation while growing up in a traditional Indian home. I experienced exclusion from an early age as the elders in my family, valued a stereotypical superficial beauty that prized a narrow nose, fair skin and straight teeth. Unfortunately, I fell short compared to my sisters. Also growing up during the apartheid era, I had very little contact with members of other race groups, who were regarded with suspicion and 'othered' in my community. Further, my mother's regular statements to me to 'act like a girl' and 'a woman's highest *dharma* (duty) is to serve her husband'; deeply reinforced ideas of subordination and patriarchy in my formative years. This study then formed a catalyst to begin the uncomfortable process of interrogating these falsehoods entrenched throughout my socialisation, to begin a phase of deconstructing and rebuilding a conscientised worldview. Notably, the principles of PALAR design called for this kind of personal reflection on my positionality throughout the three cycles of this research. Awareness of my positionality therefore influenced how the research was conducted and the outcomes and results of this study.

All the members of the ALS were new to research, and my first priority was to level the power relationships between the participants and myself as the researcher. As a PALAR facilitator, I was firstly forced to re-examine my positionality as the sole creator of knowledge in the action learning set. In the initial stages of the project, having a teaching background in early childhood education, it was difficult to relinquish my position as teacher and wear the cap of guide and facilitator instead. Indeed this entailed approaching the group as a researcher who values the knowledge of the research participants. Hence my role as the guide and facilitator was to create a climate of mutual learning

where every member was encouraged to participate freely and equally. I emphasized that the purpose of the project was to learn from the participants

and their experiences. Respecting their prior learning was thus integral to the success of the research. Furthermore, the explanation of the principles of PALAR were outlined at the beginning, as it was something new to the members of the ALS. This unique form of research emphasised not just research but lifelong sustainable learning and leadership for all the participants. The commitment, compromise and communication required from members were much greater than regular university research, but so were the vast benefits to community and society. The challenge for me was for members of the ALS to buy-in and own the project. The acquisition of knowledge would liberate them to become action leaders who could be instrumental in emancipating children, other members in their centres and communities. As I delved deeper into my study of PALAR design and critical pedagogy the famous words of Freire governed and transformed my positionality as leader of the project, "leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them" (2000, p. 178). Therefore, as the research progressed and participants grew in confidence, my positionality as leader of the project was relinquished in gradual stages. With this transformation of researcher positionality, my participants would achieve true emancipation.

4.4.4 Research Procedures

The research design encompasses the adoption of the PALAR research process represented by the model given in Figure 4.3. Wood (2020) recommends the infinity sign as a suitable guide for the PALAR design. The continuous nature of the infinity sign represents the nature of lifelong learning which is at the heart of the PALAR process. In essence, this research aims to develop lifelong learners who will continue learning and disseminating knowledge as leaders beyond the lifespan of the research project. The first step of the process requires entry into the research location. Ethical clearance was granted for this project during the COVID-19 lockdown. Unfortunately due to this, access to the planned ECCE centres were restricted and the research locations were unable to support my research as planned. I saw a need for online interactions and a group of passionate ECCE teachers and trainers were willing to join using the WhatsApp platform. Consequently, I was able to start a group and to begin with building of relationships with my co-researchers. As mentioned earlier the process of relationship building in PALAR is a vital component and requires time and careful planning. Using online platforms required a greater duration to ensure that all co-researchers felt comfortable with each other. The relationship building phase consisted of six steps that included a definition of mutual purpose, identification of personal strengths, forming a team, analysing the ECCE context, setting goals and negotiating the ethical considerations of the research process (figure 4.3). The research phase began on the completion of the phase of relationship building. This phase requires the setting of the research questions by the ALS as a community. Thereafter the facilitator needs to

provide a background to the co-researchers regarding the methods of research that are suitable for the project. This is vital as co-researchers showed preferences toward one method more than the other. Once the research cycle one was completed , the second cycle followed consecutively to finalise the research questions for the next cycle as indicated below (figure 4.3). These three cycles follow the 'action research model' that was first proposed by Riel (2007) and later presented in Putman and Rock (2018). In the figure 4.4 that follows, it is evident how each cycle informs the other. Once the process of plan-act-observe and reflect has been accomplished then the research focuses on the collaborative analysis of findings, the dissemination of findings, further reflection on learning and a way to continue with learning for the next cycle.
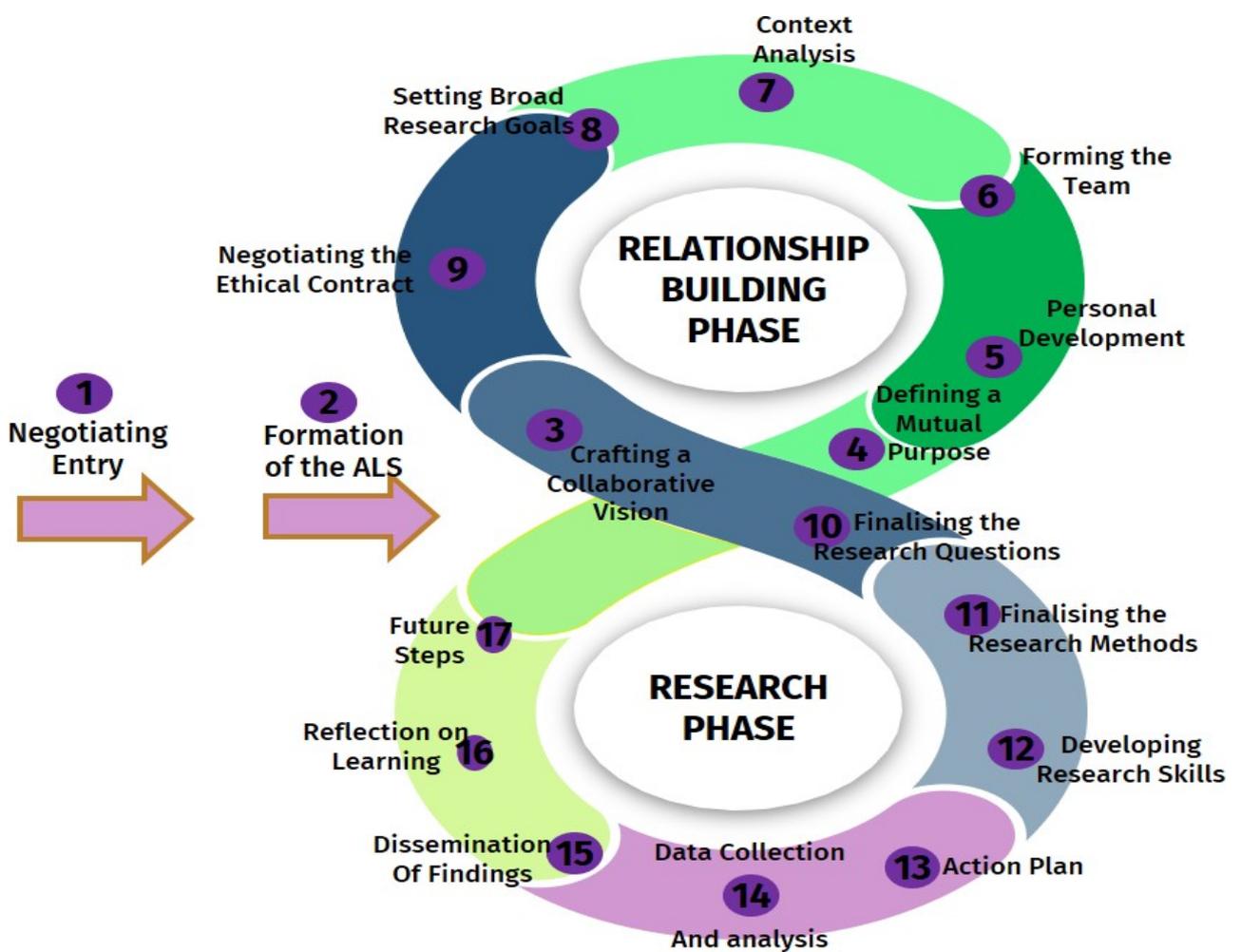
Figure 4.3 The PALAR process (Adopted from Wood, 2020)

4.5 THE RESEARCH LOCATION

As mentioned earlier the research was carried out virtually with trainers and students or prospective students from the ECCE training centre. The centre was established in 1996 as a community-based non-profit early childhood development (ECD) organisation. The research site provides technical,

professional and organisational knowledge and skills to assist ECD teachers and communities who are adversely affected by state planning, apartheid policies, and economic inequalities. The organisation achieves this through the training of ECCE practitioners and caregivers working with babies, toddlers and young children in different settings. The organisation is based in Durban and works in various townships, semi-rural and rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
What is the current Situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE?	How do we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE?	Why do we create inclusive learning environments the way we do?
PLAN	**PLAN**	**PLAN**
Defining inclusive learning environments. Explore the current ECCE context. Explore the need for inclusive learning environments. Baseline checklist	Removing false beliefs about inclusion/Becoming Aware / Inclusive Pedagogy / Inclusive Language / Building Relationships /	Benefits of Inclusive education to society Hand book - From Reflection to Action Reflecting on PALAR as a methodology Social Justice and transformation
ACT	**ACT**	**ACT**
Checklist to determine current inclusive practice Analyse baseline checklist – complete photo voice activity Purposeful WhatsApp discussions on the current ECCE context. Work in pairs and collect newspaper clippings on the need for inclusive learning environments.	Privilege Walk Online Board Game Power Flower Activity Watch videos and slide shows by CR Share Photos and Reflective drawings	Post feedback videos and photos Refine content for handbook The benefits of PALAR to a teacher – Presentation by Chief Researcher
OBSERVE	**OBSERVE**	**OBSERVE**
Observations by the research participants. Observing and highlighting the current situation on IE in ECCE. Observe photos / drawings by co-researchers	Observations by the research participants. Observing and highlighting the contributions of members in the ALS. Drawing up a collage of reflective drawings.	Observations by the research participants. Observing and highlighting the contributions of other members in ALS. Analyse
REFLECT	**REFLECT**	**REFLECT**
Complete a Reflective Journal. Analysis How to move the process forward?	Complete a Reflective Journal Analysis How to move the process forward?	Complete a Reflective Journal. Analysis Future Learning

Figure 4.4 The PALAR cycles (Adopted from Putman & Rock, 2018)

The organisation also consists of an ECCE centre that is attached to the school for training purposes. The school consists of ten children and one ECCE teacher. The organisation aims to create an awareness in disadvantaged communities of the importance of early-year education and works at empowering communities to establish affordable, relevant, and innovative programmes. Further, the organisation conducts parent education programmes and is built on inclusive values emphasising an anti-bias approach. A variety of training programmes for practitioners are offered in line with registered qualifications and skills programmes, as well as the development of relevant teaching methods and learning materials emphasising the inclusion of all diversities. The centre also aims to undertake research on issues that have an impact on the development of young children, and it aims to co- operate and participate with various stakeholders in developing policies that affect the lives of young children. Workshops and seminars are conducted pertaining to key issues and challenges that confront the early childhood field.

4.6 RESEARCH DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Traditionally, projects using the action research genre are piloted face-to-face where researchers and co-researchers follow a cyclical process of collaboratively planning the research focus, performing actions, observing the results and reflecting on possibilities for the future. In addition to this, as mentioned earlier, PALAR involves relationship building as a vital phase in this methodology. However, the onset of a global pandemic and the responses to COVID-19 included the closure of schools and restrictions on physical contact and distancing which made face-to-face research impossible. Seeing that the core of PALAR is about mutual learning and relationship building, my immediate concern was the difficulties in conveying human emotion, intimacy, tone and the understanding of complicated issues over a virtual platform. Additionally, early critics have pinpointed the lack of depth and the 'leanness' of text in virtual methods of data collection (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013). However, after much researching, I attended workshops held by the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) that provided guidance on conducting research like this from a distance.

I had a range of choices of available platforms for online engagement; however, the ALS felt comfortable with the use of WhatsApp instead of zoom or skype. The cost of data was also of consideration as WhatsApp was low cost compared to the other options. Studies have indicated WhatsApp to be a preferred means of online learning (Barhoumi, 2015; Mpungose, 2020; Tyrer, 2019). Studies by Gibson, (2020); Kaufmann and Peil, (2020) and Pimmer, Mhango, Mzumara and Mbvundula, (2017) have also pinpointed the effectiveness of WhatsApp for qualitative virtual research.

Some of the benefits of WhatsApp over face-to-face engagement, for heightened participation in virtual learning or research have also been noted (Alghamdi, 2019; Kauffman & Peil, 2020).

Statistics noting the usage of social media in South Africa has revealed that WhatsApp has emerged as the most popular chat platform, with twenty-four million users (Alghamdi, 2019). Historically, WhatsApp was created by Brian Anton and Jan Koom who were employees at Yahoo (Barhoumi, 2015). WhatsApp is an application for basic, feature, and smart phones that require a mobile internet connection or WIFI to operate (Henry et al., 2016). The authors assert that it allows users to send and receive text messages, photographs, videos, and audio recordings at a lower cost than any other platform. Significantly WhatsApp is the most recent platform used by students as it presents university teaching and learning on a more social and user-friendly platform (Mpungose, 2020). Mpungose also suggests that the informal nature of WhatsApp allowed his students to share their ideas in unpacking the module content in his teaching through this enhanced and flexible platform for communication. The application allowed for multiple voices to be heard in a democratic climate, aligned to my emancipatory and transformative research paradigm. The ability for co-researchers to respond after their reflection at their own convenience, asynchronously, contributed to the effectiveness of this research tool. These factors significantly influenced my decision, as I sought not only to research but to communicate and to enable a process of mutual learning in a democratic, comfortable and participatory manner. My tools of data generation also needed to reflect a compatibility to work on the chosen platform.

4.7 DATA GENERATION

In qualitative research to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomena, there needs to be evidence of multiple data sources (Carter, DiCenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014). The authors further elaborate that this contributes to the convergence of information resulting in data triangulation. Data triangulation refers to the combination of different data sources that are examined at different times, places, and by various persons (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The latter also argue that this contributes to the validity of qualitative research methods. In addition, for PALAR, Wood (2020) suggests the use of visual and arts-based methods together with more traditional qualitative data generation methods. Data generation in this study consisted of a baseline checklist, reflective drawings, photographs, purposeful conversations and reflective journaling. All these methods required a strict adherence to Covid-19 protocol and therefore group and personal communication observed social distancing.

4.7.1 Baseline Checklist

The baseline checklist can be defined as an analysis of the situation prior to intervention at a site (Makoelle, 2012). The baseline checklist used by researchers (Neethling, 2015; Ojageer, 2019),also served to establish the current level of knowledge and understanding of inclusion among the ALS. My assumptions were that my co-researchers were experienced teachers with a wealth of knowledge on inclusion. The checklist therefore served to establish the extent of their knowledge on inclusion and to identify gaps and to work as a springboard for this PALAR project. The checklist items were drawn up as elements of inclusive practice derived from the literature review (Appendix E). The items were listed, and co-researchers were asked to tick the appropriate box which was listed as yes, no or sometimes with an optional space included for comments. Chapter five clarifies the procedures in the analysis of the data from the baseline checklist.

4.7.2 Reflective Drawings

Reflective drawings have the potential to serve as a suitable visual participatory methodology (Literat, 2013; Mayaba & Wood, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2011; Meyer, 2018; Wood, 2020). Indeed the human hand is not merely a body part but a connection to the mind with thoughts that need to be captured and conveyed (Toadvine & Lawlor, 2007). These authors believe that an understanding of this relationship between the hand and the mind is vital to unpack the concept of drawing. Therefore the process of drawing invites reflection resulting in the materialisation of lived experiences, perception or thoughts (Mitchell et al., 2011). The authors also declare that when participants are involved in the interpretation of their intended messages then, drawings become a compelling means of participatory research embedded in participant-researcher collaboration. Consistent with this, the term 'reflective drawing' refers to the use of drawing as a tool to support the research reflection process and this may occur in two different stages of the research process (Calvo, 2017). Firstly, the author explains that drawings may be a part of the action process thus enabling reflection-in-action with a demonstration of visual and kinaesthetic learning. Secondly the author explains that reflective drawings may be used at the reflection stage of the research to recall lived experience after the observed activity, which helps to establish praxis - a bridge between theory and practice (Freire, 2000). In this study the ALS use drawings as both a means to act as well as to reflect on their learnings. It is also significant that this study integrates visual and textual data. According to Guillemin (2004, p. 273) this offers a way of exploring the "multiplicity and complexity" in human experience. I hence, concur with the above-mentioned authors that reflective drawings involve an intuitive process that enables the understanding of a complicated phenomenon like inclusion within the unique context of my study.

Building on the intuitive benefits of drawings as a data generation tool, reflective drawings may also contribute to the transformative and emancipatory agenda of this research. Wood, Theron and Mayaba (2012) maintain that reflective drawings utilise a visual participatory approach that enables participant voices and agency to be communicated. In their participatory research with children the authors asked children to make drawings and to explain the meanings thereof. Although this research involved the participation of children, I was influenced by the suitability of participatory drawings for my study with adults. Research has identified many positive aspects of this research instrument in participatory designs. Murove (2009) and Theron et al. (2011) comment on the alignment of this instrument with African ethics while Mitchell (2005) commends the non-reliance on linguistic skills. In addition, Malchiodi (2009) believes that drawings are able to generate data in a safe and culturally sensitive manner. Moreover, older studies by Thomas and Silk (1990) revealed that reflective drawings were perceived as a more enjoyable activity than writing answers and certain complex concepts were easier to communicate than through written answers (Rennie & Jarvis, 1995). Zuboff (1988) also highlighted that drawings functioned "as a catalyst, helping participants to articulate feelings that had been implicit and were hard to define" (p. 141). Therefore as Horne, Masley and Allison-Love (2017) claim, reflective drawings contribute to a participatory research approach that is dependent on researcher- participant collaboration that shifts power imbalances in the research process.

For this research, I use reflective drawings in all three cycles and two phases of the PALAR process (relationship building phase and research phase). During the relationship building phase, co-researchers sketched themselves and their personal strengths using the head, heart and hands model to represent their skills in the domains of knowledge, skills and values. This functioned to highlight common characteristics and the strengths and weaknesses among members, as well as the development of a group identity. In the research phase, the co-researchers used drawings as part of their action or reflection. Consequently, drawings were used in cycle one to explore the current inclusive learning environment or in cycle two when unpacking how to create inclusive learning environments in ECCE. Throughout the presentation of these reflective drawings, the ALS needed to add their text or voice notes to supplement the visual data. This virtual approach is adapted from the 'draw and write approach' by Mayaba and Wood (2015) and Mitchell et. al., (2011). The latter explains that when drawings are used, participants need to elaborate verbally with others to explain the interpretation of their drawings. Mair and Kierans (2007) state that participants respond to a research prompt initially with a drawing and thereafter they elaborate on their completed drawing through written (text) or oral explanations (voice note) to clarify the contextual meaning of the picture to the group. Other members of the ALS may also contribute and elaborate on these explanations. This

collaborative meaning-making provides an interpretation that is unique to the ALS. In addition, participants were encouraged to reflect on their learning by using photo voice.

4.7.3 Photovoice

Like reflective drawings, photovoice also served as a participatory visual method for this study similar to other PALAR studies (Damons, 2017; Hendricks, 2017; Luthuli, 2019; Luthuli & Wood, 2020; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018). Based on the critical conscientiousness of Freire (1970), photovoice allows for critical reflection and collaborative dialogue (Liebenberg, 2018). In addition, photo voice allowed my researchers to express their lived experiences of inclusion (Sandoval-Barrientos, 2017). Historically photovoice arose in the health field by allowing people to identify and reflect on their strengths and concerns in response to a specific prompt (de Heer & Moya, 2008; Wang, 1997). Notably the creation of images prompts participants to lead in their inquiry and to draw on knowledge that stems from their lived experiences (Hendricks, 2017). Photovoice was used throughout the research as some of the ALS preferred this approach as it required less skill and less time than reflective drawings. Through the discussion of captions the photographs and their captions, similar to drawings, fostered dialogue about inclusion. Co-researchers were asked to take photographs that portrayed their feelings, beliefs and everyday experiences accompanied by short narratives.

I firstly introduced the concept to them in cycle one by explaining the goals and reasons for the method as an instrument of emancipation (Sandoval-Barrientos, 2017). I then showed them examples of photographs, with captions, to further explain the concept. The ALS were owners of smart phones and were skilled enough to use their cameras. For each cycle they were given a prompt as a starting point for their photography. Cycle one asked the co-researchers to take pictures of the current situation of inclusion at the centres that they taught at. A few co-researchers were not allowed to take pictures of their classrooms but were able to take relevant pictures in other environments, others chose to draw instead. Cycle two prompted the co-researchers to identify how they could create inclusive spaces. Cycle three served as a feedback session, selecting relevant images for the handbook as well as identifying wider ideological issues from the images. At the onset of each cycle, ethical requirements were discussed. Co-researchers did not take photographs of the faces of children or adults. They were allowed to take pictures with faces blocked off, pictures of hands and pictures of each other.

Once the pictures were captured, I used the 'SHOWED" process of analysis, used originally by Shaffer (1983) in his research on health in Nairobi (Appendix G) but was later adopted by other researchers (de Heer, Moya & Lacson, 2008; Liebenberg, 2018; Luthuli, 2019; Ronzi, Pope, Orton & Bruce, 2016; Wang & Burris, 1994) to stimulate discussion. The following questions were asked using the SHOWED

method,

i. What do you **S**ee here?

ii. What is really **H**appening here?

iii. How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

iv. **W**hy does this problem or strength exist?

v. How could this image **E**ducate the community or policy makers?

vi. What can we **D**o about it?

Each researcher presented his/her photographs and the stories he/she had developed as a way of initiating dialogue. The best photographs for each theme were jointly selected by participants and these served as a rich source of data for our handbook on inclusion in the ECCE context.

4.7.4 Reflective Journals

Similar to other participatory studies (Damons, 2017; Hendricks, 2017; Neethling, 2015; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018; Luthuli; 2019; Luthuli & Wood, 2020) reflective journals served as an appropritate instrument to generate rich data. As mentioned earlier, insights gained through critical reflection are used to effect change or to improve the action in PALAR processes. All members of the ALS, including myself used reflective journals as a means of recording experiences throughout each research cycle (Appendix F). Mortari (2015) believes that through reflection, participants become aware of their thoughts, positions, and feelings in relation to the phenomenon and this results in creating a connection between theory and practice. At the end of each cycle, the ALS would informally discuss relevant aspects that were recorded in their reflective journals during purposeful conversations. This included their growing awareness regarding the creation of inclusive learning environments with regard to pedagogy, awareness of privilege and power, understanding basic concepts and awareness of relationship-building. Certain members of the ALS were 'quiet' and did not openly discuss their reflections with the group. This was respected. The analysis of these diaries was conducted individually and only information that the individual wanted to share was shared with the entire ALS. At the end of each cycle, the information gathered from the reflective journals shaped the next cycle of learning and reflection.

As a chief facilitator of the project, it was also imperative for me to reflect upon my practice. Consequently, reflective journals assist researchers to record their research decisions by highlighting their own emotions and roles in the process of documenting insights with consideration being given to researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Orange, 2016). Orange states that, reflexivity may be a way "to decrease 'othering' by working with participants as equals rather than positioning oneself as the researcher in a position of power (p. 2177)." Hence, my main concern was how to democratise the knowledge acquisition that was taking place. I also needed to develop agency among my co-researchers by granting them opportunities to initiate knowledge production and to share their unique experiences of teaching in the ECCE sector. This required a paradigm shift in my thinking from being the knower to becoming a learner. Emphasising these considerations, Orange (2016) states that qualitative research calls for a high degree of reflexivity that requires researchers to examine their roles in the research process critically and to assess how their biases and decisions may affect their data. Therefore, throughout the research process I used my journal to reflect upon my decisions concerning the process of knowledge acquisition.

The use of reflective journals was challenging as a source of data, because at the beginning it was a novelty and members of the ALS were enthusiastic and their diaries contained a robust set of reflections. Towards the latter stages, members needed constantly to be motivated to complete their journals. Unfortunately, the busy professional and personal lives of the ALS also impacted negatively on the quality and consistency of their reflections.

4.7.5 Purposeful Conversations

In addition to the reflective journals mentioned above, purposeful conversations enabled a greater depth of information to be conveyed by providing the participants with the opportunity to clarify their thoughts and feelings (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; Neethling, 2015). This ensured transparency as crucial evidence, was gathered throughout these informal conversations that were carried out using the WhatsApp platform. As mentioned in chapter one, WhatsApp conversations on a chat group have the potential to provide a rich source of qualitative data (Chen & Neo, 2019). Throughout the relationship-building and research phases of this PALAR process, members were encouraged to discuss their feelings informally in the form of text and from a distance due to a global pandemic. I was guided by the work of several Covid-19 researchers (Hall, 2020; Busara, 2020; Graber, 2020; Lloyd & Lorenz, 2020). Textual discussion stimulated by videos, quotations, slide presentations, newspaper articles, photo and video captions, informed each research cycle. During informal conversations, co-researchers were able to learn from each other, and in certain instances members worked in pairs and

discussed ways to solve problems, which was thereafter shared with the entire ALS. This contributed to collaborative learning which is an essential pillar of PALAR research (Zuber- Skerritt, 2011). Co-researchers could have used their mother tongue language or any other language of their choice, however conversations occurred mainly in English. These were transcribed, analysed and used to shape future action in the learning process.

4.8 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis refers to the organising, accounting for and explaining of the data in terms of the participants definitions of the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018). Wood (2020) indicates that there is no preferred method to analyse data in PALAR, however the author emphasises the need for collaborative data analysis. As mentioned in chapter one, the analysis of data was underpinned by a critical thematic analysis. Since my study was situated in an emancipatory and transformative paradigm, I needed to ensure that all voices of those who participated in this study would be heard and understood during the analysis process (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011; Wood 2020). The participatory nature of the data analysis also required transparency and the participants - including myself needed to adopt a critical consciousness to reveal underlying issues of power that may have influenced the interpretation of data.

4.8.1 Critical Thematic Analysis

Chapter two identified critical theory as the broad theoretical underpinning of the study and this chapter identified an emancipatory and participatory agenda for this project. Clear indications as to what 'critical' research entails, abounds in current scholarly work in terms of data collection, however there is a paucity of scholarly work on how to connect critical theory to the data analysis process (Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson & Gaskew, 2018). These authors also declare that in community-based critical research we need to:

> *"reimagine methods—especially data analysis—in ways that speak to the communities in which we work, learn from and with, those who depend on us to be responsible with the stories, artefacts, and experiences they have shared with us—their guests" (p. iv).*

Many researchers (Chidarikire, 2017; Damons, 2017; Dube, 2016; Paragoo, 2021) who adopt a critical perspective use critical discourse analysis (CDA) that examines text and verbal dialogue to reveal how power operates and is either legitimised or challenged by discourse (Fairclough, 2015). Mogashoa (2014, p. 104) states that CDA "is positioned in the environment of language and its successes can be measured with a measuring rod of the study of languages." Researchers using critical discourse analysis therefore require a certain background in linguistics. The author also claims that similarities

and differences between concepts in critical discourse analysis may be confusing for novice researchers and also for those with more experience. Moreover, Mogashoa points out that the lack of specific technical procedures for researchers to follow in critical discourse analysis has been indicated as a major disadvantage to this analytical framework. Seeing that the process of data analysis required a collaborative 'meaning making' with my co-researchers, I required an analytical framework with clear guidelines and little complexity. I found that the use of thematic analysis abounds in qualitative research as an analytical method with clear steps and much flexibility to fit into any research paradigm. The use of thematic analysis in critical PALAR research has been used recently (Dann, 2018; Damons, 2017; Luthuli, 2019; Neethling, 2015; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018).

Thematic analysis is an analytical framework that enables researchers to identify and to organise relevant themes and sub-themes which become units of analysis for further exploration (Labra, Castro, Wright & Chamblas, 2019). The authors clarify that central to the process of thematic analysis is the forming of themes that arise from materials in a data set for example in this study - the writings in reflective diaries, drawings and photographs including their text captions as well as transcriptions of purposeful conversations. Braun and Clark (2006) outlined a six-step framework for thematic analysis consisting of the familiarisation of the ALS with the data, the generation of codes, the search, review and naming of themes followed by a production of a report. The only mention of a critical framework by the authors can be identified in a claim by Braun and Clark, "that this framework is flexible enough to be compatible with any research paradigm" (p. 81). Seeing that this PALAR project aims to interrogate issues of social justice and inequality I was reluctant to use thematic analysis as an analytical framework.

Aligned to the critical orientation of this study, the early work on thematic analysis by Owen (1984) comprised three criteria for analysing discourse on how the ALS interpreted their relationships. The three concepts of recurrence, repetition and forcefulness (Orbe & Kinefuchi, 2008) were analysed in data sets where recurrence referred to the repeating of meaning, repetition to the repeating of words and phrases, and forcefulness to the emphasis on certain words or phrases. This basis was used as a foundation for the development of critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Notwithstanding the use of thematic analysis in numerous PALAR research studies , I was cautioned by the latter-mentioned authors who stated that Braun and Clark's (2006) method was limited in its critical ability to link "everyday discourses with larger social and cultural practices, nested in unequal power relations" (p. 2). Lawless and Chen propose a framework that deepens and "capitalizes on the utility of thematic analysis" (p. 2) to analyse qualitative data from a critical perspective. Although some critically-

orientated studies (Terry & Braun, 2011; 2016) have used Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis as an analysis method and the work of Owen (Antony & Thomas, 2010; Reilly, 2015) has made critical claims, these studies lacked the practical guidance on how CTA was to be executed.

4.8.2 The Procedures in Critical Thematic Analysis

The use of critical thematic analysis consists of two steps using open and closed coding. Qualitative research requires the analysis of a substantial amount of data and Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) suggest that researchers should rather analyse the data in small chunks as soon as it is generated. The analysis of data at the end of each cycle by the ALS contributed to essential decisions for future cycles as well as to the ability to ascertain if sufficient data had been collected (Ojageer, 2019). Based on the framework depicted above by Lawless and Chen (2019) the critical thematic analysis of data involved two steps of open and closed coding. After data was generated, the ALS started with the open data coding. We looked at the discourses within the raw data for recurrence, repetition and forcefulness to identify emerging themes that were common. Once these patterns were revealed in step one, they were linked to larger societal issues during the second step of closed coding . In this step the ALS also needed to consider what ideologies were recurring, which were repeated and which were forceful. Once these were discussed collaboratively, I then used colours to categorise the recurring themes. These themes were then presented to the group for approval.

Critical researchers, Cannella and Lincoln (2016, p. 18) state that:

> *"critical perspectives mean any research that recognizes power - that seeks in its analyses to plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical givens."*

The authors also highlight that it is language that forms ideologies and language that evokes action that is deeply complicit in maintaining or contesting power relations and class struggles. They further suggest that certain questions may guide the critical analysis of data. For instance, in the analysis of my first cycle which deals with the exploration of the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments – the ALS members questioned how particular groups were represented in the learning environment. They were guided to analyse the photographs, drawings and captions to reveal which groups of people were silenced, which were made invisible, or erased in the ECCE environment. The analysis also reflected how the status quo is maintained in the learning environment. These guiding questions elicited a deeper analysis of the data set.

Therefore, the data collected does not just offer a summary of the ALS's experiences but moves to a deep level of interpretation by relating common discourses to larger ideologies, for example the

complex feelings of the participants to diversity and inclusion in classrooms. Lawless and Chen state that the application of this framework highlights hegemon*y* – that is how we contribute to our own domination as well as our own domination of the 'other'. The authors state that through this critical approach in the analysis of data; a profound understanding of the social construction of reality could emerge. This could result in a greater conscientisation of the influence of power in creating an inclusive or exclusive learning environment.

4.9 QUALITY AND PALAR DESIGN

Wood (2020) claims that contestations regarding the validity of the action research genre as scientific, appear to be ubiquitously in academic circles. The author also raises concern that these unfounded suspicions continue to plague the university fraternity resulting in the denial of potentially valuable projects due to narrow and outdated ideas of what constitutes validity. Hence McAteer and Wood (2018) argue that universities have conventionally been recognised as "the more knowledgeable other," where the knowledge created by communities for communities is negated due to epistemic hierarchies. Reason and Rowan (1981) state that in a participatory approach, validity is personal rather than methodological, and should be based on an interactive dialectic logic. Zuber-Skerritt and Wood (2019, p.8) clarify that the researcher is interested in perspectives of the lived experiences of the community rather than in the objective truth. Wood (2020) cautions that in participatory genres, research is underpinned by a worldview that is very different from the still dominant approaches at universities and therefore this research establishes a different understanding of quality.

When exploring quality, there are numerous types of validity and reliability discussed in qualitative and quantitative research approaches, however that is a discussion for another study. Zuber-Skerritt (2011) emphasises authenticity as a guiding aspect of PALAR research. The author explains that if the research results are recognised and confirmed by the participants in the research and mutual benefits are demonstrated for all members of the ALS, then that research is valid and reliable. Wood (2020) states that trustworthiness that focuses on knowledge only, does not fully account for validity and reliability in PALAR as the emancipatory and practical outcomes of PALAR are omitted. The author also states that authenticity can also be ascertained by the extent to which the design adheres to the foundational values and principles of PALAR, mentioned earlier in this chapter as the three R's of PALAR and the seven C's of PALAR. In addition, Wood (2020) and Ojageer (2019) outline five types of validity relevant to action research designs. The following table 4.4 outlines and defines the five types of validity that were outlined by Herr and Anderson (2005), and consist of; process, dialogic, catalytic, democratic and outcome validity and how these aspects of validity relate to my study.

Table 4.4 - Validity considerations in PALAR research (Adopted from Wood (2020)

	Type of Validity	Validity Guidelines: An Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education.
1.	**Process validity** refers to the quality of the research process (Wood, 2020, p. 125).	Is there evidence of the PALAR principles (three R's / seven C's)? Are there activities for relationship and trust building in the ALS? Are there cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting evident?
2.	**Dialogic validity** occurs when participants are regarded as actual partners in the research process (Freire, chapter 2).	Is there evidence of dialogue and mutual knowledge creation in the PALAR among all members of the ALS?
3.	**Catalytic validity** refers to the elements of personal and greater social change due to the research (Wood, 209, p. 125).	Is there evidence of transformation and agency among members of ALS? Was this project transformational and does it contribute to sustained learning?
4.	**Democratic validity** refers to a climate of equality in the ALS (Freire / Dewey, chapter 2)	Is there evidence that this project respects all viewpoints and knowledge is co-constructed throughout the phases and cycles?
5.	**Outcome validity** refers to the end result of the project that may relate to a few	Is there positive and emancipatory outcomes for all members of the action set? Are there unexpected outcomes in the research?

| | unexpected outcomes (Wood, 2020, p. 125). | |

In conclusion, I used these guiding principles of validity to inform my decisions. Without these guidelines; action and community-based research genres might not be taken seriously. Hence validity concerns needed to steer my actions throughout the research process clearly and rigorously.

4.10 ETHICS IN PALAR DESIGN

It is imperative to obtain clearance from an Ethics Committee when human subjects are involved in any kind of research of an empirical nature (WHO, 2008). Therefore, permission from the university's ethical committee was sought and granted before the research began. PALAR requires a prolonged engagement with a group of people and it is not as simple as conducting interviews or filling in questionnaires. Due to these increased engagements with people, in the attempt to benefit and emancipate communities, there is an increased risk of causing greater harm than any other research genres. Hence, in PALAR there is a greater need to be mindful of the ethical considerations for community based action research as the aim is to liberate and emancipate communities to become problem solvers and lifelong learners. Consequently, studies by Lake and Wendland (2018), noted that universities have accepted the benefits of engaged, participatory research to address persistent and complex social problems. In a conceptual article on the ethics in community-based research, Wood (2017) identifies that due to a need to decolonise and democratise knowledge production, universities have to reconsider their ethical procedures to suit subjective, participatory and community-based interactions. Most university ethic committees are guided by the Belmont Report that centres on three main ethical considerations, including respect for persons, beneficence and justice (Salganik, 2014) however PALAR research requires a wider range of criteria.

Additionally, Khanlou and Peter (2005) and Lake and Wendland (2018, p. 33) note that "ethical research commonly has seven requirements, including social and/or scientific value, validity, fair subject selection, favourable risk–benefit ratio, independent review, informed consent, and respect for participants." The authors in their focus on participatory research also recommend the modification of traditional ethical research practice to collaborative research genres. Wood (2020) and (2017) suggests that in addition to the university ethical requirements, PALAR requires researchers to develop a specific set of ethics. In addition to the suggestions listed above, I therefore ensured that:

- The principles guiding the work were negotiated during the relationship-building phase and were accepted and negotiated by all members of the ALS;

- The ethical contract was negotiated by the ALS;

- The work of all participants was recognised and valued;

- Participants wishes not to comment or contribute were also respected;

- There was a high level of transparency in all phases of the research process;

- Evidence of compromise was demonstrated where all points of view were accepted;

- The research adhered to the principles of democratic decision-making, where end of cycle suggestions shaped future learning;

- There was equal access to information generated by the process for all participants;

- All members of the ALS benefited from the research; and

- The research had a wider benefit to the community and society at large.

This research required me to adhere to the ethical considerations above throughout the research cycles. The additional ethical considerations meant a deeper look into the three R's and seven C's that govern PALAR, as these align well with the above ethical considerations.

4.11 LIMITATIONS OF A PALAR DESIGN

PALAR also resonates with the philosophy of inclusion, participation of all members, democratic methods of knowledge acquisition and a wider social justice agenda. I found however, that PALAR research requires a great deal of time and effort compared to 'regular' qualitative approaches. PALAR requires commitment and a 'buy- in' from the ALS members from the outset. This has to happen at the beginning where mutual goals are negotiated by the ALS. This was however difficult to achieve, as the research focus and questions needed to be predetermined in the University Ethical Application. Consequently, any changes to the instrumentation or processes needed to be approved by the ethical committee which served to undermine the autonomy of the ALS. I was fortunate that members did not change the goals of the research proposal, but used them as a guide to shape their understandings in a unique manner.

4.12 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I explored PALAR as a research methodology that originated from lifelong learning and participatory action research. Opportunities to participate actively in the research and learning

developed the skills of the participants. For example, they were involved in drawing, photographing, making videos and PowerPoint slides which allowed them to take ownership of our project. Participation also allowed them to 'own' the project. Notably, they believed in the benefit of this research and committed fully to inclusive values. Research or learning content that is culturally relevant and appropriate is more likely to succeed and lead to sustainability beyond the research project. Consequently, my participants have the potential to become leaders in the field and cascade the knowledge gained during this project to their centres. Hence, research like this does not just benefit researchers but the participants who develop knowledge, skills and values to address issues in their communities.

In this chapter, I also explored the emancipatory paradigm in which this research was situated. In chapter three, the literature review highlighted how this sector is primarily undervalued and underpaid with little recognition from the government. Thus, I needed to enable the voice of the ECCE teachers and trainers and recognise their knowledge on inclusion. Traditional research can be self-serving but emancipatory research like this aims to improve the lives and to recognise the value of the work of my participants. Therefore the publication of an inclusive handbook for ECCE, presents a collection of their efforts and cascades knowledge to the sector. The handbook shares their lived experiences relating to inclusion using their reflective drawings, photovoice and reflective journals.

This chapter also highlighted the foundational elements of PALAR research that centre on what is termed the three R's of PALAR research – relationships, recognition and reflection. Throughout the three cycles of this research, critical reflection informed each step and allowed for individual and personal introspection. Building relationships among the co-researchers was inevitable and in the absence of democratic, trusting and purposeful relationships, I could see that PALAR could not really take place. In this chapter recognition is also seen as vital in PALAR as an affirmation of personal and collective achievement that needs to be rewarded and celebrated by the publication of a handbook on inclusion. Besides the three R's of PALAR, we mentioned the seven C's of PALAR that are interwoven. In addition, the chapter focused on ethical considerations and validity issues unique to PALAR research.

Through the recording of my reflections in a journal, I became more aware of my personal thoughts, positions, and feelings in relation to the phenomenon and theories. I was able to create connections that informed my methodology. Hence, as the principal researcher, PALAR methodology demanded that I become more inclusive and that I applied the philosophy of inclusion to my methodological

approaches. I also needed to step down from my high horse as a university researcher to become truly one with my co-researchers. The knowledge from the participants was recognised and their experiences were valued. At the end of this chapter, an eye-opener was that this PALAR methodology synchronises with the central principles of my theoretical framework and with my concept of the phenomenon of inclusion. The following chapter explores the relationship-building phase and the findings for cycle one of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION: CYCLE ONE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I discussed the research paradigm, approach and design of the study. I outlined the proposed research procedures consisting of three iterative research cycles and the data generation and analysis methods. The chapter also highlighted issues of trustworthiness and the ethical considerations specific to a PALAR design. Wood (2020) suggests that PALAR research can be divided into two phases comprising a phase for relationship building and a phase for research enquiry. In chapter four, Moseley (2015) remarked that relationships are a fundamental part of humanity where communication and a shared sense of belonging is established. In addition, Zuber-Skerritt (2018) states that the building of trust, cooperation and team spirit are important for the ongoing success and sustainability of a project with relationship building as an essential foundation (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013; c.f. 4.4.2.1).
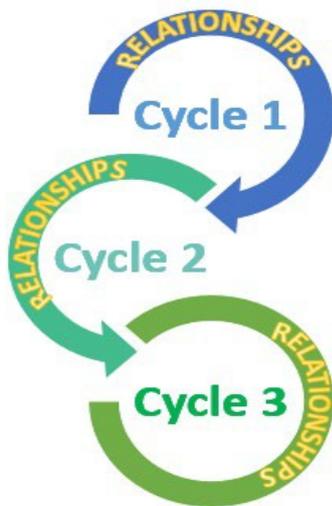
Figure 5.1 The two phases of research and relationship building are interwoven throughout the three cycles

Source: Author

This chapter focuses firstly on relationship building, which is followed by the first cycle of the research phase. In PALAR research, relationship building is never 'a quick fix' (Setlhare-Kajee, 2018, p. 38) but an essential component that requires time. A WhatsApp group was set up as guided by the Covid 19 safety protocols governing research at the university. Firstly, we needed to build relationships of trust

and a spirit of collaboration and shared goals within the team. Numerous PALAR publications (Luthuli, 2019; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018; Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) emphasise the importance of building relationships with researchers prior to and during the research phase. The two cycles of research and relationship building are intertwined, and fully integrated throughout the project (see figure 5.1) but they need to be discussed as different components for ease of understanding as suggested by Wood (2020). Zuber-Skerritt (2011) cautions that disregarding this phase may result in the failure of a PALAR programme.

5.2 THE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING PHASE – PHASE ONE

The study was planned to occur through face-to-face meetings for a period of six months, however the onset of COVID-19, disrupted my well-laid plans. Creating trepidation within me, was the uncertainty as to whether or not PALAR research could be conducted without face-to-face participation. Participation being the cornerstone of PALAR, it seemed to be impossible to achieve through virtual platforms. Fortunately, I was invited to attend participatory action research conferences held by the Action Learning and Action Research Association of America (ALARA). Online meetings held in these conferences served as an example of how to conduct participatory research during COVID-19. Equipped with this newfound guidance, I set up a virtual learning community using a WhatsApp group with my participants. A further issue that arose was that the research site I had planned to use had closed down temporarily and my participants were not keen to participate in virtual research. I, therefore, needed to contact various other ECCE centres to inquire if anyone had staff willing to participate in online research. After some time, I received a positive response from an ECCE training centre and nursery school. The participants were either trainers, prospective or graduated students or teachers associated with the centre at some point. This also called for a revision of my ethical contract with the university.

Following the ethical approval, we set up a WhatsApp group as a medium of communication, learning and research. Using text messages and responding to photographs, images and videos we were able to establish a rapport and a shared interest and passion for teaching young children. All the participants who formed the ALS were traumatised by a complete or partial loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, monthly data packages needed to be provided to sustain the participation of all members of the ALS. Seeing that "knowledge is created in community," focused relationship-building activities were planned for this initial phase (Wood, 2020, p. 26). Concurrently, the team set out to identify an area of need in ECCE research. Table 5.1 represents the procedures in the relationship building phase as proposed by Wood (2020).

Table 5.1 The relationship building phase

Activity	Purpose
Design a collaborative word cloud to develop a common purpose	Crafting a collaborative vision
Display the strengths and areas of weakness for group members to become aware of their own and each other's strengths, which in turn builds an individual's belief in their abilities. Establish strengths and weaknesses	Defining a mutual purpose Personal Development
Establishing the roles and responsibilities for each member	Forming the research team
Contextual issues: Resources available Challenges experienced Rising above the challenges	Addressing contextual issues
Identifying an urgent global need for inclusion of diversities like gender, socio-economic status, race, language and ability.	Setting a broad research goal
Finalising the ethical agreement	Negotiating the research ethics

5.2.1 Procedures in the Relationship Building Phase

As mentioned previously, members of the ALS were associated with the training institution and early learning centre as teachers, trainers and current or prospective students. However, only three co-researchers worked together presently and knew each other personally. Therefore, my first challenge in this phase was for members to get to know each other and to build a trusting relationship before the research phase could begin. I had planned to follow the steps in figure 4.3 (c.f. 4.4.4); however, I was unable to complete these in an ordered or sequential manner as I needed to allow the process to flow naturally and for my participants to start to 'own' the research plan. At this initial stage as the researcher, I felt the need to establish a relationship with my participants, I therefore asked each member to post a photograph with an adjective to describe themselves. This was an effective means to add a human element to the virtual research group, allowing ALS members to assign a face to each person. These photographs and adjectives were collated, and a digital collage was created that served as the initial profile for the WhatsApp group.

5.2.1.1 Crafting a Collaborative Vision

The next step entailed the "crafting of a collaborative vision" to further assist in relationship building among the participants (Wood, 2020, p. 107). The author proposes that researchers need to establish an area of common ground at this initial stage as an impetus for the bonding process. Hence, participants were asked to provide a motivation for their chosen careers as an ECCE teacher. The reflections of participants depicted a common thread of passion and dedication to working with young children. These contributions were collected, and the participants selected key phrases to form a word cloud. Similar to the Luniko project in Wood and McAteer (2017), this participatory visual served as a logo for the group, and the values represented were revisited throughout the research cycles. The comments that were selected to construct the collaborative vision are presented below in the word cloud (figure 5.2) and clearly demonstrate a "common sense of purpose" (Wood, 2020, p. 107).

Figure 5.2 Crafting a collaborative vision

Source: Author and Co-researchers

Co-researchers were asked to reflect on the construction of the collaborative vision. Jessica, an ECCE assessor, trainer and former teacher, emphasised that the activity highlighted a common interest between members of the group. She also mentioned the larger set of human values and social justice agenda that a project like this would bring to the fore. She articulated the common objective as follows:,

> "we all have come together with one thing in common - our love and passion to work with children. At the heart of this research is love for the children, which helps bring mutual respect, compassion and humanity to work. So, by doing this exercise we all are coming together to share, learn and improve lives."

Similarly, Bahle a trainer for ECCE teachers, foregrounded her feelings of faith in the research outcomes after the activity. She mentioned, that,

> "this relationship building exercise makes me look at our common interest. I believe that if we work together and have faith in what we are doing we will succeed and do great things with this research."

Participants demonstrated a common interest to share knowledge and to improve the lives of the children. Recognising a common ground for the research was a start, but participants also needed to move forward and to define a mutual purpose.

5.2.1.2 Defining a Mutual Purpose

Defining a mutual purpose involves a process where each person reflects on their strengths and their deficits to determine their learning needs to enable them to contribute towards attaining a vision (Wood, 2020). I consequently attempted to create a climate of transparency, where the participants cared for each other, and showed an interest in learning about the strengths and weaknesses of all members. After developing the collaborative vision, we had to reflect on personal and professional strengths and weaknesses that each brought to the project. Participants were asked to share their strengths and weaknesses in both personal and professional domains. These were collated and each person's 'chart' was plotted onto a power point slide and presented to the group.
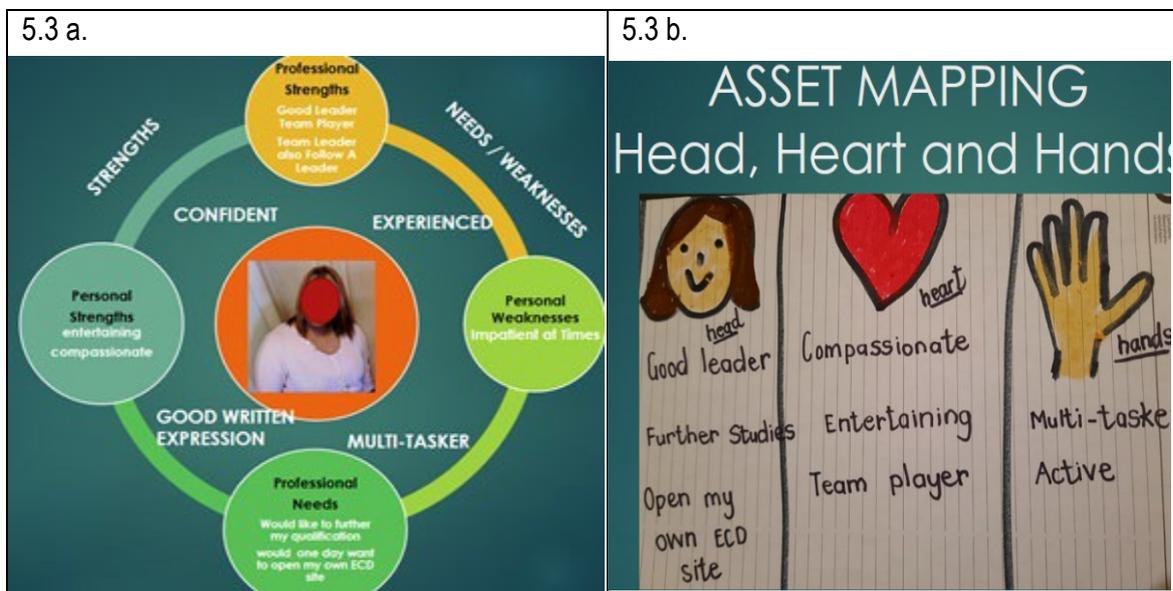
Figure 5.3 Asset mapping exercise

Source: Co-Researcher and Author

Members were invited to add on any strengths that they felt the person had left out. The final charts were then completed and presented with contributions from the rest of the group (figure 5.3 a). As proposed by Wood and McAteer (2017), members were subsequently required to complete an asset

map, which reflected their strengths in the domains of head, heart and hands. Members were asked to divide a piece of paper into three sections and draw a head, heart and a hand on each section. Members then needed to record their strengths into the three different domains of intellect (head), affect (heart) and skills (hands). These domains represent the teacher as a whole person and fostered a greater self-knowledge. Some of the participants shared these asset maps with the group (figure 5.3b).

This activity followed the suggestions by Wood (2020) that at the start of the project, self-knowledge and accountability for improving practice needed to be established. When participants reflected on the asset mapping, they indicated better self-knowledge and greater confidence in their abilities. Jessica noted that,

> *"From this activity, I can see that my greatest strength is determination, hard work and perseverance. Self-motivated, I always aim to go over and above and deliver a 110%, I am a perfectionist and always aim to reach higher in all that I do."*

Further, Annerly indicated her strength as a willingness to navigate through uncertainty in order to learn,

> *"my greatest strength personally and professionally is that I am always willing to learn and take risks. I accept critics and use it to better advance myself. I also love children, this helps me to do my job to the best of ability."*

I could see from these and similar comments, which the members of the ALS were developing knowledge of their own capabilities. In addition, Setlhare-Kajee (2018, p.38) believes that during this phase trust is developed. Lihle, a teacher with five years of experience claimed that she felt a sense of trust working and revealing her strengths and weaknesses to the group. She remarked that,

> *"I felt a little uncomfortable to talk about my strengths and weaknesses to a group of people that I did not know. But this was one way to start trusting the people in this project so we can all get to know each other better and reach our goals."*

Equipped with greater self-knowledge and defining a mutual purpose, however was still inadequate. I felt that participants needed to buy-in to the focus of the research. In true PALAR research, participants decide on the research focus according to their needs. However, this research proposal centering on inclusion was already drawn up and approved by the university ethics committee for my PhD study. Consequently, I needed to think creatively to get my participants to buy into and to identify with a need for inclusion.

5.2.1.3 Setting a Broad Research Goal

Once members had mapped out their strengths, it was important to determine a broad focus for the research. Initially, participants worked in pairs and each group was allocated a few selected news clippings. I was careful to pair my participants with partners who were unfamiliar with each other. This activity served a two-fold purpose of identifying a focus for the research and learning activities, as well as for the pairs to get to know each other better. Using collected clippings from news broadcasts that served as headlines from online news providers and my phone gallery, participants were asked to discuss the following pictures privately with their partner and report back to the group (figure 5.4).

Group 1	Group 1 reflected on their news headline of protesting students as, *"an image of students who are protesting with regards to being included into the education system. They want low fees in order to have an opportunity to study towards a tertiary education. The debate that this is an issue of the past and yet still something they are faced with today. The poor are very much excluded from gaining an education today."*
 Source: https://ewn.co.za/2020/03/13/parly-s-education-committee-promises-to-address-cput-students-grievances	
Group 2	The second group worked on a news clipping of protests against homosexuality, depicting homosexuality as "violation of the will of God." The image also highlighted a slogan that "one million gays broke the habit, and you can too." In addition, the protest banners emphasised that, "God loves you and not your sin." My co-researchers discussed in response that, *"whether gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender they are more vulnerable to stigma, violence and discrimination and they should be accepted by people and treated equally. I believe it is*
 Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10217638689429876&set=a.1334007161082	

	wrong for people to bring God and religion into these kinds of things and misuse or manipulate the word of God out of fear and hate."
Group 3 Source: https://www.kyivpost.com/world/associated-press-protests-over-police-killings-rage-in-dozens-of-us-cities.html?cn-reloaded=1	The third group responded to the George Floyd murder and the need for a society that accepts all kinds of people. The pair stated that, *"this picture is all about racism and hatred and disrespect for a human life. To be inclusive we must teach children with different race, religion and beliefs that we all are different and we can learn from each other."*
Group 4 Source: Author	The fourth group looked at protest action for gender equality that depicted a recent university silent protest action against gender based violence. Group members responded that, *"If we are inclusive it means that women have the same rights as men. But society treats the different genders unequally. It's been a struggle for women and children in many homes. Race, colour and gender don't matter to a violent man."*

Figure 5.4 Establishing a Need for Inclusion

From the above discussion, members decided that there was a common need to create a humane society that accepted different people. Consequently, Merriam & Caffarella's (1999) theory that

cognitive awareness of a common problem within a particular context triggered the initial process of learning among the participants seemed to apply. These paired activities confirmed that discrimination against people with difference is very much an issue today as it was in the past. In early childhood, these attitudes of acceptance are formed, and it is important to start building inclusive values early on. In support, Kaveri responded that,

> *"we teach kids about life and how to treat other people. Kids start with us in ECCE. We have to teach them this first."*

Hence, arising from the discussion that was prompted by these newspaper clippings, participants established a need to build a more socially just and equitable society. To achieve this, members agreed that my idea to develop a handbook on inclusion would be very beneficial for the sector. This handbook will serve as a means of cascading information to other ECCE role-players.

5.2.1.4 Forming the Research Team

Wood (2020) suggests that defining roles and responsibilities and accountability at the start of the project is essential. Members needed to commit to the project and to offer their expertise. A figure (figure 5.5) was drawn up of the different talents and roles that the group felt were essential for the development of the handbook.

Figure 5.5 Negotiating the roles

Source: Co-Researchers and Author

Before developing the handbook, we needed to gain an understanding of inclusion within this unique context. Co-researchers needed to research collaboratively and to present their learnings to the group. This could be done in numerous ways according to the strengths of the member. Members were quite excited to use visual methods with captions to portray their understanding of key concepts. Members could choose to use photography, drawings, slide presentations or videos according to their circumstances. A few members brought to my attention that the places where they worked did not allow photography of any sort. These co-researchers chose to use drawings instead. Others felt that they were interested in making videos after school hours to 'teach' the group what they had learnt. At this point a few co-researchers expressed concern regarding time constraints and the inability to make an optimum use of technology. Kaveri and Ranjeni alluded to being unfamiliar with the making of videos and expressed concerns about this. Despite her fear and after some coaching, towards the end of the project Rangeni developed her technological skills and presented a video. Some were embarrassed about their drawing abilities and chose to take photographs instead. The group agreed that nobody would be forced to do anything that made them feel apprehensive, and they were free to select their own ways of making contributions to the project. Drawing from the strengths of each member a portfolio committee was appointed to assist other members with their activities (table 5.2). These committee members could provide guidance to any one requiring assistance. I made it clear that I was also available to assist.

Table 5.2 - Roles and responsibilities of the ALS

	Role	Person in Charge
1.	Making Videos	Jessica
2.	Using Power Point	Bahle
3.	Photographing and Editing Photographs	Annerly
4.	Journal Writing Skills	Amina
5.	Presentation Skills	Raadia
6.	Drawings	Kaveri
7.	The Handbook	Rangeni and Lihle

From the above we see that the unique set of strengths and weaknesses of the participants were acknowledged and the planning continued to develop according to their strengths and abilities.

5.2.1.5 Contextual Issues

Since ECCE is presently a resource-scarce sector, the group needed to be aware of potential support structures that exist in the community to help them to attain their goal of inclusion and move towards the "co-ordination of and collaboration with existing resources, rather than creating new ones" (Wood, 2020). Consequently, participants were asked for possible support organisations that would assist the group and the suggestions that were made by the group were captured in figure 5.6. Support organisations that were identified included Inclusive Education South Africa, Training and Resources in Early Education (TREE), New Beginnings, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, PlaySA and an ECD Facebook Support Group. During the PALAR project, participants including myself engaged in an online three-day course on inclusive education in ECCE (Appendix: K). This course assisted in shaping this study as the focus was on the inclusion of all diversities not just disabilities. Thereafter afew participants attended a follow-up course specific to the inclusion of children with disability. Co-researchers were also encouraged to attend the online course with Playsa that focused on play in different age groups in the entire ECD sector (from birth to grade three). Further discussion of the research context revealed the extent of the marginalisation that these teachers were experiencing. Messages also indicated a passion and dedication for their work despite these challenges

Figure 5.6 Support structures available to the ECCE sector

Source: Co-Researchers and Author

5.2.1.5.1 Challenges Experienced

In their haste to curb the spread of COVID-19, the South African government closed all schools, including ECCE sites; comprising preschools, crèches and playgroups (Bridge, 2020; Giese, 2020; Brooks & Hatnack, 2020; Vorster, 2019). According to reports by Ilifa Bantwana (2020), ninety-nine per cent of ECCE sites reported that fees were not paid due to the lockdown and therefore, eighty-three per cent of owners were unable to pay the full salaries of staff over the lockdown period. Ninety-six per cent also reported that their income was insufficient to cover their basic operating costs. In July 2020, the government sanctioned the reopening of centres (Bridge, 2020) but seventy per cent remain closed due to a lack of financial capital to comply with the standard operating procedures (Giese, 2020). However, this did not come as a surprise, considering that prior to the pandemic, this sector remained largely disadvantaged with workers earning well below the minimum wage threshold with instability and poor staff retention in South Africa (Bridge, 2020) and internationally (McDonald, Thorpe & Irvine, 2018).

In keeping with the above, the participants commented on the lack of significance given to the ECCE sector; and the lack of value accorded to this sector compared to the formal education sector. Bahle stated that,

> *"due to COVID 19 the ECCE centres are treated differently. Their jobs are not important to this world. Most ECD teachers were not getting paid during this covid 19 period. Not even getting funds from government. Things they were saying were not taken serious like other teachers who are teaching big grades."*

A new mother, Raadia who worked in the sector for seven years indicated an unfortunate incident of not receiving maternity benefits and taking a pay cut on returning after the birth of her son. She stated that,

> *"I asked for a three month maternity leave as financially it was hard [up] but as the time came closer I asked for a little more time as I was still breast feeding and my baby was only two months. My boss then said take another three months I agreed as I had no choice because I worked for seven years without being registered. Not long after that I received a call from my boss saying that when I come back to work my salary will be reduced from R3500 to R3000. I was really hurt as I was a dedicated worker and felt this was unfair yet again I could not do anything as I was not a registered worker. This is an experience I recently had."*

Kaveri, also reported financial constraints when she received only half her salary since the COVID-19 because children were not attending the centre. She also remarked that, due to her low income although working in the sector for twenty years, she was unable to study and receive a formal

qualification. She worked long hours daily from six in the morning to five in the evening, and had to come home to cook and clean which was so tiring.

From the above statements in the participant reflective journals and conversations, I can conclude that the onset of a pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing plight of these ECCE role-players. Earning a minimal wage with no job stability, confirmed that little recognition is given to ECCE as a serious career choice. This is despite research in South Africa, and internationally, that indicates the early years as a critical period for human development where quality early childhood care and education leads to higher levels of social, emotional, cognitive and physical well-being in young children (Atmore, 2019). As a result little recognition and support from government has led to the marginalisation of such teachers.

5.2.1.5.2 Rising above Challenges

The National Curriculum Framework (DBE, 2015, p. iii) recognises the importance of the early years as a period of critical development. The document states that;

> "delays in cognitive and overall development before schooling can often, have long lasting and costly consequences for children, families and society. The most effective and cost-efficient time to intervene is before birth and [in] the early years of life."

In keeping with this the co-researchers, acknowledged the importance of their work in terms of developing the child in various domains, during this critical period. Annerly stated that:

> "we help a child develop emotionally, socially and intellectually."

She also highlighted how this phase laid a foundation for future schooling, taught important life lessons and identified red flags early. She stated that:

> "we are the ones who lay a foundation for the child's future education, ECCE is where the learning begins and it's what gets children excited to want to go to school. We also pay attention to a child's learning capabilities that can be brought to the parents notice before the child goes to 'big school'. We help to better prepare and equip the child for their future by teaching them basic things that can help them along life's path."

In addition, Bahle commented on the importance of her impact on the lives of children and indicated a passion that went beyond a meagre salary. She stated that:

> "I know my job and like working with children they give joy to my heart although I am not getting paid much but I'm doing it out of love."

The importance of ECCE as a phase for more than just education but also care was emphasised by Raadia. She stated that:

"We are the ones who help children overcome their fears. We as teachers basically take over the role of a parent."

Amina presented a display that summed up these ideas. She compared young children to seeds and teachers as gardeners. With proper care and nurturing these seeds would grow into the flowers of tomorrow (See figure 5.7).
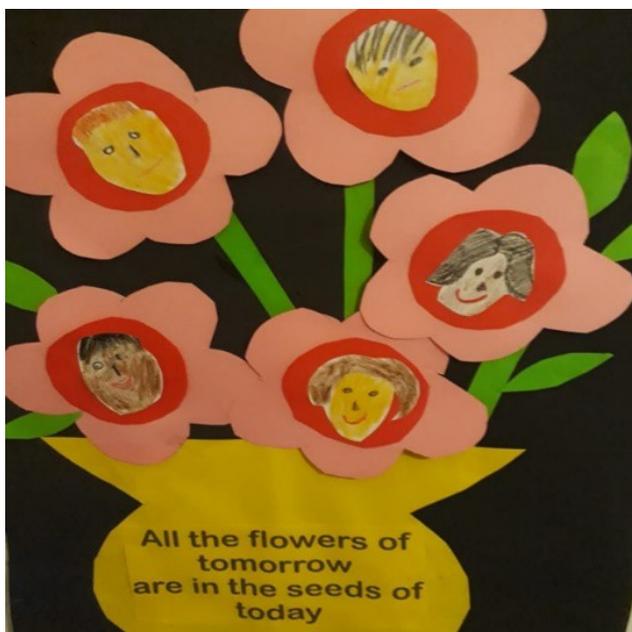
Figure 5.7. Teachers as gardeners
Source: Co-Researcher

The findings suggest that the co-researchers were aware of their critical role in shaping young minds for the future. Despite their low salaries and poor work conditions they laboured on out of pure love for the children. Using Amina's metaphor of the seed, I could compare these teachers to gardeners. With the right amount of patient nurturing, sunlight, water and good soil these seeds would reach their optimum levels and one day produce flowers. According to Baptiste (2002) some plants require special care while others are hardy. Additionally certain plants may need transplanting, support, lots of sun and different quantities of water. If a plant is not growing, as it should, the gardener needs to investigate the condition of the environment of the plant. Instead of looking at the deficiencies withinthe plant, the growth conditions need firstly to be corrected. Moreover, the pivotal role of these nurturers in the development of the youngest members in society cannot be over emphasised. Looking at contextual factors, low salaries and poor work conditions did not dissuade this group from their passion for working in this sector.

5.2.1.6 Negotiating the Research Ethics

The university ethical clearance was received before the start of the project and this comprised principles outlined by the Belmont Report that centre on three main ethical considerations, including respect for persons, beneficence and justice (c.f. 4.10; Salganik, 2014). Due to the participatory, democratic and emancipatory agenda of PALAR research and an extended association with the members of the group, the ethics needed to be revisited and negotiated by the research group. Based on the principles of epistemic democracy (c.f. 18.1, c.f. 2.2.1.3.2, c.f. 4.2) the knowledge of all participants was valued and recognised during the group interactions. Further to that, participants could choose not to comment or not to participate if they did not want to. A high level of transparency was required in all phases of the research process and participants had opportunities to compromise and also to show respect for the viewpoints of others. Moreover, the research cycles were shaped by democratic decision-making, with a previous cycle shaping future learning. The groups also decided that all members of the ALS including the community and society at large, needed to benefit from the research.

5.3 The Research Phase – Phase two

As mentioned earlier, PALAR research requires two phases; a relationship building and then a research phase. The research phase is represented by the lower half of the infinity sign represented by Figure 4.3. (c.f. 4.4.4). PALAR research calls for collaborative decisions regarding the setting up of the research objectives for a study. However due to the university ethical requirements, the research objectives were decided in advance and presented to the members of the ALS. They were asked to streamline these objectives according to their contextual needs. I was aware that any changes to these, meant reapplying for my ethical clearance. Fortunately, there were no changes, and all members of the ALS were in agreement, as these research objectives were aligned to their broad goals expressed earlier. At this point, participants also needed to finalise the data collection methods. As mentioned earlier, participants were interested in the use of visual methods including videos, photographs, slides and drawings to present their knowledge. Members agreed that each individual could choose their own way of representing their knowledge. Guided by myself, researchers decided to begin by ascertaining the current situation at their respective centres.

5.3.1 Cycle One Data Generation

Cycle one was informed by the first research objective, which was to establish the current state of inclusion in the learning environment. This cyclic inquiry consisted of four phases that emerged from

the collaborative responses of the participants. The ALS engaged in planning by analysing the observations from the members and identified broad areas of need. Using probing questions, the participants collaboratively engaged in dialogue to further explore what needed to be learnt. Members used drawings and photographs to represent their observations. Finally at the end of the cycle, reflective journals were used to record their needs and ways to address future cycles. Figure 5.8 represents the procedures followed in cycle one.
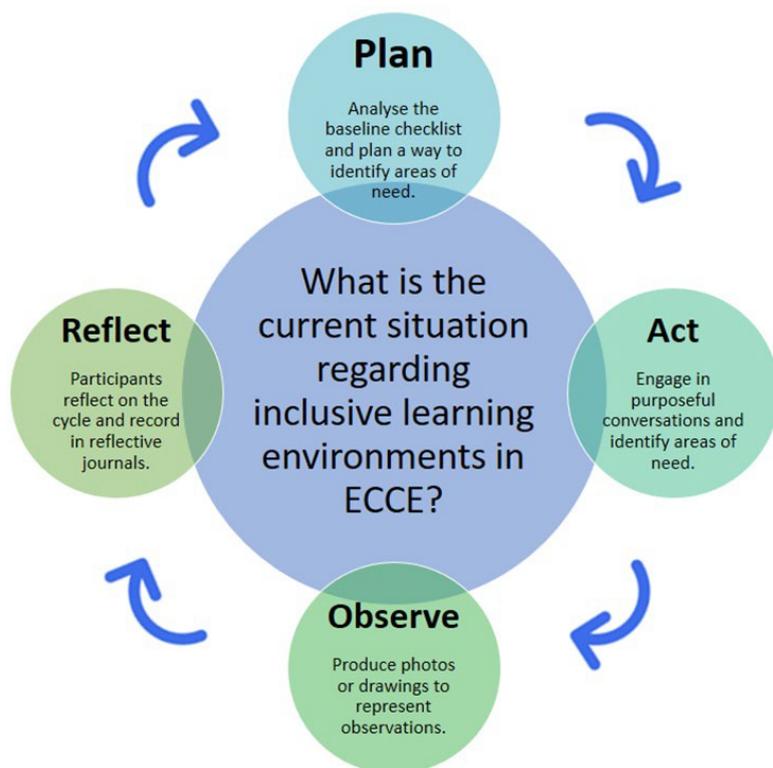
Figure 5.8 Cycle one iterative process

Source: Author

The baseline checklist was used as an instrument to gauge the current situation at the ECCE centres. As mentioned in chapter four, the baseline checklist ascertained members' knowledge and understanding of inclusion (c.f. 4.6.1). Table 5.3 indicates the detailed process of the baseline checklist presented in steps to show logical flow in arriving at themes and categories.

Table 5.3. Steps that were followed in the analysis of the baseline checklist

Steps	Procedures
Step 1	Following the relationship-building phase, checklists were handed to the co-researchers through a PDF and WORD format on whatsapp.

Step 2	Co-researchers observed their respective learning environments and ticked the appropriate collumns, made comments and returned these to the research facilitator.
Step 3	The research facilitator collated the responses and produced a composite chart of all responses.
Step 4	Responses were discussed on WhatsApp and notes were recorded in writing next to relevant items.
Step 5	With coaching the ALS attempted to categorise the items into themes. Eventually I built upon their efforts to categorise the data.
Step 6	Using colour coding the composite checklist was presented to the ALS for verification. These subthemes were then related to wider ideological issues as per the requirement for CTA analysis and approved by the team.

Findings from the baseline checklist were triangulated using visual data, journal reflections and purposeful conversations that arose from consideration of four themes.

5.3.2 The Themes and Sub Themes

As mentioned previously, following the identification of areas of need from the checklist that was further confirmed by reflective drawings, photovoice, journal entries and conversations, members were able to establish the current situation of inclusion. Table 5.4 indicates the themes and sub-themes that were identified from the data. The table also indicates the implications for the next cycle.

Table 5.4 - Critical thematic analysis of data in phase two-cycle one

Critical Thematic Analysis in Cycle one			Implications for cycle 2
Data Generation Activity	**Step 1 Open Coding** What was repeated, recurrent, and forceful in these texts?	**Identification of a Broad Theme**	
• Reflective journal entries • Baseline checklist • Reflective Drawings • Purposeful Conversations	• Myopic Views of Inclusion • Inclusion as an End Product • Macro-exclusion • Micro-exclusion	Theme one – Understandings of Inclusion	How can teachers gain an understanding of inclusion?

• Reflective journal entries • Baseline checklist • Photo voice • Purposeful Conversations	• Misconstruing Privilege • Misconceptions of Diversity • Stereotyping and the Exclusion of Certain Groups	Theme two – Lack of awareness of Privilege, Diversity and Stereotyping	How can we challenge the current reality through building awareness of privilege, diversity and stereotyping?
• Photo voice • Reflective journal entries • Baseline checklist • Photo voice • Purposeful Conversations	• Teaching using Rote Learning and Repetition • Eurocentrism in the ECCE Learning Environment • 'Schoolification' of ECCE • Rigidity in the ECCE Curriculum and Planning Schedule	Theme three – Traditional Teaching Methods	How can we adopt an inclusive play-based pedagogy?
• Reflective journal entries • Baseline checklist • Photovoice • Purposeful Conversations	• Limited Interaction Among Role Players • Communication that Excludes • Learning in Isolation	Theme four – Focus on Relationship-Building	How do we build relationships?

5.4. FINDINGS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION: CYCLE ONE

Data presented in the following sections were informed by the research question, "what is the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments?" The purpose of this cycle was to identify areas of deficit that could be addressed in the future cycles. Four themes were established and four areas of need were identified to form the basis for future learnings.

5.4.1 Theme One: Understandings of Inclusion

Dominant ideologies regarding how society understands inclusion, may impede the creation of an inclusive learning environment. Upon comparing the literature in chapter three, the theoretical perspectives in chapter two and the messages from the ALS, the following four deficits in the understanding of inclusion were identified. Firstly, inclusion has a broad meaning that focuses on more than just the segregation of children with disabilities, special educational needs (SEN) and barriers to learning (Walton, 2018; c.f. 3.2.3.1). Secondly, in keeping with a critical perspective, inclusion requires

ongoing inquiry as a process rather than a product. Thirdly, the findings presented below indicate a need to understand macro-exclusion as a blatant disregard for human rights that needs to be addressed. Finally, practices of micro-exclusion, including assimilation, integration and celebration, were also foregrounded as insidious forms of exclusion. The messages presented below suggests a need for a deeper understanding of the concept of inclusion.

5.4.1.1 Myopic Views of Inclusion

From the baseline checklist, it was clear that the ALS felt that inclusion is about integrating children with disability into the classrooms. Co-researchers mentioned that special education teachers are trained to work towards inclusive education, thus alluding to a narrow view of inclusion (c.f. 3.2.3.1). Aligned to a narrow perspective of inclusion, Bahle indicated in her journal entry that this amounts to centres that:

> *"need to include children with special educational needs. These children require a specialised environment with special equipment which we cannot always afford. Personally, I feel that children who need sign language or braille or children with autism are challenging in centres with normal children."*

In a similar way Lihle recorded in her journal that she needed to have

> *"a better understanding of epilepsy."*

Co-researchers were asked to present their understandings of inclusion as a reflective drawing activity. The following were a few of the drawings and captions that were presented to the group (figure 5.9).The drawings highlighted a narrow and deficit understanding of inclusion (Lilley, 2015; c.f. 3.2.3.1) focusing on the inclusion of children with disability or learning barriers. Captions also used vocabulary that misconstrued inclusive teaching to be the *equal* treatment of all children. As mentioned previously, this is questionable as inclusive teaching requires teachers to work *equitably*, due to all children being different with unique strengths and weaknesses (c.f. 3.2.3; Paul, 2019). Aligning with a deficit model, discourses containing words like 'normal' and 'average' go against inclusive terminology (c.f. 3.2.3.6.5) as inclusion is about accepting that *all* children are different and unique. This suggests that the centre needs to be flexible enough to accommodate all children.

After discussion, all agreed that inclusion had much broader implications than 'disability' and 'barriers' and a broader understanding needed to be gleaned in cycle two.

	It means helping children with all kinds of difficulties like slow learners, disabled learners and giving them a chance to feel special. It's about teaching the average

Research Participant 1 	*child not to condemn children with differences but to respect them. This makes the disabled/slow learner feel welcome and feel comfortable in their learning environment and it would show them that they too have a chance to learn. Teachers need to find ways of being accommodating to all learners and treat them all equal.* Upon discussion, the ALS decided that inclusion is more than just the inclusion of children with disabilities. The use of the word 'average' goes against an inclusive vocabulary (c.f. 3.2.3.6.5).
Research Participant 3 	*Inclusive education makes all teachers or practitioners understand that children are different. Some have different barrierssome are normal that means teachers mustknow how to deal with each child under their circumstances.* After discussion, it was highlighted that inclusion deals with more than just barriers to learning. Similar to the previous participant, the use of the word 'normal' also goes against inclusive terminology.
Research Participant 5 	*Every child should be loved, cared for and treated with respect no matter thechallenge. Children with disabilities need tobe treated equally.* Upon exploration, the ALS decided that inclusion is more than just including children with disabilities, but has a broader meaning encompassing all differences. The mention of children being treated equally is arguable. Inclusive teachers treat children equitably rather than equally (Paul, 2019; c.f. 3.2.3.).
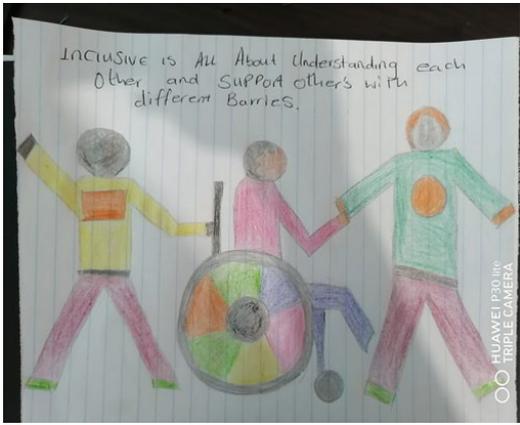
Figure 5.9 Participant drawings: The understanding of inclusion

Source: Co-Researchers

5.4.1.2 Inclusion as an End Product

Researchers understand inclusion as evolving and dependent on contextual factors. Therefore the

concept of inclusion is varied and fluid, and for teachers to be inclusive, a critical stance is essential

(c.f. 3.2.3.1). Hence, centres never reach a state of inclusion as it is a process of *becoming* not a product or a state of rest. Contrary to this, Lihle pointed out that,

> *"inclusive education is a goal for most schools. I think that this goal of inclusive education can be reached with a right mindset and with the right support. I can only rest when I am a teacher that includes all children. "*

Upon examining this statement, the ALS members decided that this was contradictory, as teaching is a career of daily learning and readjusting without ever achieving a state of rest. Consequently, a state of rest implies no need to learn further. It was agreed that further knowledge needed to be gained about understanding inclusion as an evolving process.

5.4.1.3 Macro-Exclusion

Segregation is a form of macro-exclusion that occurs when children are physically located away from regular classrooms and children (c.f. 3.2.2.1). Amina brought up the point that children with disabilities or learning barriers could be bullied and traumatised when sharing programmes with other children, and alluded to the reality of the practice of segregation for children with specialised needs. She claimed that:

> *"I love the idea of inclusive education but the reality is that children with special needs are often bullied and ridiculed by their peers. They are stared at by the other children which makes them feel really uncomfortable. Little children can be so cruel. Parents too, are aware of this and choose to segregate their children away from normal children."*

Ranjeni also responded that there was a need for extra staff members to assist children with disability or learning barriers. She stated that:

> *"I see that with inclusion a child with special needs and the other children may be disadvantaged without an assistant to help me."*

Kaveri also concurred that inclusion requires teachers with specific skills and qualifications. She declared that it is:

> *"difficult - as I am not qualified to be an inclusive teacher."*

Consequently, research on children experiencing learning barriers placed in inclusive learning environments has indicated benefits for both children with learning barriers and 'regular children' (c.f. 3.3) however similar to Ranjeni, Raadia also expressed concern that inclusion could disadvantage children who were 'regular' as children with learning barriers required more of the teacher's time. She noted that,

> *"children with special needs have to be included in all the activities. I have worked with a child with autism and I find that he can become disruptive during my lessons. When there*

are sudden changes he would become upset and certain sensory activities were too overpowering for him. I needed a lot of assistance to cope with my class in that year. So inclusion is possible but you need to understand the children in your group and make allowances otherwise your entire plan gets disrupted and everyone is disadvantaged."

Following this statement the ALS discussed the flaws as no two children are alike and children need to learn about embracing *all* difference from a young age. These differences would be more than just disability or learning barriers and it would be impossible to segregate children with *all* diversities.

5.4.1.4 Micro-Exclusion

Micro-exclusion refers to the exclusion of children who have access to the ECCE centre but who do not participate fully or who do not achieve fully. Micro-exclusion is therefore a more insidious form of exclusion (Cologon, 2019; Faustino et al., 2017; Kollosche et al., 2019; c.f. 3.2.1.2). The cycle revealed integration, assimilation and celebration as a subtle form of exclusion. The previous section on macro-exclusion discussed segregation as a blatant form of exclusion however integration is less obvious. It is the ineffective placement of children together within the same settings (Daniels, 2018; Swart & Pettipher, 2016; c.f. 3.2.2.1) without making adjustments or adaptations to facilitate real inclusion. Implying integration, Jessica stated that *"our centre is inclusive because there are children who attend with special needs."* She also noted the challenges of including all children in school concerts and assemblies as well as social play due to behaviour issues or developmental delays. Following further questioning of the co-researchers on their views, it was found that most believed that having diverse children present in their centres meant that they were being included, however on closer examination it was found that the learning environment had not been adjusted adequately to suit the diversity of children who were present to enable participation and achievement. Hence, the ALS expressed the need to gain greater clarity on integration as a form of micro-exclusion. Upon further investigation of the current learning environment, assimilation was also indicated where learners are expected to adapt to the existing environment resulting in a loss of personal identity. This promotes standardisation and conformity where minority groups become a part of the dominant group and difference is disregarded (c.f. 3.2.2.2). Alluding to assimilation, Kaveri indicated,

> *"children come from different backgrounds but they are able to fit in so well and follow all the expectations of our centre. We have children who have learnt to understand English so quickly despite speaking a different language at home."*

Participants also noted that how children from different religious backgrounds were not always catered for in accommodating specific food requirements and religious symbols like beads or strings were also not encouraged. This indicated a clear need to understand the concept of

assimilation and how expecting a child to 'fit-in' could cause a less obvious form of exclusion that promotes standardisation and conformity where minority groups become part of the dominant group and difference is negated (c.f. 3.2.2.2). Moreover, alluding to ideas of celebration, Annerly stated that,

> *"we acknowledge and celebrate different cultures and religious groups. We have activities for all the different groups that are at our school."*

Participants also alluded to Cultural Day celebrations where children and teachers dress and share food with a focus on all cultures. Significantly, discourses of celebration could clearly be detected in these reflections and a need was identified for participants to explore this concept more deeply. Consequently, discourses of celebration that minimise difference, do not interrogate issues of power and privilege, and thus must be contested (c.f. 3.2.2.3).

5.4.1.5 Theme Summary

This theme identifies four areas of need that are essential components that contribute to an understanding of inclusion. As mentioned previously, the ALS were asked to observe their present learning environment using a baseline checklist. This served as a springboard that guided further investigation into the question: "what is our present understanding of inclusion?" It is important to note that at the starting point of the research, similar to co-researchers, I had similar misconceptions about inclusion. These misconceptions suggested a need for all to gain a deeper insight into inclusion. I felt overwhelmed at first, as I was unsure how to proceed as PALAR calls for learning through discovery, therefore misconceptions needed to be brought to light democratically and collaboratively. As a result, purposeful conversations arising from carefully crafted questions, videos and slide presentations were used to probe further. These conversations encouraged members to think deeper and then to state their views in a context-specific and dialogical manner. The use of reflective drawings materialises the lived experiences, perception or thoughts of the group members (c.f. 4.7.2). Firstly using reflective drawings, members demonstrated that inclusion centres on disability or learning barriers. Literature on the other hand, indicated that *all* children are different, and inclusion has a social justice and human rights agenda that encompasses more than just disability. To proceed, we all needed to realise that children experiencing learning barriers were not the only ones who required equal opportunities in our education system. Secondly, upon analysis of the reflective journals and probing, I found that the ALS also believed inclusion to be a goal and product. This was contradictory to the theoretical stance adopted in this research, as a critical theory calls for a position of ongoing learning, unlearning and relearning. Thus to become inclusive teachers, we all needed to adopt this critical perspective to shape our thoughts and actions in an ongoing manner. Thirdly, the messages from members indicated a

need to clarify segregation as a blatant disregard for social justice and human rights. Fourthly, before I researched inclusion, similar to the members of the group, I also misconstrued practices of micro-exclusion as inclusion. There seems to be a fine line between the two that makes it vague and difficult to discern. This is due largely to the fact that the concept of inclusion is culture-specific and not a universally understood phenomenon (c.f. 1.2.1). To move forward I needed to solve the conundrum of what inclusion entails in a context-specific manner. The ALS also identified insidious forms of exclusion, including discourses centred on celebration, assimilation and integration.

5.4.2 Theme Two: Lack of Awareness of Privilege, Diversity and Stereotyping

As mentioned previously, conscientisation leads to the perception of "social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; c.f. 2.2.2.3.5). Essentially conscientisation leads to critical awareness of one's thoughts and actions. Teachers, becoming more aware impacts positively on the creation of a welcoming learning environment for all diversity, as it is lack of awareness that may lead to the exclusion of certain groups of people. As I compared the messages from my group with the literature review, three relevant deficits were identified. Members' statements presented below suggest a need for a greater awareness of privilege, the intersectional nature of diversity and stereotyping of certain groups that led to the exclusion of certain groups from the learning environment.

5.4.2.1 Misconstruing Privilege

Privilege is commonly understood as a set of unearned advantages that a person may experience. In the initial participant observation checklist, co-researchers indicated that certain groups were discriminated against in the past, whereas others were more privileged. Upon further discussion, it was agreed that although this happened in the past, it is still very much a present-day issue. During conversations, I also picked up, that members felt that they were not privileged because they were hardworking but marginalised in their careers. They also regarded materially wealthy people as privileged. To the group, privilege meant being born with a silver spoon in one's mouth, and this was not the case here. The baseline checklist revealed that only a few ALS members were aware that their backgrounds and past experiences affected their attitudes to people from different groups. This indicated a need for awareness of how past experiences impact on our present attitudes and belief systems. In addition, upon analysis of their reflective journals for cycle one, Amina made the following statement as a recommendation for herself for cycle two.

> " I need to become more aware of my own attitude due to my life experiences, as this
> does affect my feelings towards other groups of people."

Similarly, Jessica indicated a need to,

> *"become greatly aware of my own experiences and how these affect my work with the students that I train and the children that I teach."*

ALS members indicated a need to introspect on their own positions and on how this affects their unconscious attitudes towards groups regarded as 'others'.

5.4.2.2 Misconceptions of Diversity

In the context of this study, diversity refers to the wide variety of differences present among the children at our centres. Initially participants regarded diversity as difference in race and culture. This is true, however diversity also includes other identity markers.. Upon analysis of the reflective journals, data suggested a deficit in the understanding of diversity and the wider intersectional nature of the concept. Co-researchers indicated feelings of being ill-equipped to teach diverse groups as these topics about diversity were regarded as 'sensitive' and parents were often 'fussy' and complained to school managers if these topics were discussed in class. Participants also indicated how certain diversities were easy to speak about to children, while others were more 'sensitive'

Teaching a diverse group goes deeper than just including resources that represent diversity, Kaveri indicated a superficial understanding by stating that:

> *"I use books and puzzles that represent diverse groups of people during story and playtime. This takes a lot of effort but I ensure that these items are present in my lessons."*

Encouraging a 'colour-blind' approach to diversity in the classroom, two co-researchers indicated that,

> *"I feel that it is better to teach children to be colour blind and to focus less on differences and more on how we are similar. Therefore rather focus on the similarities we have" (Annerly).*

> *"We need to focus on what similarities we have as humans. We are all alike in so many ways. I feel that focusing on difference widens the gap. So let us look at how we are similar rather than our differences in a group" (Rangeni).*

Co-researchers also displayed an inability to recognise diversity in a homogenous group, and a reluctance to speak about difference preferring rather to focus on similarities. Seeing that identity markers are nuanced and intersectional, the above messages imply a need for the group to learn more about the impact of the interconnected nature of diversity (c.f. 3.2.2.2). The inability for participants to recognise diversity in a homogenous group, a 'colour-blind' approach and a focus on similarities rather than embracing diversity were highlighted as future areas of learning (c.f.

3.2.2). Feelings of being ill-equipped to teach diverse groups and a preference for teaching about particular selected diversities also required attention. The above findings suggested a need for the ALS to become more aware of the wider concept of diversity.

5.4.2.3 Stereotyping and the Exclusion of Certain Groups

Becoming more aware also required participants to identify stereotypes and how specific groups were excluded in their present learning environments. These stereotyped attitudes to people who are different make the true inclusion of diverse groups of children challenging to achieve (c.f. 1.2.3 & c.f. 3.4). Using photographs and conversations, participants were asked to identify stereotypes in their learning environment or instances of excluding certain groups. Categories of stereotyping that were identified from the photo voice exercise included stereotyping of race and the association of dark skin with 'evil'. The use of gender binary on charts that excludes children who may be intersex or transgender and the perpetuation of stereotyped gender play found on the packaging of 'engineer dress up kits' were also photographed. Figure 5.10 represents some of the photographs and captions that were collected and classified using firstly open coding then the closed coding of CTA.

The following stereotypes were found in the learning environment.

Stereotyping people with dark skins / Racial Bias 	*"After reading The Lion King in class, children made masks. Scar was the bad character and the movie shows him as dark. Children had to use black paint to paint his mask. The other evil characters in the story like the hyenas were also dark skinned."* These harmful stereotypes about dark skin need to be contested in the lessons we teach. They have an influence on children's thinking about people with darker skins and such representations hinder an inclusive learning environment.
Gender Binary	*"This is a chart showing the gender of the children in class. There is stereotyping of boys with blue bow ties and girls with pink hair bows. This ignores the child who is transgender or intersex who does not fit into these two boxes."* Children may deviate from being cisgender or

	come from different types of families that may not appear 'normative' therefore it is essential not to push these realities under the carpet (c.f. 3.2.2.1.4). Essentially, teachers with a dualistic mindset about the male or female gender possess a viewpoint that goes against inclusion. A further stereotype that was identified by the ALS were the pink head bows for the girls and blue bowties for the boys. This common colour stereotype was found to maintain current ways of standardising the colour associations with each gender.
Stereotyping of Gender Roles 	*"This photo is of an engineer dress up kit found in the dress up area at a centre. The packaging represents a stereotypical male engineer."* Resources in the centre need to be selected carefully with the purpose of challenging the status quo.
Stereotyping of Gender Roles and Family Structures 	*"This illustration represents a stereotypical family. We need to question if all families have the same structure. Further, the roles of the mother and father are stereotyped. The role of women has changed in society, and men too may cook and nurture while women go out and earn money for the family."* Teachers in ECCE need to facilitate an environment that promotes gender equity and fairness and an environment that challenges current ways of thinking and doing (c.f. 3.2.2.1.4).

Figure 5.10 Participant photographs of stereotyping

Source: Co-Researchers

In addition to photographs, stereotypes were also revealed during purposeful conversations with the co-researchers. In a private conversation, Bahle identified language bias that was displayed at the centre towards African children. She explained that,

> "When you are an African, a common stereotype is that you do not understand English. When African children first come to school, many are able to speak in English. It doesn't mean that if you're black you can't understand English."

Alluding to the stereotyping of people living in poverty, Kaveri noted that,

> "There is a general feeling that hard work gets you out of poverty. As we know this is not true as many people are prepared to work hard but are unable to find jobs."

During conversations, the ALS also alluded to children broadly regarding disabled people as unable to work, to drive or to have babies. Bahle claimed how one four-year-old indicated that people with disabilities are unable to play soccer. These common stereotypes that abound in society were also seen to permeate the ECCE learning environment, and these ways of thinking required challenging.

Becoming conscientised is not enough; teachers need also to act upon their awareness and to make a concerted effort to ensure that the learning environment welcomes all groups of people. The ALS identified a need to create a welcoming environment for all diversity. The literature reviewed indicates that a warm, accepting school climate resulted in improved academic performance when teachers made a concerted effort to welcome, care for, respect and include all children (c.f. 3.2.2.1.1). From the baseline checklist all researchers divulged that their centres lacked an inclusion policy to guide the purchase of toys and other resources for the centre. None of the centres they worked at were accessible for children / adults with disability and there were no ramps to enable wheelchairs. All co-researchers indicated that their school displays lacked the representation of a wide range of diversities, and participants further noted that children who were unable to pay school fees were excluded from the centres. Of considerable importance as well was the fact that most participants noted that different languages were not represented on the centre display boards and newsletters and correspondence to parents were unavailable in different languages. The baseline checklist also revealed that for most of the co-researchers' different religions were not represented during school prayer sessions. Of concern was that all religious festivals and celebrations were not given equal time and importance according to the school demographics. In summary, the above messages imply a need to create a welcoming atmosphere for all children, including those from marginalised groups.

5.4.2.4 Theme Summary

The messages from the ALS suggest that members need to develop an awareness of their own attitudes towards privilege and diversity that are essential components of becoming conscientised. This conscientisation develops an awareness of stereotyping and exclusion of certain groups that may happen unknowingly in the learning environment. Messages from the ALS reveal a need for awareness as their own life experiences may attach specific meanings to specific groups of people. This awareness is termed critical consciousness in critical theory and conscientisation in critical pedagogy. This is a concept that permeates the study as a vital underlying theoretical concept. One way of gaining a greater critical consciousness or of achieving conscientisation is by exploring the history of oppression and how its remnants still persist in present-day society. As the facilitator of the group, I had to tread carefully as the topic was sensitive and the team was not prepared as yet to share such deep realisations with the other group members on such a platform. They were however happy to share their experiences with me privately. Consequently, deeper realisations arose from personal reflections in journals and private conversations that were kept anonymous. The reflections from the ALS indicated a need for greater awareness of privilege as this concept seemed to be misunderstood in the group. The messages also suggested that participants need to understand diversity as a concept that encompasses all differences within the learning environment and the impact of the intersectional nature of diversity. Also, participants recognised that the stereotyping of gender, race, language, poverty and ability in the learning environment needed to be deconstructed. Consequently, by developing awareness, participants may gain the power to change their current reality. This conscientisation means having an awareness of the effects of personal privilege on interactions with members of other groups. Conscientisation also entails *actions* to embrace diversity and to contest stereotypes that seek to maintain the status quo. Thus without conscientisation, the creation of an inclusive learning environment that is welcoming to diversity would not be possible. The above findings suggest a need for the ALS to challenge their positional attitudes and current reality through a process of conscientisation. Significantly, the process of conscientisation also needed to be applied to myself as the chief facilitator of the project. It was impossible to proceed authentically without gaining self-knowledge of my preconceived notions regarding groups of people I considered as 'other'. Over the course of this study, I developed an awareness of how my personal baggage impacted on my attitudes to the diverse members in my group. This was not something I could achieve overnight. It required a constant examination of my thoughts and actions throughout the research process. It meant unlearning beliefs from childhood that were deeply ingrained in my psyche. It meant addressing these belief systems, bringing repressed memories to the fore and it meant learning new ways of thinking and acting. This also impacted positively on my relationships with family. I was often

unwilling to consider the viewpoint of others in my inner circle of friends and family. To be inclusive, it meant backing down and accepting the views of others as valid and appropriate for *them*. It meant a major overhaul to my personality, having a greater appreciation for different opinions and developing greater empathy in my social interactions. This point in my research was a catalyst to build this personal awareness and conscientisation.

5.4.3 Theme Three: Traditional Teaching Methods

Traditional teaching methods where the teacher is seen as the knower and giver of knowledge goes against the principles of a critical pedagogy. As mentioned in the review of literature, an inclusive pedagogy is based on the principles of participatory and critical pedagogy. In chapter three, participatory pedagogy was explored as a means to enable the child's voice to be heard and to advance the participation of the child as a thinker (Meyer, 2018). This also challenges the role of teachers to take up new dimensions as learners, guides and listeners (c.f. 3.2.3.5.3). When comparing the statements from the ALS to literature, the following four messages contradicted an inclusive pedagogy. Messages from the members of the ALS presented below highlighted learning through rote and repetition, Eurocentric resources in the learning environment, what was referred to as 'schoolification' and rigidity in the curriculum and planning schedule.

5.4.3.1 Teaching using Rote Learning and Repetition

Traditional 'banking' methods of teaching portray teachers as the possessors of knowledge, deposited into the empty heads of children (c.f. 2.2.2.2.2). This system ignores children's prior knowledge and life experiences and works toward suppressing creative and critical thinking. Upon analysing the baseline checklists, co-researchers indicated that young children learn best through repetition and rote learning. Conversations with the group revealed that children in early learning spent time during the discussion rings memorising the colours, days of the week, months of the year and seasons during their learning. This kind of repetitive sing-song learning does have benefit in the early years, as it develops self-confidence and language abilities. However, there needs to be a balance between rotelearning and the dialogical problem-posing approach as a complete focus on rote methods perpetuates banking. Education must therefore focus on cognition rather than on transferrals of information (c.f. 2.2.2.3.4, Freire, 2000).

5.4.3.2 Eurocentrism in the ECCE Learning Environment

All groups of children need to see themselves represented in the curriculum and it should not just represent people from the Eurocentric western world. Responsive teaching indicated that learners must connect school to their lived experiences. Here teachers need consistently to create activities, where students' lives are brought into the classroom and connections are made between their lives and the content being taught (c.f. 3.2.3.5.3). Annerly and Bahle captured photographs that represented Eurocentric story images in their learning environment. Figure 5.11 reflects the items in the learning environment that were inadequate representations of the cultural group at their centres.

	This is a photo of a story resource made by the teacher using a wooden spoon and a cupcake casing. The story prop reflects a princess with golden hair and peach skin. Unfortunately, none of the children could identify with these physical features of the story character.
	This photo represents a file found in the learning environment. The file belongs to a child and contains the child's portfolio within. The pictures on the file represent a popular fairy tale 'Frozen.' The heroes are fair-skinned and the story is set in the snowy north pole with little relevance to the South African context.
	This photo represents a worksheet found in the learning environment asking children to colour the skin peach and the hair yellow. This serves to exclude children with different complexions. All children should see themselves in the resources of the learning environment.

Figure 5.11 Representations of a Eurocentric learning environment

Source: Co-Researchers

Since inclusive education prioritises the enactment of socially just forms of schooling, our resources in the learning environment need to be a reflection of the life experiences of the child. The learning takes place by making connections, and when a child is able to make this connection, equity and inclusion is promoted. Observations by participants identified items that were not aligned to current research (c.f. 3.2.3.5.3) that calls for a culturally responsive learning environment.

5.4.3.3 'Schoolification' of ECCE

The objective of 'schoolification' focuses on achieving school readiness as a central activity of ECCE (c.f. 3.2.3.6.2). However, learning through play is an integral part of a quality early years programme with many benefits, including the creation of an inclusive learning environment. It is through play that young children learn and develop and make sense of the world around them. However, several co-researchers indicated that outdoor activities get in the way of 'real learning' and raised concerns about play distracting the children from real learning. The false dichotomy of play-versus-learning, needs to be interrogated, as in the early years, it is through play that essential skills are learnt (c.f. 3.2.3.5.2). Moreover, play enables children to engage their senses fully in learning. A few co-researchers alluded to the fact that multisensory activities require greater time and effort to prepare for. Crayons, worksheets and drawing on paper were thus a preferred medium at the centres due to convenience. Supporting 'schoolification' (Ebrahim et al., 2019), co-researchers indicated a readiness approach in ECCE to prepare children for the formal academic programme. This entailed a more teacher-driven approach rather than a child-centred approach and a teacher-facilitated programme.

5.4.3.4 Rigidity in the ECCE Programme

The *Education White Paper Six* advocates that a flexible curriculum and assessment policy enables access for all learners, despite differences in their learning needs. The curriculum can present as a barrier to learning unless it is flexible to accommodate diverse learning needs. The ELDA's of the NCF assists in organizing children's development and learning opportunities and are merely guidelines for observation and planning of the early learning programme. All children are unique in their individual learning needs, thus the activities offer flexibility to early years teachers (c.f. 3.2.3.5.4). From the baseline checklist, all teachers indicated that children needed to be treated equally in their learning environment. As clarified earlier, teachers need to aim for equity and not equality (Paul, 2019; c.f. 1.2.3.). A one-size-fits-all approach cannot be adopted in the early years. Consequently, all co-researchers stated how time-consuming it is to plan tasks to accommodate the needs of all children. They also indicated that the managers handed them lesson plans, and there was little flexibility in their

daily schedules. Some felt that they needed to focus properly on their goals and to meet the lesson outcomes rather than to get distracted by children's individual needs. Co-researchers seldom allowed children to choose activities in the ECCE learning environment. Furthermore, co-researchers were unaware of the hidden curriculum and the important values that were imparted to children in an informal manner. These findings were contested in current research that indicated a need for teachers to achieve greater flexibility in the curriculum (c.f. 3.2.3.5.4).

5.4.3.5 Theme Summary

Messages from the group reported findings in research that called for an active and participatory play-based pedagogy in the early years. From the above findings I can identify four deficits that impede an inclusive play-based pedagogy in ECCE. Firstly, traditional methods of teaching, entailing rote and repetition methods, were predominantly used by the co-researchers. These methods impede the creation of a socially just and democratic learning environment. Secondly members demonstrated the use of traditional stories, games and charts that represent a Eurocentric culture that did not align with the life experiences of the children within their groups. Thirdly, the group demonstrated rigidity with their planning that retarded an individualised child-centred approach. Finally, the messages suggest a need for teachers to adopt a flexible and inclusive play-based pedagogy that would promote social justice and allow each child to feel equally valued in the ECCE learning environment. According to the literature these four areas would assist in the creation of a more inclusive ECCE environment.

This theme had a twofold significance in this study. The primary concern was how teachers adopt pedagogy to create an inclusive learning environment (mentioned above). The secondary concern was about this research and my pedagogical role as an inclusive facilitator. PALAR is not just about research but about sustainable learning for the ALS. I felt the need to model and coach an inclusive pedagogy to my co-researchers. This required a critical analysis of my facilitation skills and my inability to 'take a back seat' and to allow the ALS to 'own' their learning by taking charge and building knowledge collaboratively in a 'messy time-consuming manner'. It was at this point that I realised that having an approved research plan derailed the autonomy of my co-researchers. This was a serious issue as I constantly felt the need to stick to my research plan, while my group members often steered the research away from my set goals. This was not easy, but I had to negotiate with my co-researchers and compromise while keeping to the broad goals of my research plan. To plan for the next cycle, co-researchers were involved in researching activities to develop a more democratic, child-centred, culturally responsive and playful learning environment.

5.4.4 Theme Four: Focus on Relationship Building

As mentioned in the literature review, several studies foreground the importance of relationships of trust, care and affection to create a positive and inclusive ECCE environment (c.f. *3.2.3.5.6*). The ECCE centre is more than just an educational institution, it serves as a locus for relationship building among the different role-players. Contradicting the literature, messages from the ALS presented below suggest deficit relationships between ECCE role players, exclusive communication and insufficient collaboration between the children.

5.4.4.1 Limited Interaction among Role Players

Freire (1987) states that although students and teachers enter the school from unique positions, relationships have to be built in the classroom. In keeping with the emphasis on care pedagogies (Noddings, 2012; 2013; Rentzou, 2020) all co-researchers indicated genuine care and concern for the holistic well-being of their charges. Besides relationships with children, schools are spaces where relationships are built through interactions between all role players (c.f. 3.2.3.5.6). All stakeholders should be involved and partnerships need to be fostered. Co-researchers indicated that parents had no say in deciding the policies of the centre and ECCE teachers, assistants, and leaders seldom worked collaboratively to achieve a common goal. Co-researchers also indicated that parents were discouraged from visiting the centre except for meetings to discuss the child's progress, and community members were not involved in the life of the centre. In terms of building relationships among staff, all co-researchers remarked on a lack of team-building exercises to enhance staff relationships. The above messages from the participants suggest little emphasis on purposeful relationship-building activities. This contests research (De Witt, 2021; Dickins, 2014; c.f. 3.2.3.5.6) that calls for partnership building between the different role-players in ECCE.

5.4.4.2 Communication that Excludes

Communication refers to a host of strategies to impart information that includes verbal, written or non-verbal cues. For this study, we focus on the terminology and language used by teachers. A teacher's awareness and choice of vocabulary may promote or impede inclusion in their learning environments. Without a doubt, effective communication is a cornerstone of relationship building, and to build an inclusive learning environment, teachers need awareness that language is always value-laden (c.f. 3.2.2.1.5). Hence, teachers need to be aware of the power of language as unconscious bias or stereotyping can be conveyed through language. Having good intentions is not enough; teachers need to take responsibility for their language and terminology (c.f. 2.2.2.3.7). From the baseline checklist

and in their reflections and conversations, all participants indicated that they had not yet removed the word 'special needs' from their vocabulary in the classroom. Co-researchers also affirmed that they used gender-stereotypical professional terminology, for instance; postman, policeman, mailman, doctor, nurse and engineer. Members also indicated that they did not use person-first terminology, for example, a child diagnosed with ADHD instead of "that child is hyperactive." Reflective journals also stated a need to acquire an inclusive vocabulary. Bahle sustained a 'mythical normal' (c.f. 3.2.2.2) which nullifies inclusive terminology. Her statement also did not make use of person first terminology. She stated:

> *"I feel that children who need sign language or braille or autistic children are challenging in centres with normal children."*

Jessica indicated a need by stating in her reflections that she would be:

> *"interested in how to speak in a way that does not offend and includes all."*

Moreover, going through the responses in the reflective journals, I could pick up vocabulary that went against inclusive terminology. The lack of inclusive terminology opposed current literature that advocated the importance of inclusive communication (c.f. 2.2.2.3.7). Hence in summary, the above findings suggest a need for teachers to improve on their current communication skills as language is a powerful tool that may serve to include or exclude certain groups of people.

5.4.4.3 Learning in Isolation

Participation in ECCE implies that children play, learn and work in collaboration with others. As a result they make choices and have a say in their learning (c.f. 3.2.3.5.2). When children collaborate, they build positive relationships with their peers and learn how to lead and follow. During these interactions, children also learn to embrace different perspectives and to accept differences. Following the analysis of the baseline checklist, participants noted that if they worked collaboratively with the children, it negatively impacted their lesson goals. Members also noted concern that children were unable to work independently if their peers assisted them. These messages indicate a need for greater opportunities for children to work alongside each other. In this way relationships are built while learning critical social skills.

5.4.4.4 Theme Summary

The above three messages from the baseline checklists, reflective journals and conversations are essential components of relationship building that need to come together in an inclusive ECCE learning environment. Firstly, improved relationships can be created by building partnerships among

all role-players, improving communication and improving collaboration during social learning. Members indicated that partnerships needed to be promoted between the various ECCE role players. Secondly, the findings reflect a deficit in communication skills and the use of an inclusive language and terminology. Thirdly, members also needed to adopt a more positive attitude towards children playing and working in collaboration with others. In summary, an inclusive learning environment requires the fostering of responsive relationships among all members in the ECCE centre.

Besides focusing on the building of relationships as inclusive teachers in the ECCE learning environment, I also needed to look at building relationships with my group members. Relationship-building is key in PALAR methodology and I found that this was ongoing and required greater time and effort than traditional research methods. Working towards a common goal and stating our common purpose did assist with developing initial solid bonds. However, the challenge remained to keep consistently connected with my participants. I had to understand that they were human beings who had lives that needed prioritising. One participant was silent for three weeks; upon investigation, I discovered that she was busy planning her upcoming nuptials and had just started a new job. So to be in touch on a virtual platform was a challenge as not all were available to connect all the time. The busy lives of my co-researchers needed to be prioritised, and nobody was forced to submit anything under stress or duress. Despite these challenges, I feel that our goals were still being met while we developed strong, enduring relationships of trust and care during our interactions.

5.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter reported on two PALAR phases; the relationship-building and the research phase. The relationship-building phase defined common goals and developed a shared interest. I found that the ALS developed a more comfortable and easy relationship with each other as I could see improved ease and less self-consciousness among most of them. Although the activities in this phase were geared towards relationship building, they also contributed to the first research objective. Indeed the use of the news images in phase one initiated robust discussions on current incidences of homophobia, racism, poverty and gender-based violence. During this phase, the ALS defined a common purpose and established a commitment to the project.

Having established a good rapport within the ALS, cycle one of the research phase began. A baseline checklist, reflective drawings and photographs were planned to explore inclusion in their individual learning environments. Baseline checklists were ticked, and photographs and drawings represented areas of need. To move forward, the collaborative analysis of data began. This required the application

of the PALAR principles of communication, compromise and coaching. Since data analysis was new to the ALS, I had to offer guidelines and coach members accordingly. Through effective communication members were able to compromise and agree on the finalisation of the themes that arose from the data. Incidentally, at this stage I witnessed the strengths of each member. Some were eager to lead while others were content to follow. Thereafter, participants were encouraged to reflect on their learnings and on the process of cycle one in their journals. This critical reflection forms an essential principle of PALAR design as it improves upon and shapes future cycles.

Cycle one of the research phase revealed four areas of need. The participants indicated a need to understand the concept of inclusion in a broader manner. Inclusion was not just about children with disabilities but about *all* children. Responses on the checklists and reflections in their journals revealed a need for greater awareness regarding privilege, concepts of diversity and intersectionality in the next cycle. The focus for the next cycle would also include an exploration of how to build better relationships, challenge stereotypes, create a welcoming environment for all and become more aware of inclusive communication. The group also needed to investigate how to adopt inclusive pedagogies to facilitate greater classroom democracy and to active participation of children. Thus the areas of need that were identified, shaped cycle two of the study. It is important to note that these four areas of need are unique to the ALS and are not transferable to others in the sector. Essentially these needs cannot represent the needs of the entire ECCE sector, as the focus of this research is not to make generalisations or comparisons, but to enable the voice of a group of ECCE role-players. With this in mind, however, other ECCE centres experiencing similar issues may benefit from the research. Consequently, these four themes represent a point of departure for chapter six consisting of the learnings from each of the four themes and sub-themes that explore *how* to create inclusive learning environments in ECCE.

CHAPTER SIX
FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

CYCLE TWO

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I initially discussed the relationship-building phase and the first cycle of the research phases. I outlined the relationship-building activities that aimed to establish an open, transparent, trustful and sustainable relationship with the ALS. This phase defined a mutual purpose by crafting a collaborative vision and involved paired activities, identifying strengths and weaknesses, setting broad research goals, and negotiating the ethical contract. Through the initial relationship-building activities, some rich data were generated that contributed to the research goals of cycle one; to explore the current situation regarding inclusion in ECCE.

Chapter Five also presented my research findings of cycle one with a discussion of themes that emerged from the raw data. These themes were informed by the research question, *"What is the current situation of inclusive learning environments in ECCE?"* At the end of cycle one, themes (figure 6.1) that emerged from the baseline checklist were triangulated by secondary data sources, consisting of reflective drawings, photographs, conversations and reflective journals. Relevant literature and reflections from my personal journal further informed the data. The iterative cyclical nature of PALAR necessitated the systematic navigation of the emergent themes from cycle one to the next learning phase, as this cycle also highlighted gaps in knowledge that provided a way forward for cycle two. Four broad themes that shaped the learnings for chapter six were categorised.

The emerging data led to the influencing of praxis, as it attempted to bridge the divide between theory and practice in cycle two. Therefore, once the themes were identified in cycle one, they shaped the way forward for a practical application in cycle two. This chapter focuses on the research findings in response to the second research question, *"how do we create an inclusive learning environment in ECCE?"* In this chapter, I will discuss the ALS learnings based on their identified areas of need stemming from cycle one. Hence, Chapter Six focuses on the contributions of the ALS to create an inclusive learning environment in ECCE.

Figure 6.1 Research focus for chapter six

Source: Author

6.2 PLANNING FOR CYCLE TWO

The ALS collaboratively agreed that each member prepares a presentation to explore each theme. These videos and slides were presented to the group, and purposeful conversations followed the presentations. In addition, co-researchers were encouraged to represent their observations from each learning, with a photograph or drawing accompanied by a caption. These were later collated and presented as feedback for the study. After discussion, reflections were also recorded in journals at the end of the cycle. Figure 6.2 demonstrates the procedures followed in cycle two.
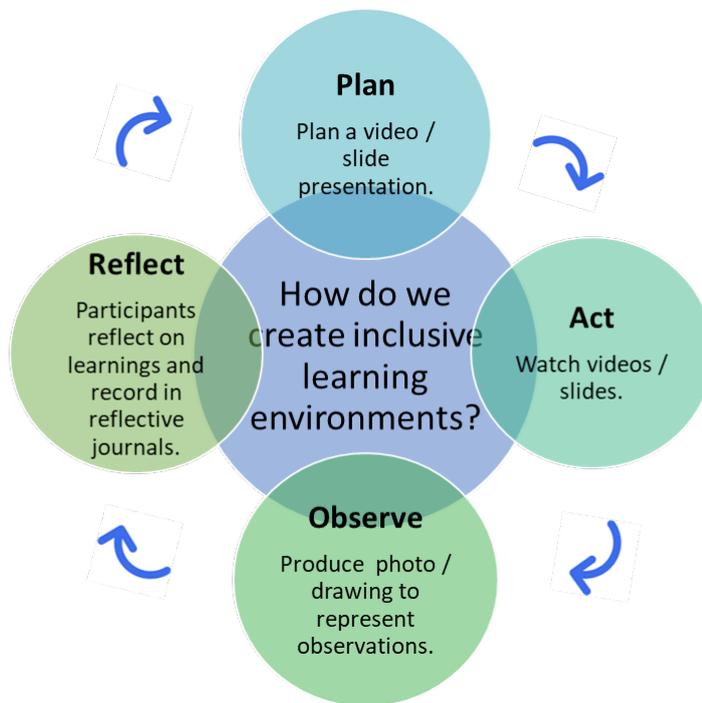
Figure 6.2 Cycle two iterative process

Source: Author

6.3 DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS OF THEMES FOR CYCLE TWO

An abundance of data was collected, which required intense immersion to gain familiarity and to avoid the repetition of information from the data sources. In PALAR research, it is vital to be cognisant that data analysis is ongoing and cyclical and is a product of critical reflection by the ALS. This aligns with Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) where they note that in qualitative research data collection, processing, analysis and reporting coincide without successive steps (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). With the use of CTA, the goal was to identify sub-themes within the initial data set, referred to as open coding. In the second step of CTA, the sub themes were related to a larger ideology, which informed cycle three (Refer to Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Critical thematic analysis in phase two – cycle two

Cycle Two		Cycle Three – Theorising
	Step 1	**Step 2**
	Open Coding	**Closed Coding**
	What was repeated, recurrent, and forceful in these texts?	What ideologies, positions of power, or status hierarchies are recurring, repeated, and forceful?

Theme five – Understanding Inclusion	• A broad understanding of inclusion • Inclusion as a process • Understanding macro-exclusion • Understanding micro-exclusion	Finding one - Ideologies regarding inclusion are contested.
Theme six - Awareness	• Personal positionality on privilege • How diversity is intersectional • Challenging stereotypes and welcoming diversities	Finding two – Disruption of the current reality through conscientisation.
• Theme seven – Inclusive Play-Based Pedagogy	• Encouraging Participation • Culturally Responsive Teaching • Play-based learning • Curriculum and planning	Finding three – Adopting an inclusive play-based pedagogy.
• Theme eight - Relationship Building	• Building partnerships • Inclusive Communication • Collaborative Learning	Finding Four – Building relationships

Cycle one revealed four key themes. After identifying these themes, co-researchers selected their categories and were asked to research, plan and present their learnings to the group (table 6.2). Some prepared videos, while others chose to present their learnings as slide presentations. Following observations of these video or slide presentations, co-researchers were asked to reflect on each theme using reflective drawings, photovoice, and entries in reflective journals. For triangulation purposes, purposeful conversations were used to probe further when matters required greater clarity. This served to validate and to ensure the trustworthiness of the data that was collected. Co-researchers shared their drawings and captions with the group.

Table 6.2 – Table of responsibilities

TOPIC	PARTICIPANT/S RESPONSIBLE
Theme five: Understanding Inclusion	Co-researcher seven
Theme six: Awareness	Co-researcher five and eight
Theme seven: Inclusive Pedagogy	Co-researcher two, six and three
Theme eight: Relationship Building	Co-researcher four

6.3.1 Theme Five – Understanding Inclusion

Cycle one found that the ALS's understanding of inclusion needed to be contested. Their understandings of inclusion centred on discourses of disability with a consequent narrow view of inclusion (Walton, 2018; c.f. 3.2.3.1). The ALS regarded inclusion to be a product rather than a goal and claimed that segregation had some advantages. The ALS also misconstrued inclusion for micro-exclusive practices of assimilation, integration and celebration. Raadia prepared and shared a video that coached the ALS and thereby clarified key concepts in their understanding of inclusion.

6.3.1.1 A Broad Understanding of Inclusion

Co-researchers recorded a broader understanding of inclusion using reflective drawings. The following drawings represented in figure 6.3 were presented to the group. The captions for their drawings suggest the need to overcome exclusion by promoting access, participation, and achievement of *all* children, not just children with disabilities (Walton, 2018; c.f. 3.2.3.1).

	Inclusion is meeting the needs of the community by celebrating diversity and individuality. It is knowing and understanding the needs of all children. Children are the future generation.

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	My drawing shows my new understanding of inclusion. In my picture it depicts different symbols of male, female, special needs, gay and lesbian. All these people I drew in one round circle which depicts earth. It shows diversity is our strength, equity is our commitment and inclusion is our main goal. It shows the coming together of all different types of people whether race, colour, gender, sex, disability or religion.
	Inclusion is supporting every child regardless of ethnic background, culture, language, gender, socio-economic background or disability. Ensuring that every child is able to participate in activities. All kids to express who they are, feel safe from abuse, harassment or unfair criticism.

Figure 6.3 A broad understanding of inclusion

Source: Co-Researchers

The above observations were aligned to several researchers' work (Booth et al., 2006; Cologon, 2019; Daniels, 2018; Nutbrown et al., 2013; Petriwskyj, 2010; c.f. 3.2.3), that inclusion has a broader human rights and social justice agenda. In keeping with the new understanding, Dickins (2014, p. 1) explains that inclusion,

> *"is based on a defined value system that equally welcomes, celebrates and respects diversity arising from gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, belief systems, socio-economic or family background, and level of educational disadvantage or disability. This is underpinned by an acceptance that inequality, racism, ableism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination are deeply embedded in today's society."*

Therefore, these deeply entrenched attitudes mentioned by Dickins need to be acknowledged and challenged as part of a defined value system that welcomes *all* who are vulnerable to exclusion, not just those experiencing barriers to learning or disability.

6.3.1.2 Inclusion as a Process

Inclusion can be seen as an ongoing search that does not reach an end. Using a photograph of a painting lesson, Raadia explained how the children enjoyed the messy process of painting more

than they took notice of the finished product. She stated that the situation changes daily, and children are never the same from day to day. Figure 6.4 is a photograph completed by the children that depicts creating a piece of artwork that is a source of enjoyment.

"To children the fun of painting is in the process - inclusion is a process not a product – similar to this art activity."
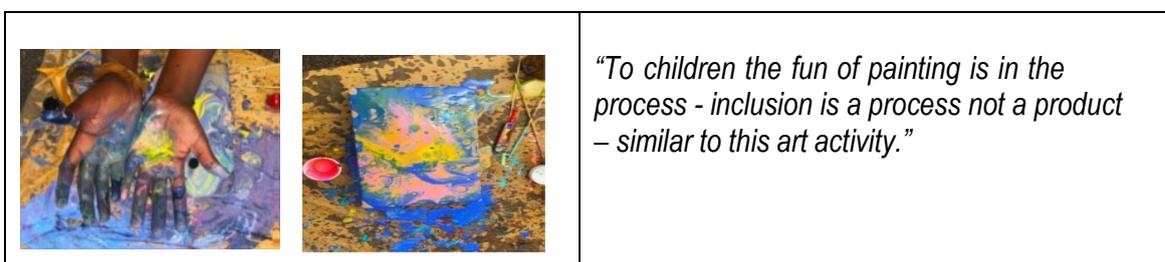
Figure 6.4 – Inclusion as a process

Source: Co-Researcher

Reflections by Raadia were aligned to Ainscow (2005, p. 118), who stated that,

> "inclusion is a process. That is to say, inclusion has to be seen as an ongoing search to find better ways of dealing with diversity."

Her intuitive comment of inclusion as a process was also alluded to in a report by UNESCO (2005, p. 13) that stated that:

> "inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. … [As such,] it involves a range of changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children."

In the same vein, Cologon (2019, p. 5) succinctly remarks that,

> "inclusion is a journey; we never fully arrive as we can always become more inclusive. Bringing about genuine inclusive education is often challenging and takes commitment and ongoing efforts."

Winter and Raw (2010) state that the idea of a process, alludes to the dynamic and evolving nature of inclusive educational practices. Essentially rules and routines in ECCE are never cast in stone, and change has to be implemented according to the child's unique needs at a particular moment.

6.3.1.3 Understanding Macro-Exclusion

In chapter three, segregation is described as a form of macro-exclusion that involves the provision of formal education but within separate settings or activities for the marginalised (c.f. 3.2.1.1). Chapter five identified a need for the ALS to clarify this concept as exclusionary. Aligned with Chaurasia (2014) and Corbett and Slee (2000), the first drawing captured by Lihle, indicates that mainstream schools

are represented by round pegs in round holes, where all children are assumed to be the same and fit into a uniform system.
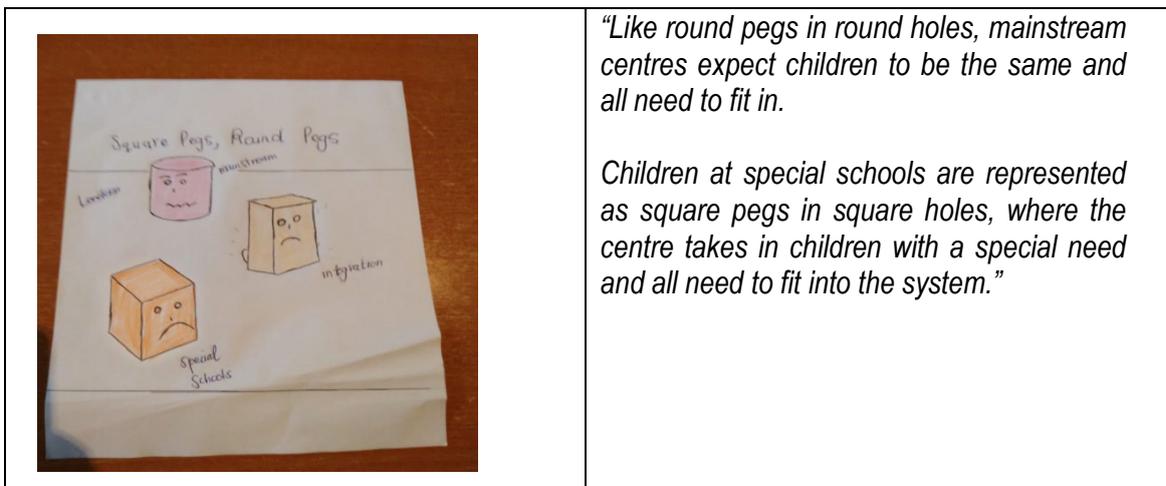
	"Like round pegs in round holes, mainstream centres expect children to be the same and all need to fit in.
	Children at special schools are represented as square pegs in square holes, where the centre takes in children with a special need and all need to fit into the system."

Figure 6.5 Mainstreaming and special schools

Source: Co-Researcher

Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2013, p. 3) explain that mainstreaming refers to,

> *"services that are set up to provide for 'typically developing' children. By definition the term mainstream places some children as outside of these services, with the presumption that their requirements can only be met within some minority, specialist provision."*

In support of a new understanding of mainstreaming, Bahle commented how every child is unique. She remarked that,

> *"difference must be expected at any school. "*

The concept of mainstreaming supports ableism, and therefore, the whole concept of 'typical development' or normalcy must hence be argued and contested. In line with Lihle's drawing (figure 6.5), Devarakonda (2014) and Corbett and Slee (2000) contend that, children at special schools are represented as square pegs in square holes. The system is predesigned to accommodate the child, who is marginalised from the viewpoint of race, gender, socio-economic factors, language and ability. Cologon (2019, p.27) concurs that segregation is exclusion that stigmatises a person as 'lesser' or 'inferior'. Hence due to segregation, 'regular' children may grow up without peers who experience marginalisation, which cascades this 'othering' to society at large.

In contrast, Lihle's photo of the shape sorter (figure 6.6) reveals shapes of different kinds, which can fit into a system that can accommodate this diversity. In keeping with this idea, Hornby (2015, p. 238) states that inclusive education is "a process that involves whole-school re-organisation" in response to the entirety of children's needs. There should be a celebration of individuality and difference in opposition to the emphasis on standardisation and uniformity. In comparison to segregation and mainstreaming, an inclusive system welcomes diversity and differences. All children are different, and all children are assumed to learn irrespective of diversity in terms of ability, language, race, gender or socio-economic status.
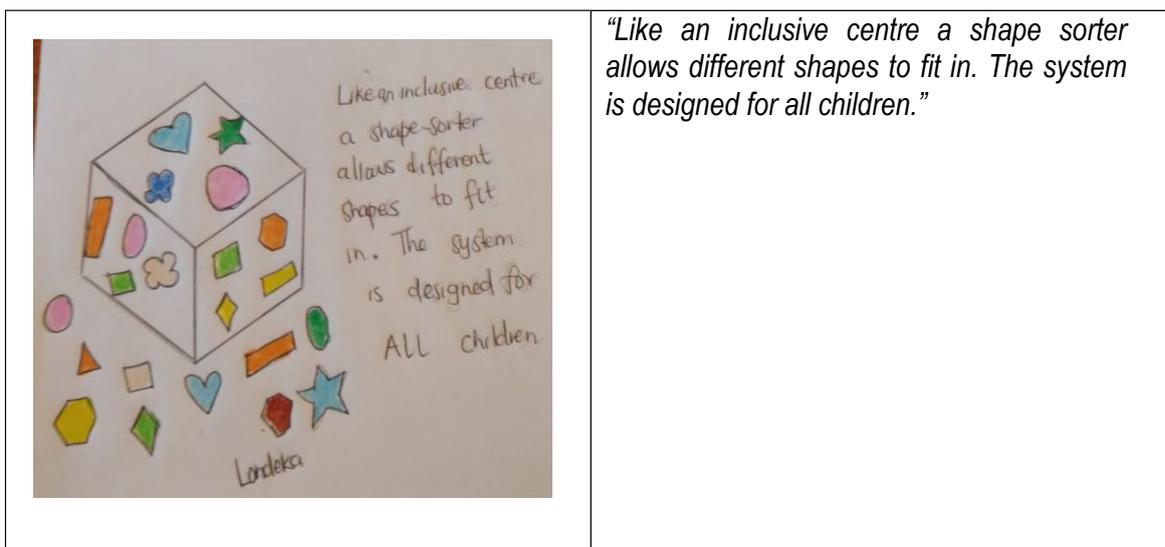
"Like an inclusive centre a shape sorter allows different shapes to fit in. The system is designed for all children."

Figure 6.6 Inclusive schools

Source: Co-Researcher

With the above in mind, Cooper and Jacobs (2011, p. 6) caution that

> *" the promotion of the delusion that being present in a school equates with being socially and educationally included, is one of the most dishonest and insidious forms of exclusion."*

Therefore, in the subsequent section, I explore micro-exclusion that was misconstrued for inclusion in cycle one.

6.3.1.4 Understanding Micro-Exclusion

Chapter three discusses practices of micro-exclusion, which is regarded as a more insidious and therefore more dangerous form of exclusion (c.f. 3.2.1.2). The section also discussed three forms of micro-exclusion, namely integration, assimilation and celebration. In her drawing, Lihle is working with her square pegs, attempted to fit these into the round holes with no success. Integration requires the child to be changed to fit into the system. The square peg has to be shaped to fit into the round hole (figure 6.7). Without the necessary support, children who are integrated into mainstream schools are not fully included in the programme.

"I do not want to be responsible for damaging these square pegs, by hammering them into the round holes."
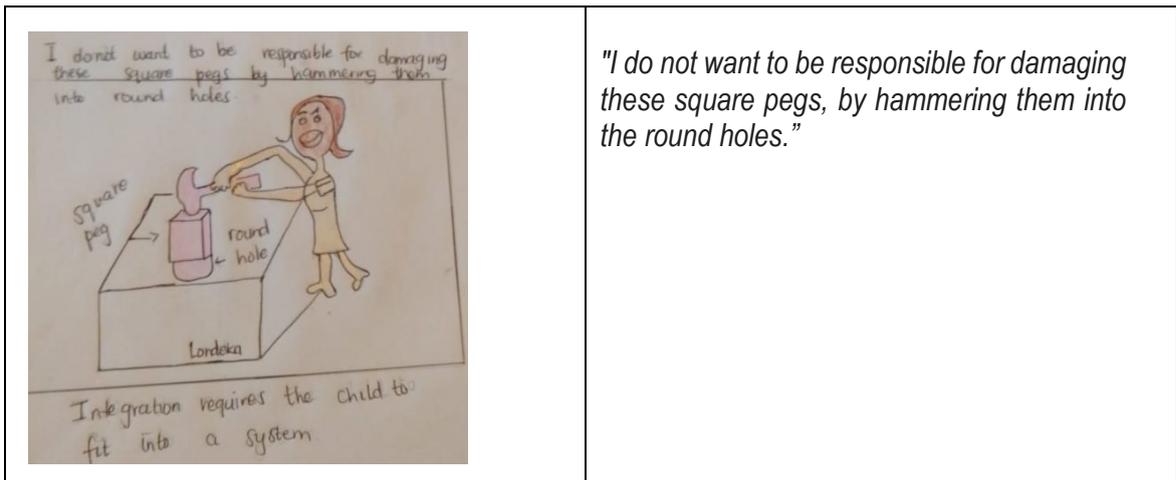
Figure 6.7 Integration

Source: Co-Researcher

Children from minority or denigrated groups are likened to square pegs trying to fit into round holes. This corresponds with chapter three, which claims that integration is the ineffective placement of children (square pegs) together within the same setting (round holes) but without making adjustments or adaptations to the setting to facilitate real inclusion. Ferrante (2012) remarked that this alludes to a deficit perspective where children's needs are connected to their 'disability' and not to their 'ability'. Hence deficit perspectives call for adjustments to be made to the child rather than the system. With concern Lihle also remarked that,

> "They just will not fit in easily."

So the ultimate concern of integrating children without adequate accommodation to the system may result in disadvantages to the child. I gather from Lihle's concern that this may create more significant injury to a child's esteem than an openly segregated system.

Similar to integration, assimilation may also result in the devaluation of a child's esteem, in this instance, due to a loss of individuality (c.f. 3.2.1.2.2). Kaveri captured a photo of a melting pot of homemade stew, where she alluded that the individual flavours of the ingredients that were lost (figure 6.8). In a similar way to these ingredients, assimilation occurs when a minority group takes on the majority group's values, behaviour, and beliefs while losing their authentic identity. Consequently, Daniels (2018) defines assimilation as an adaptation to the child's existing learning environment which impedes individual authenticity and diversity. Related to this, Raadia reflected in her journal that:

> "before this PALAR study, I was all for uniformity. Children in my class were all expected to speak in a similar way, say the same prayers, draw the same art and dress the same. Now I see how this stopped them from developing their own identities."

	"Assimilation is compared to a melting pot of stew, where each individual flavour is lost."
	"Inclusion is like a bowl of salad where individual flavour remains intact."
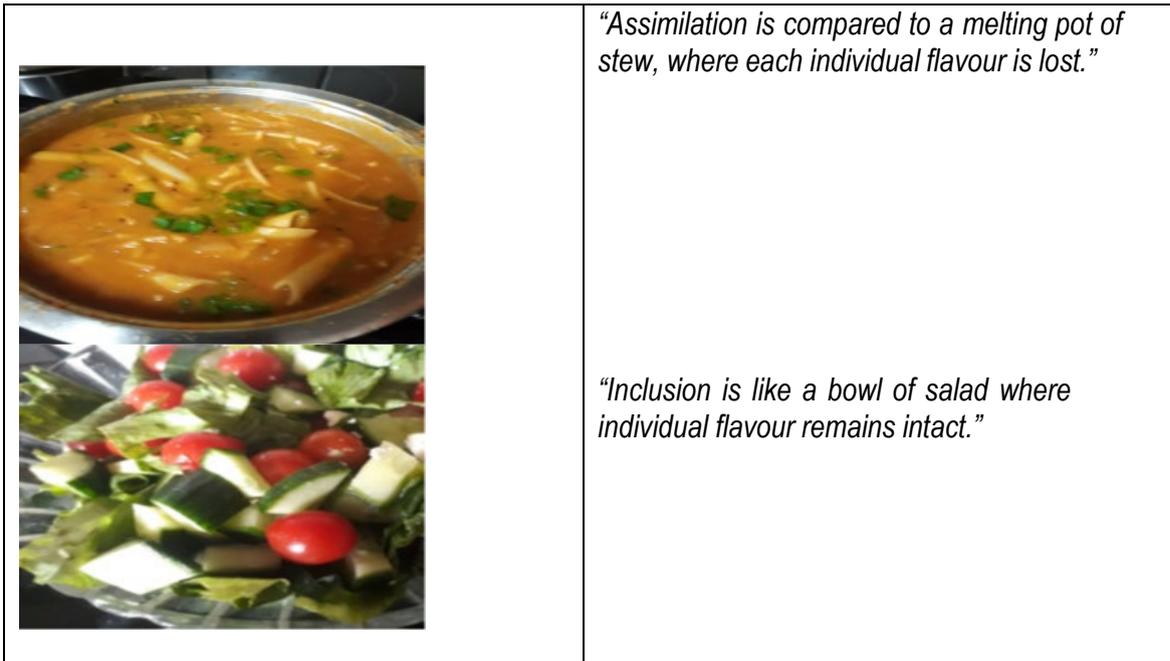
Figure 6.8 Assimilation

Source: Co-Researcher

As Raadia reflected on the importance of developing children's individuality, Kaveri expressed the need to allow children to keep as much of their culture as possible. She also remarked how school managers want to see uniformity as it gave the school a certain degree of order. She stated however that she needed to

> *"allow the kids to express themselves as individuals."*

This reflection of Kaveri divulged a need for school managers to understand these concepts, as they seemed to encourage uniformity and standardisation at their centres. Amina also related that,

> *" I had a child from Malawi, who did not want to speak his mother tongue any longer. Not even at home. His mother was worried as she felt he would lose his roots. He was saying to his mother that the children laughed when he spoke and he needed to learn English. We had to talk about this issue of respecting differences and not teasing. We are now having more discussion about Malawi language and culture in the discussion ring."*

From the above experience of Amina, we can see that children who are from minority groups may feel ashamed of their identities. This resulted in the child wanting to forget his roots and fit in with the dominant group. Mongbo-Gbenahou (2019) states that a child's social identity is constructed through the community, and in this case, not belonging to the in-group (English speakers) resulted in the rejection of his mother tongue. Hence, in this sub-theme, members expressed that exclusion, whether subtle or blatant, impedes inclusion and intercepts creating an inclusive learning environment in

ECCE. As a solution to this issue of children losing their identities and taking on those of the dominant culture, Jessica suggested that:

> *"We make a start by sharing cultures. Learning about the food from different cultures. We can set up our dress-up corner with clothes from many cultures. We can learn how to greet in different languages. In this way, a child may not feel ashamed of showing whohe really is."*

Hence, ECCE settings may include diverse children and families, similar to a melting pot, except that these children will not feel compelled to conform to the dominant culture's rules (c.f. 3.2.2.2). This practice of 'fitting in' disregards the authentic identities of children from denigrated groups and should never be mistaken for inclusion. In Jessica's reflections above, she alludes to a celebration of diversity. This is all well and to the good; however, discourses of celebration do not always guarantee inclusion. Reygan et al. (2018) caution that discourses of celebration may strengthen the 'othering' of groups of people or perpetuate certain stereotypes regarding different markers. When Jessica was asked to elaborate if the celebration of diversity was enough for inclusion, she stated that,

> *"clearly it is not enough. If we are celebrating diversity, it needs to happen every day."*

In keeping with this, Banks (1989, p. 17) cautions against an "ethnic additive approach" where education about diversity is a sidebar to dominant perspectives. In essence, diversity is side-lined and does not play a meaningful part in daily learning. To remedy this, Raadia explained how she worked with a child diagnosed with autism and used resources that the children could relate to. She explained that,

> *"every day this child with autism required my full attention. I would try to find stories and posters about autism, and share with the group. As little as they were, the other children could see he required more of my attention. So when our school highlighted World Autism Day, it was nothing new for them. We brought autism into our lessons as much as possible on a regular basis. Autism awareness was not just for one day of the year."*

Raadia was thus able to remove superficial understandings of autism in her class group by including this into her daily discussions. She discouraged unnecessary sympathy for the 'other' and thus facilitated a deeper inclusion of the child diagnosed with autism. Also, Annerly described how she thought that the occasional celebration of cultures meant she was an inclusive teacher (figure 6.9).

> *"I thought that having a Heritage Day celebration was enough. We have a celebration where we dress up and share food. This was fun and created a better knowledge of each other's cultures. To be truly inclusive means I must go deeper than just food and dress. There is definitely more to inclusion than this."*

In line with Annerly's comment, Solomon and Levine-Rasky (2003) warn that these fun and positive classroom activities are viewed as positive experiences because they seldom address issues of power, privilege and discrimination, which have more negative connotations.

| | *"To be truly inclusive means, I must go deeper than just celebrating food and dress. There is definitely more to inclusion than this."* |
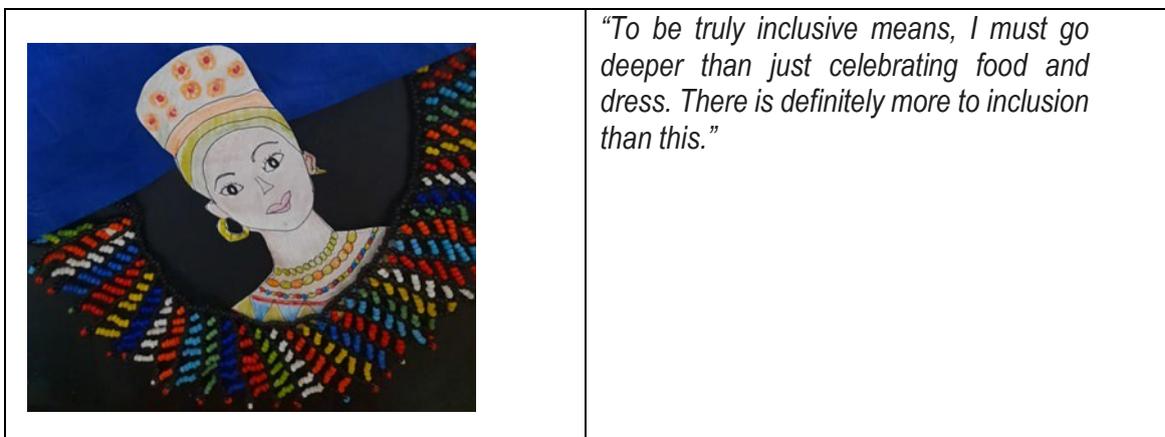
Figure 6.9 Celebration of Heritage Day

Source: Co-Researcher

In addition, Amina mentioned that,

> *"when celebrating diversity and culture, I see that I need to be wary of stereotyping certain cultures. Not all cultures dress and behave in the same way as they did in the past."*

In alignment with these celebratory discourses, Banks and Banks (2012, p. 193) caution that this

> *" focuses on the lifestyles and artifacts of ethnic groups and reinforces stereotypes and misconceptions"*

Banks (1989, p. 17) refers to this approach as the teaching of diversity through "heroes and holidays" which disregards essential issues related to particular groups' oppression and struggles. Reygan and her colleagues also concur that celebration minimises difference and does not interrogate issues of power and privilege and it therefore needs to be disrupted. Hence, issues such as racism, power and oppression tend to be evaded. Exclusion, whether subtle or blatant, intercepts the creation of an inclusive learning environment in ECCE.

6.3.1.5 Theme Summary

Journals, purposeful conversations, reflective drawings and photovoice informed the data for this theme. From the above messages, I gathered that the ALS were able successfully to contest common ideologies regarding the concept of inclusion in this second cycle. According to the ALS, this could be done by demonstrating a broad understanding of inclusion that encompasses all diversity,

conceptualising inclusion as a process, and understanding macro and micro-exclusion. After watching videos and discussions, members demonstrated a more coherent understanding of inclusion that was aligned with current literature. I found that the photovoice depictions of the different concepts were innovative as they afforded explanations using the lived experiences of the ALS members. On my part, I was aware that without a solid understanding of inclusion, members would not be able to proceed further and achieve the project's goals. Looking at inclusion from a narrow perspective would disadvantage many children who were not experiencing barriers to learning or disability. Therefore, I felt elated when members agreed and grasped the comprehensive, broad and fluid nature of inclusion. I also observed that although members were able to research and present videos for this theme, it required a great deal of coaching from me. Those who did not adhere to my guidelines were found to stray from the concepts that I needed to highlight. Too much coaching reduced the epistemic justice of a PALAR design; however, too little coaching impacted negatively on the realisation of my research objectives. I needed to be cautious and to find some balance in future interactions.

6.3.2 Theme Six – Awareness

Findings from cycle one revealed a need for the ALS to become more aware and thus challenge the status of their current realities. The literature refers to this process as conscientisation, developing awareness of a problem and solving it. Earlier in chapter three, Kiguwa (2018) also regards this as a 'forced introspection' as a means of engaging with the complexity of diversity in classrooms and the everyday world. To achieve an awareness of privilege, diversity and power interactions, the ALS were guided to participate in a privilege game and power flower activity. Using their awareness, members were able to address stereotyping that resulted in making all feel welcome in our learning environment.

6.3.2.1 Personal Position on Privilege

To understand personal privilege, two activities were planned. The ALS watched a video and played a board game on privilege. Firstly, members watched a video where the teacher asks students from different parts of the room to throw their wastepaper into a bin. The students had to throw the paper into the waste-paper bin without moving from their seats (figure 6.10). Students sitting at the back or far away had an unfair disadvantage compared to those sitting in the front of the classroom. Those sitting close to the bin were able to perform the task successfully and were less likely to complain as those seated far away from the waste-paper bin. Just like sitting in the front or back row, the presence or absence of privilege is not a determinant of success or failure; but rather implies an unfair advantage or disadvantage. In the video (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KImvmuxzYE), the students represented society whereas the bin represented the ability to be wealthy, successful, and to achieve.

Those seated in favourable positions were able to score and those who were far away found it difficult. Hence members were able to understand privilege better.

| | "In the video, students from different sections of the room were asked to throw their crumpled paper into the wastepaper bins. The students at the back struggled to score a hit, while those in front got more wins. The students in front had an advantage. That is how privilege works." |
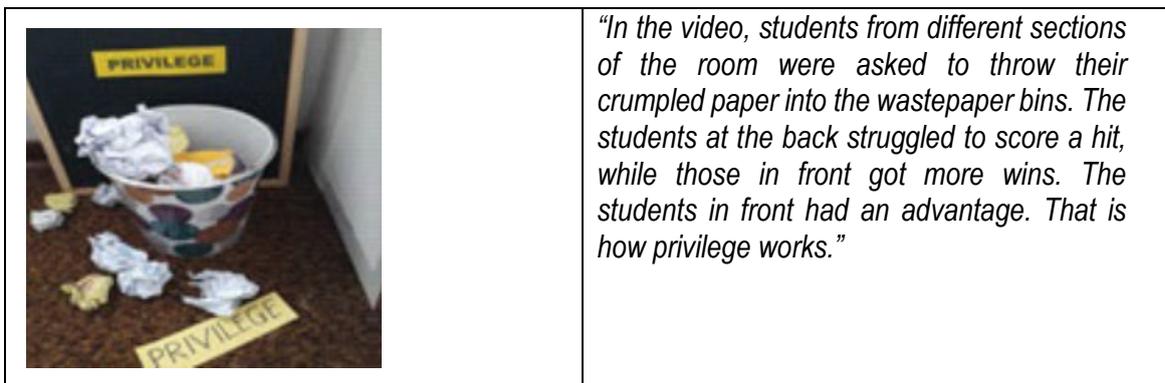
Figure 6.10 Privilege

Source: Co-Researcher

Secondly, the privilege game was planned to raise an awareness of various forms of privilege and a deeper understanding of how the intersectionality of race, socio-economic class, gender and other identity markers may shape our positions and the positions of the children in our care. Based on the privilege walk (see https://blog.shrm.org/blog/my-experience-with-the-privilege-walk), this game generally can be arranged in an open space with co-researchers lined up in a horizontal line. They close their eyes and step forward or back as the facilitator reads a statement or question (Appendix H). Due to Covid-19 restrictions, I redesigned the Privilege Walk as an online board game played asynchronously by the researchers (Appendix F). Co-researchers moved forward or backwards on the board game according to the statements that they read.

Black and Stone (2005, p. 243) purport that, "in many cultures, particular groups benefited and prospered because of the entitlements, advantages, and dominance conferred upon them by society. These privileges were granted solely as a birth-right, not because of intelligence, ability, or personal merit."

In her reflections on the understanding of privilege, Kaveri stated that,

> "privilege can be having wealth and being born into a rich family. But it is so much more than that."

Concurring with Kaveri, Ebbitt (2015) remarks that our identities are nuanced and intersectional therefore, privilege abounds . This is also in line with Walton and Osman (2018, p.1) who say that "not all identities are equally valorised in schools and society, and oppression is experienced by those whose identities are not valued." Building on the above concept of varying identities, Raadia noted that consequently, privilege is

"a special advantage that people have – but people can be privileged in some ways and under privileged in other ways."

Furthermore, Bahle stated that:

"It is like a preferential treatment that some people have. We cannot ignore something like privilege. Talking about privilege brings about healing and positive change."

Jessica added:

"For me privilege means a special right granted or available to only one person. My privilege comes from going to high school and ECD training, having food and family. I also realise that my gender is a disadvantage to me. These disadvantages do not make up for the unearned privileges I have."

In keeping with the above, Ebbitt stated that the system of oppression could be dismantled through examining ourselves. The authors also state that having a disadvantage does not negate the unearned privileges we may have. Thus, the process of reflecting and acknowledging our privileges and examining our own discrimination can challenge the status quo and heal these wounds. When asked about the privilege game's effect on their feelings, all the co-researchers indicated that it was a turning point. Annerly reflected on how troubling it was to imagine others stepping back. She stated that,

"I would never want anyone to take steps back on what I have taken steps back on. Hence, I would always try my best to help motivate and encourage others. Playing this game showed me even more why it is important to have an inclusive learning environment. If children are educated about these things at a young age, they would not treat others badly and most people won't feel what I have felt growing up. It is essential for children of all backgrounds to feel included and loved and have a feeling of belonging."

Raadia reflected on how this game served as an eye-opener with her personal relationships and teaching approach,

"After doing this activity it made me feel that I need to be better and to treat people better and not judge them based on what I see. We don't know what people have to face every day and we should just be thankful for the little things and the fact that we can wake up every morning because even that is a privilege as there are some who are fighting every day to just be here. As a teacher it is important for us to know that each and every child is different no child or even adult will ever be the same, so we need to stop expecting the same from every child. We need to realise that all children come from various backgrounds and cultures and at the end of it they are just children and it's our duty to make them feel loved and equal."

Jessica reflected on how she developed a deeper appreciation for what she had,

"By doing this actual activity and answering these questions, it has brought a deeper understanding of how privileged I am as compared to someone who is homeless or jobless. It teaches me to be more humble and appreciative of what I have and this helps me to be a better person and teach children about learning to appreciate, value and be thankful for what you have in life. My child can then learn and see that with hard work, dedication and great sacrifice her mum is about to do things for her that makes her life privileged in many ways. I feel that this activity was life changing in so many ways. I did not realise how much I have. I always thought of myself as poor, but I realise that my richness lies in my relationships and my family. I am also able -bodied and can earn a living. I will teach the children the value of life and how not to pick on children with less privilege. Even at this age they know privilege."

Hence stemming from these statements, we see that acknowledging our privilege is indeed a starting point to develop greater self-awareness and conscientisation.

6.3.2.2 How Diversity is Intersectional

The power flower activity explored how each person's identity intersects with other individuals. These intersecting identities may be exacerbated resulting in greater oppression or privilege. The power flower is made up of concentric circles (figure 6.11) with the blue concentric circle representing different identity markers, for instance ability, language, race, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. The orange layer represents the privileged or dominant group in society, whereas the flower petals represent the individual research participant's identity marker. Petals coloured pink indicated privilege, whereas petals in yellow represented disadvantage. Therefore, the drawing reflects on the intersection of our nuanced identities resulting in greater or lesser privilege. When asked about how their various identities intersect to form their unique experiences, participant eight reflected that,

"Growing up in poverty I was unable to study because of financial reasons. Also we have been discriminated against because of our race. Whites were more privileged in the past. Being female always comes second to being a male."

Also this task highlighted how diversity is intersectional, and how privilege is not a clear thing to discern. We can be privileged in certain ways and disadvantaged in other instances. Rangeni stated that,

"I can see that in some ways I am privileged and in other ways I am disadvantaged. I feel privileged because I can afford to study. I am privileged to be the first female in my family to own a car. I am however less privileged because I still have to have the responsibility of managing my household and my three children while studying at the age of 40. The power struggle that I face the most is putting myself first before my family. I have always put my family first and motivated them to achieve their goals and put myself on the back burner. Now that I am studying I like to be an example to my children. A lesson for them that you are never too old to achieve your goals."

In her journal Amina stated that a knowledge of intersectionality will benefit teachers as they would be able to understand the children better. She remarked that,

> *"I can see this happening with the children. We have all kinds of diversities and that child who is poor, a foreigner and female has a greater disadvantage than the one who is poor, a foreigner and male."*

Kaveri reported that,

> *"From this activity I have learnt that working with diverse groups is more than just resources and displays. It is a deeper understanding that all people have many identities. Some identities give us advantage while others bring us down. What is important is that as teachers we need to be aware of this and treat each child as an individual. We need to look at the full picture of the child and understand how identities can intersect."*

Rectifying the colour-blind approach in cycle one, Lihle stated that,

> *"This activity teaches me not to push important discussions about diversity under the carpet. I am privileged and you are not as privileged. This is uncomfortable but important discussions we need to face head on."*

Consequently, these discussions on intersectionality opened up new realisations for the ALS. They understood that not all identities are equally privileged in society as individual identities that are undervalued may experience marginalisation or oppression. Furthermore, certain individualities had privilege or disadvantage compounded due to nuanced identity markers. They all concurred that the early year's professional needs to be aware of the intersectionality of these multiple identities that may compound experiences of oppression and marginalisation among certain groups of people (Reygan et al., 2018; c.f. 3.2.2.2).

| | *"We have many different identities. These are mine. Sometimes, I am privileged in certain ways and lack privilege in other ways."* |

Figure 6.11 Power Flower activity

Source: Co-Researcher

Co-researchers reported to have greater self-awareness and enhanced relationships with people. The following statements were noted,

"Yeah talking about these things are not easy. Going back to the past and thinking of how it was before did help to open me up a lot more and realise how much I had overcome. Especially the question about being discouraged from academics or jobs because of my gender. In my family money was not to be wasted on a female's education"(Amina).

"This activity helped me see why some children excel and others don't. Why some need that little extra bit from me – which I will happily do "(Kaveri).

"I see I have an advantage over so many and I must use this advantage to uplift a child" (Rangeni).

"I must admit this activity made me feel guilty about how much I actually have that others don't. If we want to make a change we have to seek the uncomfortable " (Annerly).

"This activity showed me how children and the other people around me are all connected through having disadvantage and privilege. This makes us kinder to others " (Bahle).

Members further reported having greater empathy towards children experiencing marginalisation. This aligns with chapter three, where Derman-Sparks speaks of the importance of inclusion being an inner journey of conscientisation (Freire, 2000) or personal awareness of diversity and teachers' critical position as drivers of inclusion among the diverse children in their care (c.f. 3.2.3.2). From the analysis of the co-researchers' reflections, all seem to have benefited from the privilege game and the power flower activity. Most of the co-researchers appeared to have benefited in both personal and professional areas.

6.3.2.3 Challenging Stereotypes and Welcoming Diversities

Chapter five presented various stereotypes that abound in the learning environment. The concern was also to create a stereotype-free learning environment that welcomed and created a sense of belonging for all diversity. Therefore this sub-theme has a twofold purpose as it encompasses how to create a stereotype-free environment as well as an environment that welcomes all diversities. For the purpose of this study, five salient diversities were identified by the ALS. These include diversities in gender and sexual orientation, language, race and skin colour, ability and socio-economic status. Co-researchers were asked how to create an environment that reduces stereotyping where all diversities feel a sense of belonging. The discussions, photovoice, reflective drawings, conversations and reflections in journals were transcribed and analysed to identify the following categories and themes.

6.3.2.3.1 Removing Gender Stereotyping

In cycle one, members recognised instances of gender binary, gendered play and gender role stereotyping in the learning environment. Members were asked how we can create resources in the learning environment to contest these stereotypes. To remedy the gender binary, a chart is depicted that represents each child as a crayon of a different colour (figure 6. 12). There is no reference to groupings that promote gender binary in the second chart. Figure 6.12 demonstrates pictorial representations of how gender stereotype and exclusion were addressed in cycle two.

BEFORE	AFTER
Cycle one The Need to Contest Gender Binary 	Cycle two Contesting Gender Binary in the Learning Environment Cycle one represented gender binary where boys and girls were grouped into either male or female categories. The second picture corrects this by representing children as different crayons. Similar to the crayons in this illustration. All children are different and unique and children should not be grouped according to a teacher's perceived criteria. Hence charts and displays should avoid gender binary. In this case we should avoid grouping children according to their assumed sex.
Cycle one The Need to Contest Gendered Play 	Cycle two Contesting Gendered Play Cycle one highlighted an engineer dress-up kit with a picture of a male engineer. This sends a message that males are engineers and should be playing with this dress-up kit. In the second picture a little boy approaches the dolls to select one to play with. Should boys prefer to play with dolls and girls with cars, these role-reversals should be encouraged at the

	centre. The reinforcement of the female gender as helpless and in need of rescuing also required addressing during story time where feminine beauty and vanity were more important than character and skills.
Cycle one The Need to Contest Gender Roles in Society 	Cycle two Contesting Gender Roles Cycle one highlighted how traditional gender roles can be maintained by messages in the learning environment. The chart on the left in cycle one for instance reinforced traditional gender roles. Therefore in cycle two, Rangeni presented these toilet roll puppets. This activity based on the theme of community helpers represent both female and male firefighters, police and engineers.

Figure 6.12 Removing gender stereotypes

Source: Co-Researcher

Kaveri was able to differentiate between the terms gender and sex. She stated that,

> "From the video and discussion, I learnt that sex refers to the physical body. Gender refers to your role in your life as a female or male."

In this study, we are interested in gender roles that are usually stereotyped in our societies. Raadia noted the fantasy play created an opportune moment for children to act out their gender roles. She remarked that,

> " In our centre, it is fantasy play that gives a child a chance to reinforce the gender roles that are expected of them. I see a lot of exciting things happening during play."

Lihle was concerned about the classroom resources that reinforced traditional gender roles that were used daily by the children. She claimed that the learning environment required resources that interrogated traditional ways of being. She stated that

> "Posters, books, puzzles, toys and movies should show male and female performing roles that go against the grain. Our dress up props need to encourage any gender to be firefighters and engineers. In the same way, anyone can be a nurse or a cleaner."

Reflecting on the importance of challenging children during their play and stopping them to disrupt current stereotyped roles, Rangeni and Lihle averred,

> "Boys play rough games like wheel barrows and catching outdoors. Girls play house-inside. So I asked them if dad cooks and cleans. I asked does a mom go to work" (Lihle).

"So they liked playing according to the stereotypes. The girls were playing with the dolls and dressing up. The boys had the cars. I just decided to swop them around. Girls go play with the cars. Boys go and cook. They were not happy but I called them later and said, "in life boys and girls have to be able to do anything. You have to cook and clean at home, then go to work" (Rangeni).

Alluding to a much more serious notion of contesting gender roles within the centre itself, Jessica cautioned,

"To get gender equality at the centres, we firstly need to be gender-neutral and avoid grouping children according to their physical sex. Instead we should let them play with whomever they want. Even our class lists and posters should not be divided into boys and girls."

She also mentioned that,

"We have to have male teachers. This sends an important message that males can be carers too. Fathers also feel more comfortable with a male teacher."

The above participant reflections indicated a difference in the terms gender and sex, one referring to biological disposition and the other referring to the social roles associated with gender. Co-researchers also emphasised the need for purposefully challenging these stereotypes by talking about gender stereotyping in their play. The use of resources that promote gender neutrality were also suggested. Further, a concern was raised about applying gender equity by encouraging the employment of male teachers at centres. These discussions relate to a suggestion in chapter three where Devarakonda (2014) asks for parents or teachers to be guarded about promoting stereotypical play, leading to the reinforcement of gender roles (c.f. 3.2.2.1.4). Teachers are responsible for contesting these, leading to a more equitable and just society free from gender stereotyping.

We then discussed a news report in Texas, where officials dismissed a teacher for teaching children at a high school about "Black Lives Matter" and sexual orientation diversity. The co-researchers were asked about their opinions on whether young children should be aware of diversity in sexual orientation or should this reality be regarded as taboo. Two co-researchers responded to this discussion. Annerly stated that,

"I think children need to be aware of all different diversities however since some topics are more sensitive, we as teachers need to find ways to discuss sexual orientation without bias. I do believe children learn things gradually as they grow older however I also feel we should lay a foundation to teach them the basic important things that they need to know without being biased. It's also nice to get consent from parents when talking about sensitive issues as parents may feel uncomfortable. However we can assure them that it's [in] the best interest of the child."

Amina also suggested that these issues should not be treated as something to hide or to be ashamed of.

> *"LGBTQI+ is something that can be relatable to children in their home settings. It will allow them to better understand different family settings as well as their own. They would understand how some children may have two mummies or daddies. Also from a young age they will be accepting of difference and grow with a clear understanding. Even the children themselves will not see themselves as social outcasts should they be different."*

Co-researchers were later asked how to include children who come from homes that differ from the heterosexual norm. Co-researchers suggested the use of stories, posters and books that contested heteronormativity. Bahle suggested that:

> *"We need to have a family wall with all the different family structures in our group. If we have a child from a family with two mums or dads, this must be discussed. The child who is experiencing a gender confusion, may also feel more welcomed in this way."*

The reflections above are in line with Govender (2018) that children may deviate from being 'cisgender' or come from different types of families that may not appear 'normative' therefore, it is essential to deal with these realities head-on. This would mean moving away from 'certainties' regarding gender or sexual normativity (Govender, 2018). Hence, as ECCE teachers, it is critical to make all feel welcome in the learning environment and to be aware of the undesirability of stereotyping gender and sexual orientation.

6.3.2.3.2 Moving Beyond Skin Colour

Very young children are aware of differences in people and are curious about it. From cycle one it is noted that adopting a 'colour blind' approach to differences may magnify bias and stereotyping of people who look different (Kemple et al., 2016). Co-researchers were asked to respond to a scenario that was presented where a three-year-old boy was found by his teacher scrubbing his hands vigorously under a tap. He did this because other children commented that his dark skin looked dirty. Co-researchers were asked, how to remedy a situation like this. Claiming that young children see differences and this needs to be addressed, Bahle stated that:

> *"Children see when they are different from the other children. Even from a young age. So we need to form the right attitudes here and now."*

This aligns with various studies that children as young as six months may be able to notice differences in the physical attributes of people such as skin colour and hair texture (Katz & Koffin, 1997; Kemple et al., 2016; Miller, 2019; University of Toronto, 2017; c.f. 3.2.2.1.3). Further, children may learn prejudice about skin colour or race from the family. Therefore, Rangeni suggested the need to contest the incorrect discriminatory attitudes children learn from their homes and family members.

> *"I feel that children come to school, even at this age with a lot of ideas about race and skin colour. We just cannot be silent here and need to correct any disrespect."*

Rangeni's claim above aligns to a statement by Miller (2019) that young children's beliefs are influenced by their environments. Therefore, early childhood teachers need to encourage dialogue regarding race and difference. In addition, she highlighted the importance of welcoming all races. She claimed that,

> "We have to make an effort to include all race groups and make them feel a part of our centres."

Moreover, suggesting that diversity still exists among homogenous groups Annerly remarked that,

> "Even among a group of people who look similar, we still have differences. Differences in language, ability, or religions."

Referring to the dark evil characters in the movie, *The Lion King,* she later stated that,

> "To be more inclusive of race or skin colour, I need to not just have books and resources and toys representing different races but I need to use them in my discussions all the time. Children need to see that race or colour does not determine how good or bad you are."

Furthermore, I had the privilege of assisting Annerly in her lesson on skin colour. Children matched play dough and paint according to their skin colours (figure 6.13). They later painted self-portraits and modelled their play-dough. She noted that we need to teach children purposefully about colour and differences. She stated

> "We have to teach them that it is okay to have different skin colours. We made different colours of play dough using brown and white paint mixed together. When painting self-portraits the children were allowed to mix their own paint to get the correct colour of skin for themselves. Some are darker and some are lighter in colour. But all are beautiful. "
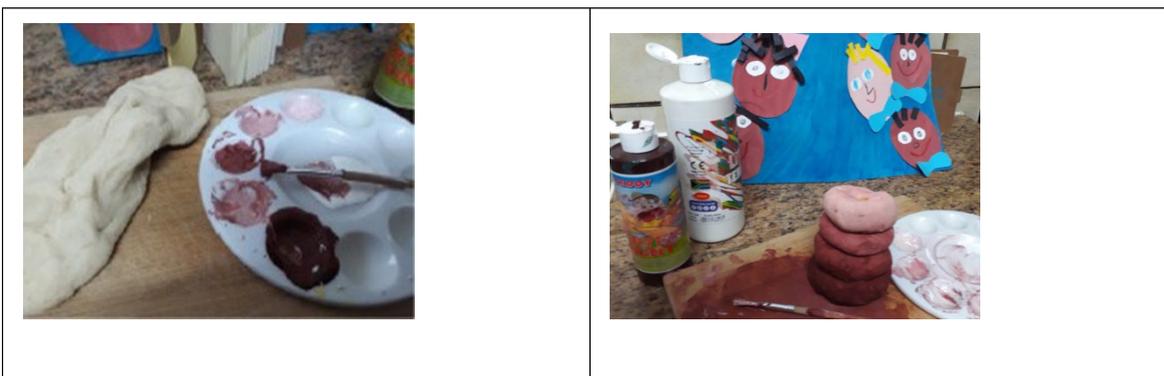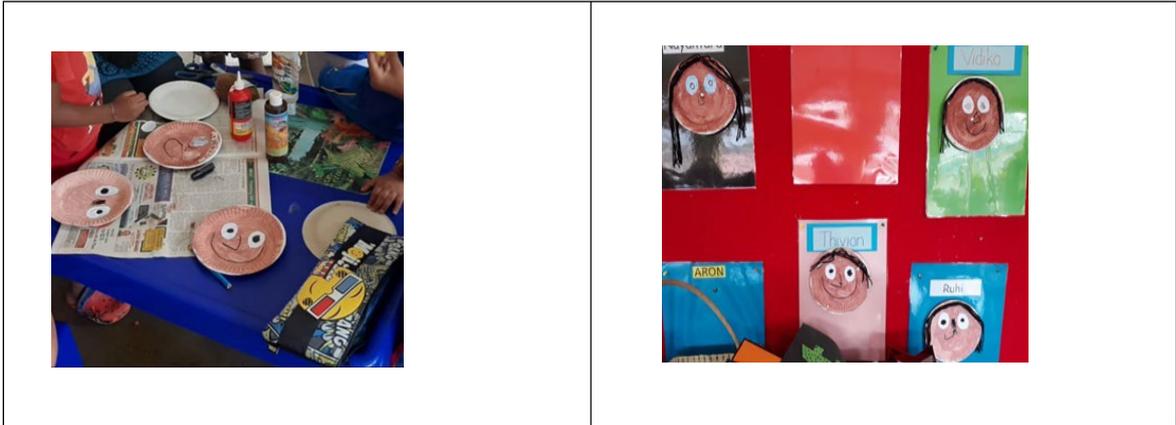
Figure 6.13 Skin colour activities

Source: Co-Researcher and Author

From Annerly's activities I was able to see how the concept of skin colour and difference was taught purposefully to the children. Another salient issue of consequence was the lack of racial equity in the employment at the centres. Observation checklists in cycle one revealed that cleaners still remained black while managers of centres in these cases belonged to more advantaged race groups. Taking on a critical stance, Jessica cautioned the members of the ALS that,

> *"We can do all these things above but if we do not have racial equity at our centres we are sending contradictory messages. "*

The ALS later discussed that having a white manager and black cleaners and assistants at centres send out the wrong messages to the children. Suggestions to include diverse groups in the hierarchical organisation of centres, with equitable employment for different race groups is a noteworthy consideration however teachers have little say in the employment policies at centres.

Teachers' hands are tied with the latter mentioned employment equity issues, however from the above messages, we see that teachers have the power to be instrumental in ensuring that children from minority race groups could be made to feel welcome by including multiracial resources in the learning environment. The above activities demonstrate explicit ways of teaching little children about skin colour and difference. The practical painting and play dough activities above offer practical ways for teachers to welcome differences like skin colour into the learning environment (figure 6.13). In essence, when teachers fail to discuss differences openly, they are complicit in maintaining the status quo to reinforce negative beliefs about the 'other'.

6.3.2.3.3 Addressing Inequalities in Socio-Economic Status

In chapter three Moodley (2019) states that the developmental milestones of affluent young children in South Africa differ from children in impoverished backgrounds due to a lack of stimulation and access to well-resourced ECCE centres. Therefore, the ALS were asked, how to create an environment to level the playing fields between children from varying income levels. The participants were coached by watching an initial video then worked in pairs to answer the question. The participants were requested to use a picture or comment to attempt to answer the question. The following comments were noted by the members:

> *"Many children come to school without eating breakfast. Children cannot learn if they do not eat. In certain schools porridge is cooked daily"*(Kaveri & Lihle).

> *"If you have clothes that you no longer use at home, you can pack it and give a child. Bring lunch for them if they do not have anything to eat. Obviously as a teacher you don't have to give that child in front of other children. Get parents and businesses to sponsor lunch for the children. Something like a daily feeding scheme"* (Bahle & Annerly).

> *"Children are sensitive from a young age and quite often they will not make their poverty out there for others to see. But as teachers we could make the children aware that it is ok if you don't have something others may have and also that if you have more, learn to share"* (Amina & Rangeni).

> *"Make all feel welcome. Maybe the child whose parents are absent may require extra attention and care than the others. We have to understand each child's background and home environment to be inclusive"* (Jessica & Raadia).

The ALS also reflected in their journals at the end of cycle two regarding the inclusion of children from impoverished or relatively impoverished backgrounds. Jessica explained that certain classroom activities required expensive items like paintbrushes, paint, strong glue and clay. She believed that such activities requiring expensive items should be discouraged unless the teacher can plan to accommodate these problems. Jessica stated that,

> *"Never exclude a child from activities because his parents have not paid for their stationery or supplies."*

She also stated that children needed to have items that were uniform. This uniformity discourages peer pressure and bullying. Children are aware of others' socio-economic status based on the clothing they are wearing and their school accessories, which becomes a fertile ground for discrimination.

> *"If everyone wears the same uniforms, it's harder to discriminate between the rich and the poor. Having similar items for all the children prevents children from displaying their material advantage to the less fortunate. Always discourage expensive items in the classroom."*

Annerly stated that sometimes the children who had less supervision could communicate better and run her errands for her. These findings highlight two important issues to include children who are experiencing poverty or relative poverty. The first relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This humanistic theory is visualised as a pyramid arranged in seven hierarchical levels. From the bottom, the needs comprise of physiological needs, safety, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, cognitive needs and aesthetic needs. The final rung of self-actualisation can only be achieved if the child's lower-level needs are met (c.f. 3.2.2.1.1). The discussion by Kaveri and Lihle / Bahle and Annerly indicated that a child's primary physiological needs must be met first. The provision of nutritious foodis vital for children to reach their full potential. The other two groups alluded to children living in poverty requiring extra attention from the teacher, enhancing Maslow's love and belonging and esteem needs. Seeing that in chapter three, children from impoverished backgrounds may lack the presence of a significant adult (c.f. 3.2.2.1.1), this is noteworthy. It aligns with a study by Berkowitz et al. (2017) that linked a positive learning environment to academic achievement irrespective of poverty. The study highlighted that a warm, accepting school climate resulted in improved academic performance, achieving a decline in the academic achievement gap between wealthy and less affluent children (c.f. 3.2.2.1.1).

The second important issue related to the organisation of the classroom activities to reduce discrimination by wealthier children. Co-researchers suggested the wearing of uniform and having uniform school accessories. This would reduce the awareness of socio-economic status among children. The messages also suggest that children need to be included in all activities, irrespective of the required items' absence. Activities requiring expensive items should instead be excluded from the programme as children should never be excluded from activities based on the absence of the required material.

6.3.2.3.4 Addressing Language Bias and Welcoming all Language Groups

The Constitution of the country (1996) declares eleven official languages, however regardless of this, languages do not have the same amount of status or power in South Africa. Following a discussion on language in the ECCE, participants were asked to reflect critically on how to create a learning environment for all language groups to feel welcome without any language bias. Suggesting language stereotyping and power issues Raadia stated that,

> *"one language can never be superior to another. A common mistake is to label a child as slow who is struggling to understand the language."*

Implying the importance of a sensitive period for language development, Kaveri stated that,

"The early years is an important period for language development. Children should be learning a new language while still using the mother tongue. This will assist the child to learn the new language in a less stressful way."

Suggesting ways to welcome minority language groups into the play group, the following ideas and photographs (figure 6.14) were presented.

"There are posters and greetings in my classroom with different languages. We not only have them displayed but learn to greet each other in their different languages. These differences in language are not an inconvenience but something we all enjoy" (Annerly).

"I find that we need to be careful with children's names. We should not shorten their names. As names have meanings. I feel that some teachers never made an attempt to learn how to say my name correctly. Others would shorten my name when I was in school. I felt strange being called differently at home and at school. I make an attempt to learn how to say their names correctly" (Bahle).

"To make different language groups feel included, get all children to learn a song or rhyme in a minority language. Try sharing stories in a different language by getting a person from the outside or someone from your centre. I keep books in different languages in my library corner" (Lihle).

"School newsletters and notices also need to be inclusive. There is no point of sending these home when they do not understand the language" (Amina).

| Greetings in diverse languages at the centre. | Library books in various languages displayed in the book corner. |
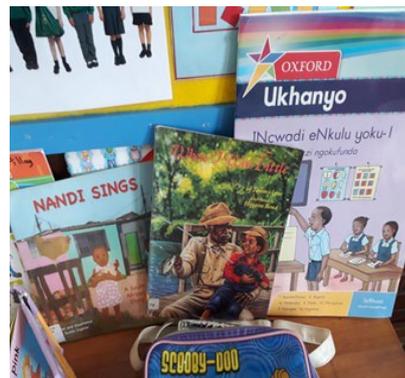
Posters displayed on the walls in two languages.	Sharing stories in a different language by getting a person from the outside to read to the children in a different language.
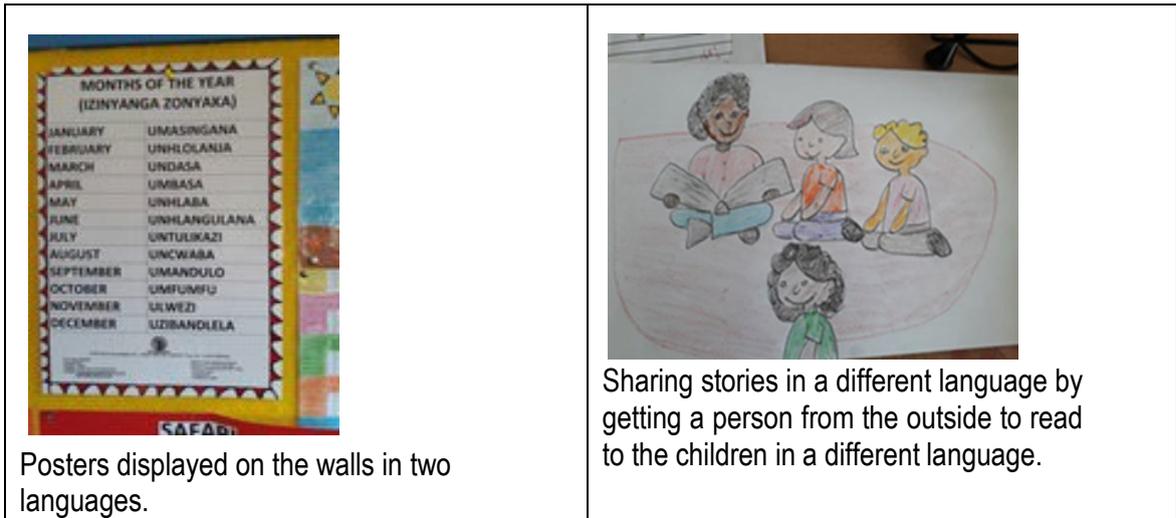
Figure 6.14 Inclusion of diverse languages in the ECCE centre

Source: Co-researcher

The above findings suggest three essential points. *Firstly*, the use of colonial languages like English for formal education, suggest that these colonial languages have superiority. The statement by Raadia contests this as all languages need to be equally valued in our centres. Aligned to this in chapter three, Kretzer and Kaschula (2020) and Ferguson (1959) declare that language is never neutral and developed the term 'diglossia' to separate two language varieties. The authors clarified that language is classified as high or low variety where one has greater value over the other (c.f. 3.2.2.1.5). *Secondly*, Kaveri noted the importance of a child retaining the mother tongue to enable the smooth learning of a second language. This strengthens a need for early childhood teachers to recognise the value of additive bilingualism (c.f. 3.2.2.1.5). Additive bilingualism enables the learning of a second language in conjunction with the first language, as suggested by researchers like Cummins (1992), Enstice (2017) and Joubert (2019). *Thirdly*, these participant reflections guide how to welcome minority languages practically in the ECCE centre. The presence of various books in various languages in the book corner, the translation of school newsletters, the learning of greetings and the recital of songs and stories in different languages create a warm environment for children from different language groups. The findings also suggest the importance of learning how to say children's names correctly as most names reflect the family culture and belief system and are tied to a child's identity (Lynch, 2019).

6.3.2.3.5 Challenging Ableism

Ableism was explained in chapter three as a deeply entrenched form of social prejudice that assumes people with barriers to learning or disability are inferior and require 'fixing'. Cycle one revealed a need for greater awareness of ableism among the ALS. Members of the ALS were paired once more to

encourage collaboration, communication and compromise. Each pair needed to discuss a photo and to relate to the inclusion of disabilities or specialised learning needs. Arising from their discussion Bahle and Lihle indicated that specific barriers were difficult to identify by teachers, but both types were critical to address. They stated that:

> *"some children have disabilities that can be seen like a child in a wheel chair. Others have problems that are not easy to see."*

Amina and Annerly added that the learning environment had to accommodate all the children somehow and by making improvisations with the assistance of community this would be less expensive. They remarked that

> *"we don't need to have specialised equipment to include children with impairments. Instead, we could get parents to assist with building ramps or modifying the playground."*

Kaveri and Raadia noted that sympathy for people with disability was problematic and encouraged empathy instead. They stated that

> *"empathy allows us to put ourselves in their shoes without feeling pity."*

Jessica and Rangeni suggested a need for people with disability or barriers to learning to be represented in the resources of the centre. The pair stated that

> *"There is a need for stories, books, toys and resources for children that represent people with disability doing wonderful things and achieving a lot in life."*

The above statements suggest that teachers should be aware that disability may be easy for teachers to detect or present as hidden impairments which aligns with remarks by Mathews (2009). The messages also suggest that simple physical accommodations within the learning environment may enable greater access, participation and achievement for children experiencing disability or barriers to learning. These physical changes could include inclusive playground equipment, a simple wheelchair ramp and wider classroom isles that can be inexpensively improvised with parents' help. This answers concerns raised by Wodon and Alasuutari (2018) that African communities may have poor infrastructure and offer minor physical accommodations for children with disabilities or learning barriers to fully access, participate and achieve in school (c.f. 3.2.2.1.2). The statements by the ALS also discourage the offering of sympathy that may serve to destroy children's self-esteem. This is in line with Cologon (2019), who states that people without disability or learning barriers may patronise or show unnecessary benevolence to the person grappling with an impairment as people assume incompetence based on the person's diagnosis and the inaccessibility of places, events and materials. The reflections above also encourage the representation of people with disabilities in the resources within the learning environment. These resources include dolls with disabilities, puzzles and books

depicting children with disabilities as well as posters in the classroom. In cycle two the ALS attempted to challenge ableism in the early learning environment.

6.3.2.4 Theme Summary

The above theme highlighted teacher reflections on becoming more aware of privilege, power and diversity. , We all have unconscious attitudes toward groups of people due to our individual life experiences. As teachers, these must be brought to our awareness. The literature refers to this awareness as conscientisation – removing the veil on our implicit biases that would drive creating an inclusive learning environment forward. Chapter three mentions three levels of inclusion. The first is surface inclusion which is led by policy and the second level of inclusion focuses on changes to environments and curricula. The deepest level of inclusion, the target of this study, occurs within the teacher and addresses the hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum is the implicit values, behaviours and norms transferred without conscious intention and awareness by children and teachers. Hence entrenched deeply within every one of us is a lack of awareness of the power effects of diversity that needs to be addressed.

 It was apparent that after engaging in the privilege game and watching the video on understanding privilege, members became more aware of the nature of privilege and their position in relation to privilege. From the reflections, I gathered that although participants benefited from the game, it was not a very comfortable exercise. They could understand that individuals could be privileged in some ways and disadvantaged in other ways. Most of the members indicated a feeling of gratitude and a few demonstrated guilt after this activity, realising that they had so much more than others. It was using a virtual space, for the privilege game, in my opinion, that allowed for a more in-depth introspection, compared to the game being played in the presence of others. Essentially, there was more focus on themselves rather than the other participants in the game. This also created less of an opportunity to compare with others, which could have caused resentment and a breakdown in relationships within the ALS.

The ALS further engaged with a power flower activity that created greater awareness of how a person's identity is multi-faceted, resulting in compounded privilege or disadvantage. This activity allowed participants to once more introspect on the multi-faceted nature of their own identities. From their reflections, I could see an awareness of the intersectional nature of diversity developing. When applied in the ECCE centre, this intersectional nature of diversity resulted in a greater awareness of those children whose multiple identities resulted in disadvantage. Freire (2000) states that developing an awareness is not enough, as this awareness needs to translate into action. Hence, conscientisation

requires people to act upon their newfound awareness. Co-researchers thus were able to address stereotyping regarding race and colour, gender, language, socio-economic status, and ableism identified in cycle one. Members were able to do this in two ways. *Firstly*, by observing children's play and intervening at opportune moments, members were able to correct bias and stereotyping. *Secondly*, the physical resources like toilet roll puppets, books and wall displays were used to challenge the status quo, thus discouraging stereotyping. Following this discussion, it is apparent that an awareness of privilege, introspection on the intersectional nature of diversity, and awareness of stereotyping are essential to creating an inclusive learning environment. It is clear from the co-researchers' messages that disruption of their current reality through conscientisation is critical to achieving this end.

6.3.3 Theme Seven – Inclusive Play-Based Pedagogy

Learning in the early years occurs mainly through the medium of play-based activities. In addition, an inclusive pedagogy is based on the principles of critical pedagogy where the learning environment promotes participatory learning. Participatory approaches democratise knowledge production and promote learner voice and emancipation. Cycle one identified four deficits that opposed these principles. The co-researchers demonstrated traditional teaching methods, Eurocentric resources in the ECCE curriculum, 'schoolification' and rigidity in the curriculum and planning. To become inclusive these problems needed to be addressed. The co-researchers watched videos and recorded their new understandings using drawings, photovoice and journal entries. The four identified deficits were addressed by encouraging greater participation of children, implementing cultural responsiveness, playful learning and greater curriculum flexibility.

6.3.3.1 Encouraging Participation

Learning through active participation encourages children to exercise their autonomy with a role change from passive to active learning. Co-researchers were asked how to encourage greater participation of children in the early years programme. Raadia produced a photograph of craftwork done during one of her lessons (figure 6.15).

Participatory Learning	*"We learn through active participation in ECCE."*

Figure 6. 15 Participatory learning, Source: Co-researcher

In the photo above, children are learning actively and socially in the early years but true participation is deeper than this. True participation allows a child to think, make decisions and own their learning. Children take on different roles. Similar to the above picture, all contributions are valued in an inclusive learning environment. Children drew around their hands and were assisted with the cutting. These hands formed a vase of flowers. Producing the picture required a joint effort by the teachers and groups of children. Similar to participatory approaches where everyone gets involved, each child had an important role to play in the production of the craft. Hence Raadia's caption resonates with the principles of participatory pedagogy where early childhood teachers enable the child's voice and endorse the active participation of the child. Chapter three mentions that this approach nurtures choice and flexibility, balances risk and challenge, and fosters critical reflection among the children (c.f. 3.2.3.5.4). At the heart of participatory pedagogy is equality for all and the inclusion of all diversities. To enable this, teachers need to revisit their roles as "co-enquirers, democrats, guides and listeners' (Linington, Excell & Murris, 2011, p.36; c.f. 3.2.3.5.3).

In addition to a deep level of participation, classroom dialogue also opposes traditional 'banking' (c.f. 2.2.2.3.4) methods that specify a one way communication by the teacher to the child where the child listens and the teacher speaks. In keeping with Bohórquez (2020) horizontal dialogue between teachers and learners is an essential element in sharing ideas and ensuring democratic pedagogic practice. This aligns with Freire (2000) who states that *"knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other"* (p. 244). This ongoing dialogical interaction enables the co-construction of knowledge in a collaboration that results in epistemic justice (Ebrahim et al., 2019). After watching videos, Bahle produced the following photographs that related to classroom dialogue (figure 6.16).

Questioning	*"It's important to ask questions after a lesson to see how they relate to the lesson …. "*

Listening	"…teachers must listen to children... really listen... to what children have to say."

Figure 6.16 Dialogue

Source: Co-researcher

The above statements by Bahle strengthens the importance of a dialogical teaching approach where the teacher asks questions and listens to the answers that children provide. Hence ECCE teachers, using dialogue, become jointly responsible in a pedagogical process in which all grow. An inclusive teacher needs to exhibit the willingness to learn as much as a willingness to teach.

6.3.3.2 Culturally Responsive Teaching

It was reported in chapter three, that Ladson-Billlings (2009) contends that teachers who use a culturally responsive teaching method see culture as a strength that can be used effectively to enhance academic and social achievement. In alignment with this Delpit (2006) refers to 'responsive teaching' as a means of linking classroom content to the lived experiences of children. The author claims that teachers need consistently to create activities where students' lives are brought into the classroom and connections are made between their lives and the content being taught (c.f. 3.2.3.5.3).

Similarly, Bassey (2016) alludes to the fact that

> "culturally responsive teachers are grounded in pedagogical practices, teaching conceptions, and social relationships that enhance social justice, because these teachers relate the curriculum to students' backgrounds, establish connections with families, understand students' cultural experiences, establish connections with local communities, create shared learning experiences, and recognise cultural differences asstrengths on which to build programs."

Thus children learn when they are able to connect with the learning content. In contrast to this, cycle one revealed that traditional stories with blue-eyed and golden-haired princesses were very much the norm in the centres. When asked how to address this issue of story characters and resources that children were unable to identify with, Kaveri attempted to remake her story puppet (figure 6.17). Using brown paint and black hair she redesigned the characters to represent the children in her play group.

Remodelling a Story Puppet		
		"When we teach, we need to use examples from the child's life. We create a bridge between the child's home and school. If I teach early maths and I need counters, I will use what they have brought from home, even shapes I will say bring me a box from home. Use items like beans and pinecones as counters."
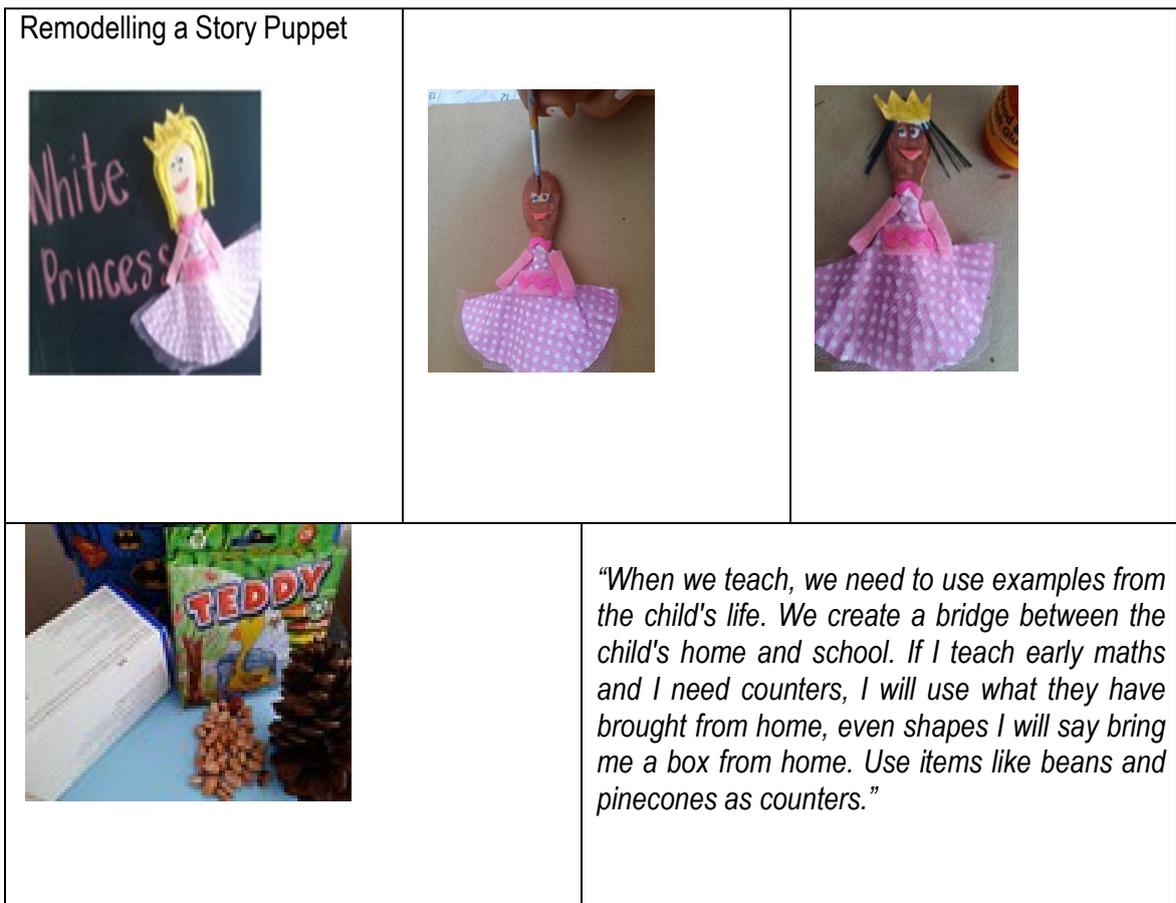
Figure 6.17 Culturally responsive teaching

Source: Co-researcher

Using photo voice Rangeni explained to the group how she used resources that the children could identify with (figure 6.17). The above representations by co-researchers reveal an understanding of culturally responsive teaching that valorises the lived experiences of children, hence creating a more meaningful and sustainable learning experience.

6.3.3.3 Play-Based Learning

As mentioned earlier, the NCF promotes play-based learning as an integral part of pedagogy in the early years (DBE, 2015) as play serves as an intrinsic channel for young children to learn and develop (c.f. 3.2.3.6.2). Cycle one suggested that the ALS required a deeper understanding of playful learning. Lihle completed the following drawing that emphasised the holistic development of children in all domains through the medium of play as it is a natural way of learning. The ALS also stated that the different play areas stimulate different areas of learning. For instance, in Lihle's drawing in figure 6.18 the block area not only develops important early mathematical skills like colour, shape and size but

also develops concentration, creativity and social skills. Members also noted that play is a time that teachers can observe and correct children's poor attitudes to diverse groups of people.

Play	"Play is work for children."

Figure   6.18   Play

Source: Co-researcher

It is apparent that the different play areas in the learning environment contribute to the children's holistic development in various domains due to the multi-faceted dimension of children's play. Messages also highlight teacher intervention during play. This is in line with Excell and Linington (2015) who state that a pedagogy of play allows the teacher to become an active part of children's play. Hence, if children are engaged in discriminatory behaviour, these need to be corrected during opportune moments (c.f. 3.2.3.6.2).

Multi-sensory learning through play, enables learning through the use of two or more senses which could be a combination of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory or taste. A brain development theory by Edelman (1987) states that multisensory learning enables more elaborate neural connections than single sensory learning. Therefore, children are able to grasp concepts more comprehensively due to stimulus from more than one sensory organ. Further to this, children have different learning styles and multisensory learning will appeal to visual, auditory, tactile, and kinaesthetic learners. The concept of learning styles is grounded in the idea that individuals differ in the ways they learn and how they absorb and retain new information (Dunn, 1983). Demonstrating a multisensory activity Jessica posted how she used multi-sensory learning to teach the letters of the alphabet (figure 6.19).

Multi-sensory Approach	"If the four-year-olds are learning about the letter h. they get to taste, smell and touch the play dough which involves their eyes, fingers, nose and tongue. They also get to roll the play dough which develops their finger muscles at the same

	time. This keeps them learning and developing with these kinds of activities."
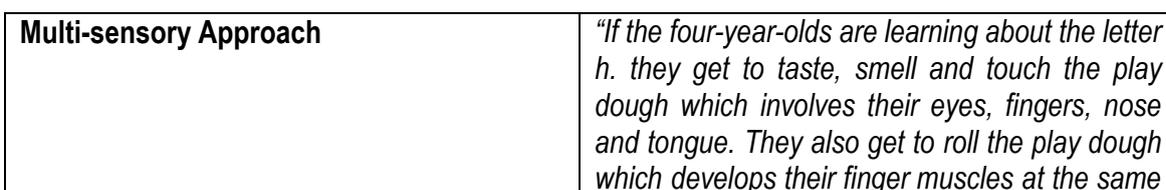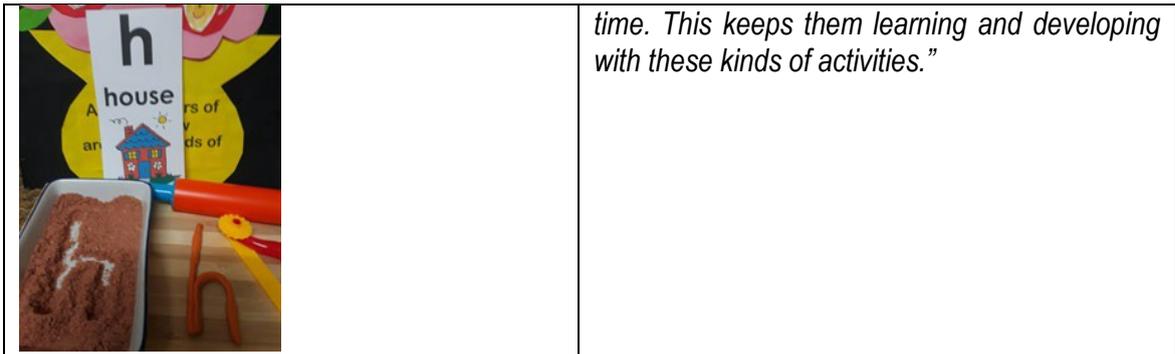
Figure 6. 19 Multi-sensory approach

Source: Co-researcher

Hence learning should involve all the senses, as children learn in different ways and we should try and engage all senses in the learning that takes place. Play-based learning discussed above also calls for flexibility in the early years programme.

6.3.3.4 Curriculum Implications

A flexible curriculum is essential as all children are unique in their individual learning needs. The *South African National Curriculum Framework* (DBE, 2015), is merely a guideline for observation and planning of the early learning programme. Therefore, the activities in the NCF are not prescriptive and offer a great deal of flexibility to teachers in the early years. However, cycle one revealed that teachers had to follow their plans strictly, offered little choice to children and there was an unawareness of the value of the hidden curriculum. The following realisations regarding flexibility, choice and the hidden curriculum were recorded by Amina in figure 6.20.

Curriculum Flexibility	*….. learning takes place incidentally. It is important to go with the needs of the children.*
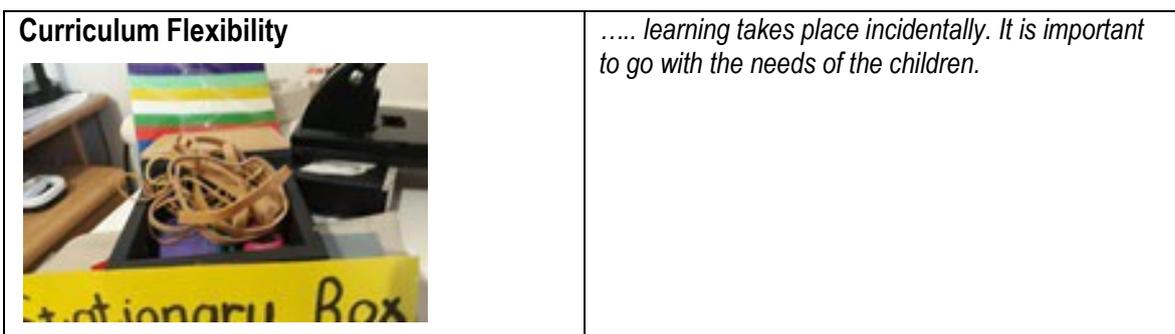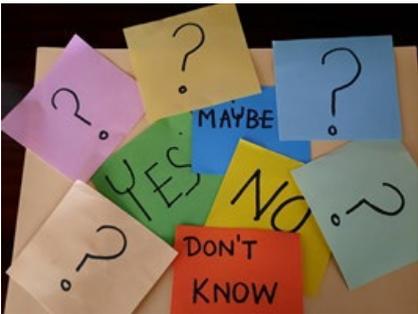
Choice	*Children need to decide which area to play in and what toys appeal to them at a specific time.*
Hidden Curriculum	*Teachers need to be aware of their own values and unconscious biases that shape the hidden curriculum.*
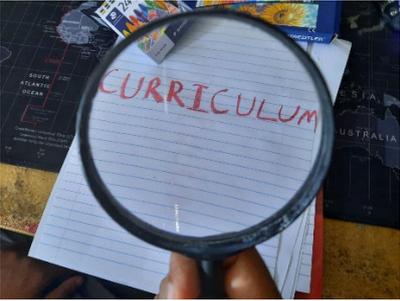
Figure 6.20 Curriculum and planning

Source: Co-researcher

In the above statements Amina indicated that flexibility enabled a more child-centred approach whereas choice of activities enabled greater democracy and ownership of learning. Her new awareness of the hidden curriculum highlighted the importance of life skills and human values that are a part of the daily lessons. Anti-discrimination and respect can be taught during opportune moments in class. For example, she could have addressed why dark-skinned children were the robbers in a game that children were playing. By using the hidden curriculum these ways of thinking must be challenged actively.

6.3.3.5 Theme Summary

This theme addressed concerns regarding traditional teaching methods in cycle one. This consisted of rote learning and repetition, resources that were Eurocentric in the ECCE learning environment, 'schoolification' concerns and rigidity in the curriculum and planning schedule. By implementing an inclusive play-based pedagogy, these deficits could be alleviated. According to the ALS an inclusive play-based pedagogy could be achieved if learning in the early years occurred mainly through the medium of play-based activities. In addition, based on the principles of critical pedagogy the learning environment needs to promote participatory learning that democratises knowledge production and promotes learner voice and emancipation. Further, the ALS suggested

cultural responsiveness and greater flexibility in the curriculum.

6.3.4 Theme Eight: Relationship Building

The early learning centre is an important space where relationships are built through interactions between people. It is more than a place to learn; strong social bonds and a sense of community develops through interaction with others. Cycle one revealed a need to foster partnerships among all role players, limited knowledge of inclusive communication among co-researchers and a need for collaborative learning opportunities.

6.3.4.1 Building Partnerships

The early learning environment is a place where trust and partnerships are built through various interactions. Several studies have revealed that a warm classroom climate enhances learning and produces a feeling of belonging and inclusion. Co-researchers were asked how to improve relationships among staff-members and partnerships with families and community members at the centre. Figure 6.21 captures the photo voice and drawings that co-researchers presented to the group.

Trust	Partnerships
Trust builds relationships	*Build partnerships with parents and the community.*
Grandparent Handmade Puppet	**A School Garden**
Grandparents must be included in the programme.	*A school garden is a way of welcoming parents.*

Key Person Approach	Parent Teacher Conferences
This approach allows a child to develop a strong relationship with one staff member at the centre.	*Regular parent teacher meetings allow parents to keep up to date with their child's academics and schooling life.*
Welcome Families of Diverse Structure	**Welcome Families of Diverse Culture**
If we have this kind of family we need to display these pictures.	*Include displays and artefacts to make diverse cultures feel welcome.*

Figure 6.21 Building partnerships

Source: Co-researcher

The above visuals and captions suggest the importance of trust in the inclusive learning environment (c.f. 3.2.3.3.2). It is also important to note that trust is vital in building relationships in educational settings. All relationships contribute to the development of an inclusive centre including the relationships between teachers and children, teachers and colleagues, teachers and parents and teachers and managers. The messages from co-researchers also suggest that centres are a microcosm of a larger society (Brown & Sekimoto, 2017; c.f. 2.2.2.3.1) and the early learning environment in ECCE is an initial space for building partnerships with parents and community. Building partnerships entails more than just getting them involved in the programme. An inclusive centre ensures family and community feel a sense of belonging and purpose within the centre. The reflections by co-researchers also reveal the importance of including grandparents in the activities of the centre as many South African children are brought up by grandparents due to multiple socio-economic factors as mentioned earlier by Moodly (2019). Further to this, the findings indicated a need for a family wall

to display and discuss the various types of family structures within the classroom. The school gardening project enabled children, teachers and community members to plant, grow and sell fresh produce thus working towards a common goal and fostering a deeper relationship. The key person approach, enables a single staff member to be solely responsible for the receiving, feeding, changing and dismissal of a child. This developed strong emotional bonds of trust and care. Finally, the inclusion of cultural artefacts and displays made minority cultures feel welcomed at a centre. Besides building partnerships, the ALS also explored how to communicate in a more inclusive manner.

6.3.4.2 Inclusive Communication

Chapter two states that language is important in negotiating and renegotiating power as many are disadvantaged or marginalised mostly through words and expressions and then through actions. Language can be both exclusive and a tool of liberation and teachers need to be aware of the power of language as unconscious bias or stereotyping can be conveyed through language. Following a video presentation by Jessica the co-researchers suggested three important pointers regarding inclusive communication. Firstly, the use of first-person language was noted by Bahle that,

> *"Be specific when talking about a disability or when someone who has a condition. Say someone diagnosed with or someone living with a disorder. Do not say this ADHD child or this Dyslexic Child."*

Aligned to this McDevit (2018) states that the use of people-first language reinforces that a person is a unique individual with their own set of characteristics and people with different abilities don't want their disability to become their main identifier (c.f. 3.2.3.6.5). *Secondly,* all co-researchers agreed that the use of certain gendered terminology served to exclude certain groups of people. Some examples of terminology that excluded were words like postman, policeman, chairman and fireman. In this case the language used excludes the feminine gender. It is crucial that teachers need to interrogate language usage and become aware of how language may covertly or overtly alienate and ostracise groups, thus creating and reinforcing the 'other' in early learning environments (c.f. 3.2.3.6.5). *Thirdly,* co-researchers agreed that the use of certain words served to denigrate certain groups. All agreed that words like special needs had to be removed from teacher terminology. This aligns to chapter three, when Makoelle (2015) contests the use of the term special needs as it singles out children and negates that *all* children have unique and special needs (c.f. 3.2.3.6.5). Furthermore, the ALS also needed to recognise the value of collaborative learning opportunities for the children.

6.3.4.3 Collaborative Learning

In chapter three Parton reminded us that as young children develop, their play becomes more complex and social resulting in the development of important skills like self-regulation, sharing, leadership and communication. Co-researchers were asked how to improve collaborative learning in the early years programme. Annerly produced a photograph of an enlarged jigsaw puzzle.

Jigsaw Puzzle	*Important social skills like turn-taking and patience are developed in the puzzle area.*
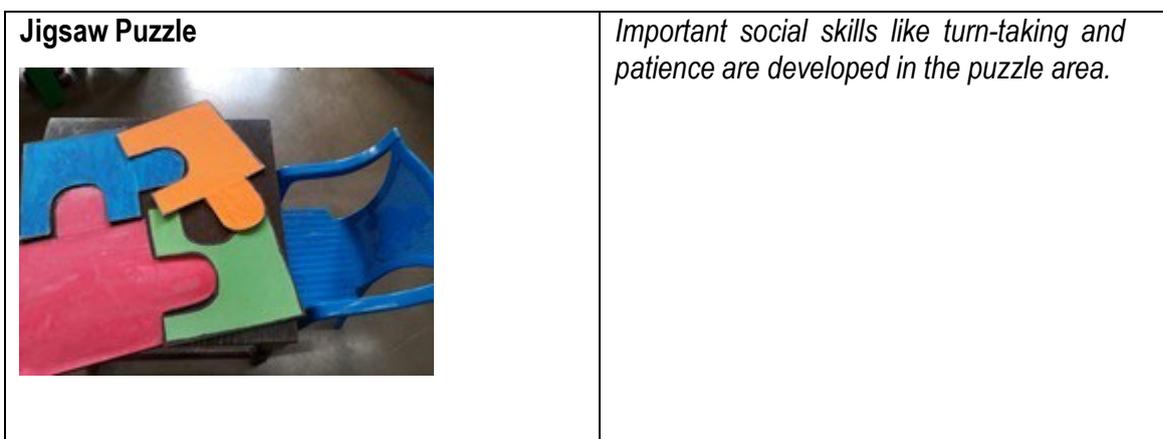
Figure 6.22 Collaborative Learning

Source: Co-researcher

She stated that as children work together with puzzles they are learning important skills in problem solving, hand-eye coordination, mathematical concepts and communication (figure 6.22). More importantly she emphasised the development of patience, perseverance and how to take turns. Members of the ALS also emphasised the value of fantasy play as a means of developing social skills and emotional regulation. These important realisations about collaborative learning through play align with Vygotsky's theory of self-regulation (Hardman, 2016). The latter states that through co-operative play like puzzle-making and fantasy play children are able to act against their immediate impulses. Similarly, Hardman (2016, p. 143) states that this collaborative play enables a child to 'test' new learning safely. In addition, the author states that collaborative play involves rules that need to be followed and this prepares children to act according to social norms and thus it builds relationships from a young age.

6.3.4.4 Theme Summary

This theme addressed concerns regarding relationship-building in cycle one. The concerns included a lack of partnerships among ECCE stakeholders, a need for greater knowledge on inclusive communication and collaborative learning through play in the ECCE learning environment. The group suggested ways to build partnerships among teachers, parents and the

community in numerous ways using visual data and captions. According to the ALS inclusive communication should be achieved by becoming more aware of language that may be offensive to certain groups, exclusive language and a lack of person-first communication. To encourage greater collaborative learning, members suggested the use of puzzles and fantasy play as a means for children to develop greater social skills that are the building blocks for relationships in later life.

6.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The aim of cycle two was for the co-researchers to demonstrate their competence in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and values. In cycle one, the co-researchers acted together within their context to foster collaborative critical reflection. This resulted in a transformation of their reality and further action and critical reflection. However, identifying the need for inclusion was insufficient in cycle one. Co-researchers had to dig deep to figure out how to create an inclusive learning environment within their context. Every participant chose an area of interest, based on the findings from cycle oneand prepared a video or slide presentation for the group. These videos or slide presentations demonstrated their commitment to learning and growing. On completion, these presentations served as a means to stimulate further discussion and to share their learnings with each other.

In theme five, the co-researchers agreed that they needed to understand the concept of inclusion, before moving on. Co-researchers used photographs of items within their environment to better understand complex concepts on micro and macro-exclusion. I found that this added to the authenticity of the research, as these served as a representation of their lived experiences. To understand inclusion better, we needed to understand that inclusion is not mainstreaming, integration, segregation, assimilation or a tokenistic celebration. The use of drawings of round pegs and round holes, square pegs and square holes, square pegs and round holes together with shape sorting toys served as metaphors to further explain these concepts. In addition, children were expected to lose their individuality and assimilate into a 'melting pot' of mixed cultures instead of retaining their original 'crispness' like a medley of fresh vegetables in a salad. To gain a thorough understanding of inclusion also required an understanding of inclusion as a process not a product. The co-researchers decided that inclusion required constant adaptation to a situation and attempted to maximise access, participation and achievement of all children. This discussion on inclusion revealed that it is ever-changing and fluid, with different meanings in different contexts.

Theme six, highlighted a need for the ALS to examine their own value systems on a continuous basis. Hence each of us played a 'board game' that emulated a 'privilege walk' and a 'power flower'activity to understand intersectionality. This game raised an awareness, of various forms of privilege

and a deeper understanding was achieved of how the intersectionality of race, socio-economic class, gender and other identity markers shaped our perceptions of diverse groups of people. Just as this position needed to be understood by the co-researchers in their classrooms, it also served as an eye-opener for me. I needed to be aware of my privilege over the co-researchers and not let my position as an esteemed researcher cloud my research judgments. My position as privileged researcher needed to be re-envisioned, from a 'position of knowledge in an epistemic hierarchy to someone operating in an epistemic democracy' (McAteer & Wood, 2018, p. 1). The new insights of intersectionality and privilege, brought upon by these activities, influenced the processes of knowledge acquisition in this cycle.

As a result of a newfound awareness, theme six also aimed to create a stereotype free learning environment that welcomed all diversity. Members of the ALS identified five salient diversities which included diversities in gender, language, race and skin colour, ability and socio-economic status. Using photovoice, collaborative discussion and reflective drawings participants shared their observations and learning. Their communication built upon the learnings of others and deep realisations were made according to their unique life experiences. As the researcher, I was made aware that few people were 'normative' and were able to fit into the proverbial 'box' hence I could see the need to deal with these realities head on. To be bias free and to welcome all, I needed to move away from assumed 'certainties' regarding gender, racial, sexuality, ability and socio-economic status. Reflections from the ECCE role players revealed a critical need to make all feel welcome in the inclusive learning environment and to be aware of various types of stereotyping.

Theme seven centred on the need for an inclusive play-based pedagogy to replace traditional methods of education where children are seen as passive recipients of knowledge. The findings of this revealed the need to reimagine the role of the teacher and learner, where teachers may perfect their craft through listening attentively to learners and valuing their unique realisations. A video was prepared by Lihle and then participants were asked about how to make their teaching more inclusive. Co-researchers were asked to record their insights using drawings and photographs of objects in their environment. These exercises revealed that there was a need for dialogical learning, flexibility, problem-posing, playful multisensory learning, and cultural responsiveness. From my standpoint as a PALAR researcher, this meant stepping back to become a facilitator of learning rather than a dispenser of knowledge. It was a challenge to allow the knowledge to come from the participants. Twenty years of giving instruction to learners needed to be undone. It was time-consuming, and I had to remind myself constantly about the rejection of these harmful 'banking' methods during the learnings.

Theme eight centralised the inevitable building of human relationships as part of the teaching and learning process. The findings highlighted values of respect, care, trust and humility as cornerstones of good relationships in the learning environment. As a researcher, I could relate these to my reflections on the relationship-building phase of PALAR and the value of human connection. The relationship of language to power was also emphasised here. Many are disadvantaged or marginalised through words and expressions. Consequently, the co-researchers highlighted how language could be both exclusive and a tool of liberation. For my personal journey towards adopting an inclusive approach in my living, I could see the need to pause and examine before speaking aloud. These findings deepened my awareness of the power of my words not only in my professional but also in my personal interactions.

The entire cycle was a learning experience that reflected the *how* of creating an inclusive learning environment for these participants within their unique contexts. Inadvertently, the suggestions were not always suitable for all the participants, and many agreed that certain realisations were not applicable to their centres or their personal philosophies. However, this cycle served as an intersection of theory and practice, which is regarded as praxis, "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2000, p. 79). This cycle focused on the way we think and about *how* we perform our professional duties inclusively in the specific context of an ECCE centre.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION: CYCLE THREE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter synthesises the findings from the two previous cycles presented in chapters five and six and the literature reviewed throughout this thesis. Chapter five highlighted the need to create an inclusive learning environment by surveying the current situation of inclusion for the participants. The chapter findings revealed a need for the group to understand the concept of inclusion and a need for greater awareness of privilege and diversity. The chapter also called for the group to adopt an inclusive play-based pedagogy and emphasise relationship-building among all stakeholders in their centres. This gave impetus to chapter six, highlighting how to create inclusive learning environments to address the areas of need identified in chapter five. In this chapter, the theorising, the complexity of inclusion in ECCE is brought to the fore to answer the final research question. Using the responses from the former two cycles, I picked out key insights that informed the research question: *Why do we create inclusive learning environments the way we do?* Although cycle three serves as the final cycle for this study, the ALS will continue with improving their knowledge and skills beyond this study to refine a handbook on inclusion for the sector. At the end of this cycle, the ALS completed a journal that reflected the entire research process. The data from the reflective journals were triangulated with results of the first two cycles, literature, visual data and informal discussions that were validated to inform the focus of this cycle.

7.2 ARRIVING AT THE FINDINGS

This chapter explains the complexities of the themes in cycles one and two. Cycle one and two required a straightforward analysis due to the exploratory nature of the research questions. Cycle three aimed for a deeper level of analysis, which called for closed coding in a critical thematic analytical framework to revisit the data from a more critical standpoint. Instances of recurrence, forcefulness and repetition were analysed to identify ideologies, power relations and hierarchies (Lawless & Chen, 2018) within the data set. This critical analysis aimed to explain how these ECCE role players became aware of dominant ideologies and how they worked towards challenging them to promote an inclusive learning environment. The theoretical 'why' question of this study meant deeper prodding that resulted in a more critical examination of the collected data. To begin this cycle, co-researchers were given feedback from the research findings in cycles one and two. This served as a refresher with a three-fold purpose; to validate the key learnings, to provide structure for our proposed handbook on

inclusion, and to theorise our findings for cycle three. Following this, the ALS reflected on the PALAR process and their application of the PALAR principles in creating an inclusive learning environment. This exchange granted me unique insights into their lived experiences and interpretation of the research process. These were then triangulated with the literature and findings from each cycle to formulate an answer as to why we create inclusive learning environments the way we do. As the principal researcher, I collated the information and related these key themes to the theoretical insights these findings offered me. In this chapter, I attempt to synthesise these messages with my theoretical perspectives, methodological paradigm, and literature on inclusion. Before building my justification, it is essential to bear in mind that my fundamental ontological assumption is that reality is socially constructed where the understanding of inclusion is collaboratively constructed and remoulded by the research team. Using a participatory research method, the reality of the researcher and the participants is transformed through the research process. Knowledge acquisition is collective with no power hierarchies apparent. Figure 7.1 illustrates the iterative dialogical process for cycle three.
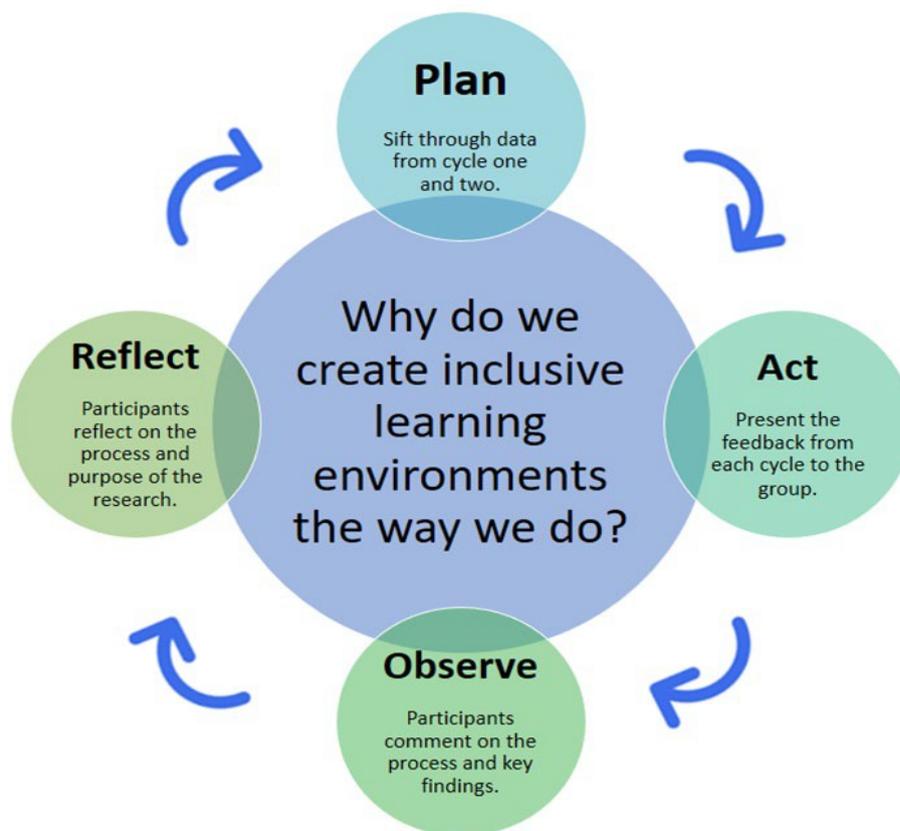
Figure 7.1 Cycle three iterative process

Source: Author

The findings presented in this cycle highlight that *why* we make sense of inclusion the way we do, is not a generic or one-size-fits-all answer. Instead, it goes beyond an individual understanding extending to the interactive network of collaborative role players specific to this study. The understanding of inclusive learning environments is informed by the unique contexts in which the participants live and operate. To begin with, this chapter first theorises on the four broad themes presented in cycles one and two (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Critical thematic analysis in cycle three

Critical Thematic Analysis of Data in Phase Two – Cycle Three		
Focus Question	Identifying Prominent Issues	Philosophical Interpretations
	Step 1 Open Coding What was repeated, recurrent, and forceful in these texts?	Step 2 Closed Coding What ideologies, positions of power, or status hierarchies are recurring, repeated, and forceful?
Why do we need to create an understanding of inclusion the way we do?	- A broad view of inclusion - Inclusion as a process - Understanding macro-exclusion - Understanding micro-exclusion	**Finding one: Ideologies Regarding Inclusion are Contested.** - Turning away from Narrow Individual Deficits - The Destination of Inclusion is never really reached - Segregation Marginalises and Stigmatises - Micro-exclusion is Insidious and Vital to Address
Why do we create an awareness of privilege, diversity and stereotyping the way we do?	- Understanding the impact of personal privilege - Understanding diversity and Intersectionality - Addressing stereotyping and welcoming all groups	**Finding two: Disruption of the Current Reality through Conscientisation** - Conscientisation Reveals our Position on Privilege - Conscientisation Reveals that Diversity is Intersectional - Conscientisation also means Action

Why do we need to implement an inclusive pedagogy the way we do?	• Addressing rote learning and repetition • Addressing Eurocentrism in the ECCE learning environment • Addressing 'Schoolification' of ECCE • Addressing rigidity in the ECCE curriculum and planning schedule	**Finding three: Implementing an Inclusive Play-based Pedagogy** • Knowledge through Invention and Re-Invention • Moving towards Cultural Responsiveness • Play as a Channel to Disrupt the *Status quo* • Flexibility Promotes Greater Child-Centredness
Why do we need to build relationships the way we do?	• Building Partnerships • Communicating in an Inclusive Manner • Learning Collaboratively	**Finding four: Building Relationships** • Moving Beyond the Cognitive Domain – The Role of Affect • Language is Never Neutral • Collaborative Learning as a Collective Meaning-Making process

7.2.1 Finding one: Ideologies Regarding Inclusion are Contested

Ideologies refer to a set of dominant beliefs of a particular group of people. Members of the ALS identified false beliefs that they shared regarding the concept of inclusion in cycle one. This gave impetus to cycle two, where the group attempted to contest these false understandings. Chapter five identified narrow and deficit model discourses as part of the participants' understanding of inclusion. In addition, the ALS regarded inclusion as a goal or state and misconstrued micro- and macro-exclusion practices as an understanding of inclusion. The group in cycle two then revisited these four areas. To this end, the ALS collaboratively reconceptualised their understanding of inclusion as presented below.

7.2.1.1 Turning away from Narrow Individual Deficits
To articulate my argument, I draw on the work of Freire, critical theory, critical emancipatory research and the models of disability. From the findings of cycle one, it was evident that the ALS initially adopted discourses of disability or learning barriers as the focus of inclusion. The ALS believed that special

education teachers need to be trained to create inclusive learning spaces, and the concept of inclusion centred on the placement of children experiencing barriers to learning in mainstream classes. They also initially adopted a narrow view and medical model of inclusion that highlighted disability instead of a broader view that includes *all* children vulnerable to marginalisation (c.f. 3.2.3.1; c.f. 5.4.5.1). In chapter three, deficit discourses of inclusion where the child is regarded as a problem are contested. It is mentioned that our ECCE centres' rigid structures and systems need to be addressed to accommodate *all* differences, not just disability (c.f. 3.2.3). Later in cycle two, the ALS prepared presentations and recorded their observations using reflective drawings. In keeping with the epistemological assumptions of critical theory, knowledge is valid if it can transform and empower people's lives. The methods employed to procure knowledge amounted to a 'collective meaning-making' process between the co-researchers and the researcher (c.f. 2.2.1.3.2.) Following the photographs, captions and conversations that emanated from cycle two, the ALS reflected on their new broad understanding of inclusion, where rigid structures and systems of our centres needed to be addressed to accommodate *all* differences, not just disability. These observations were aligned to the work of several researchers (Booth et al., 2006; Cologon, 2019; Daniels, 2018; Nutbrown et al., 2013; Petriwskyj, 2010) who advocate inclusion as a human rights and social justice agenda. In keeping with the new definition of inclusion, Dickins (2014, p. 1, c.f. 6.3.1.1) explains that "inclusion is a value system that respects *all* diversity and contests bias, prejudice, and stereotyping deeply entrenched in society's values." Thus, moving away from a deficit discourse promotes a more accommodating learning environment that asks for all children to be valued as unique individuals with varied strengths and capabilities. In line with Freire's emphasis on how the education system may favour some voices and marginalise others (Freire, 2000), the deficits of a rigid ECCE centre need to be addressed rather than the perceived deficits that marginalise a child. To sum up , the ALS needed to turn attention away from individual deficits towards institutional deficits.

7.2.1.2 The Destination of Inclusion is Never Really Reached

This study is viewed from a critical perspective that calls for individuals to invent and reinvent themselves continually, and a loss of this fluidity results in a loss of this critical stance (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; c.f.1.5). Consequently, the ontology of a critical position requires a dynamic, subjective and fluid reality that must be reconstructed through continued action and critical reflection (Aliyu et al., 2015; c.f. 2.2.1.3.1). In cycle one, the ALS produced messages of inclusion as a goal to be reached rather than as a process of becoming. This challenged the very nature of inclusion to be a process of constant critical reflection and critical action. As the PALAR process emerged, participants indicated a need to examine their situation on an ongoing basis where each day presented

varied opportunities to readjust, reinvent and reconsider teacher choices. As an inclusive teacher, just as the children who enjoyed the process of creating their paintings for research participant eight, inclusion is in a state of becoming. In the same vein, inclusion can be likened to a journey that never reaches a final destination which is often challenging, and takes commitment and ongoing effort (Cologon, 2019; c.f. 6.3.1.2). In essence, a state of inclusion will "emerge only through invention and reinvention, the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry beings pursue with the world and with others" (Freire, 2000, p. 53). Hence, the destination of inclusion is never really reached, and it is in a constant state of flux depending on the physical, temporal and social contexts of the learning environments that change from day to day.

7.2.1.3 Segregation Marginalises and Stigmatises

A vital agenda of critical research is to emancipate society from the dominant ideologies that compound social injustice and lack of equity. These ideologies serve to protect the interests of majority social groups resulting in the denigration of certain other groups in society. Likewise, the concept of segregation serves to marginalise and to stigmatise certain groups in society. Segregation is a form of macro-exclusion that involves the provision of formal education, but within separate settings or activities for the marginalised (c.f. 3.2.1.1). In chapter five, research participant two implied that it was the ECCE parents who often felt that their children with specialised needs were safer from ridicule and bullying in a specialised environment. This can be regarded as a parental choice that denies a child experiencing a barrier, the right to become a fully integrated member of society. It is important to realise that inclusion is a basic human right (Cologon, 2020) and this practice of relegating the child to a special centre compounds the stigmatising and 'othering' of the child as an inferior member of society. Consequently, this segregation creates a situation where people without disabilities have no interactions with people who do, resulting in a society that excludes and denies the inclusion of marginalised groups. Young children must experience living together with others who are different to embrace diversity. Consequently, studies on children experiencing barriers or disability, placed in inclusive learning environments have indicated long-term benefits for both - children experiencing barriers or disability and 'regular children' (c.f. 3.3). PALAR research promotes the notion that learning experiences need to fit into the life experiences of the participants as learning takes place by making connections. Chapter six, presents a research participant's pictorial representations of toys in her classroom to explain these concepts in a way that the children could relate to. Using drawings of shape sorters and pegboards, the concept of mainstream schooling and special schools were presented in a context-appropriate manner. This is aligned with Freire (2000) who advocates that the learners need to transform their lived experiences into knowledge by using the already acquired knowledge to unveil

new knowledge. Unless they are able to do this, "*they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing*" (p. 19). Hence using their lived experiences, participants noted that segregation and inclusion are conflicting ideas where one promotes a more equitable society and the other reinforces stigmatisation and marginalisation. To create inclusive learning environments and an inclusive society, teachers need to be mindful that young children must be in contact with marginalised groups from a young age.

7.2.1.4 Micro Exclusion is Insidious and Vital to Address

A critical epistemological agenda influences how researchers design their research while attempting to discover "real knowledge which is of benefit to society" (c.f. 2.2.3.1.2). Specific to this study, subtle exclusionary practices like integration, assimilation and celebration at ECCE centres may be mistaken for inclusion, leading to harmful repercussions in society. Therefore, these insidious forms of micro-exclusion need to be addressed critically in early childhood settings (c.f. 3.2.1.1). Messages from participants in cycle one indicated an understanding of integration, celebration and assimilation discourses as inclusion among co-researchers. For example, participant five alluded to encouraging children from different backgrounds to 'fit in' and follow the expectations of the centre. Children were encouraged to adopt the language, dress and food of the dominant culture. Freire (2000, p. 181) asserts that this is "*cultural invasion, which through alienation kills the creative enthusiasm of those who are invaded.*" In essence, children from minority groups are expected to conform to the ideals and practices of the dominant group at a centre, which results in alienation and a loss of individual identity. Hence, Freire states that "without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle (Freire, 1985, p. 186)." Consequently Cologon (2019) states that these forms of micro-exclusion are subtle, difficult to recognise but vital to address. Therefore, in an ECCE learning environment the subtle forms of exclusion should not go unchallenged.

7.2.1.5 Summary

The above exploration produced a deeper understanding of why participants understand inclusive education the way they do. I drew on the work of Freire, critical theory, literature on the models of disability and a critical emancipatory methodological research paradigm. The findings in the above discussion were in keeping with the latter mentioned worldviews where we gained a deeper understanding of inclusion through the experiences of people working democratically alongside each other with an intention to transform and improve the lives of others. A process of reflection and action that built upon the lived experiences of the ALS were reflected through the cycles. The key message

of this finding revealed that through this process, participants refuted narrow models of inclusion that foregrounded deficits in individuals rather than deficits in rigid institutional structures that failed to accommodate a diversity of children. Also contributing to an understanding of inclusion was the revelation of inclusion as a fluid process of 'becoming' rather than as a static goal. Of further significance to the participants understanding were their use of resources within their unique lived experiences to gain an understanding of blatant macro-exclusion and a more subtle micro-exclusion. Consequently, the understanding of inclusion is informed by the unique contexts in which the role players lived and operated that created a unique representation of their 'meaning making.' The ensuing section explores the role of conscientisation to build an awareness of privilege, diversity and hegemony.

7.2.2 Disruption of the Current Reality through Conscientisation

To explore the concepts of privilege, diversity and hegemony, I draw on the principles of conscientisation (Freire), elimination of false consciousness (critical emancipatory research) and critical consciousness (critical theory) as well as hegemony and counter-hegemony. The concept of conscientisation, critical consciousness and false consciousness are similar as they raise the awareness of individuals through a process of self-inquiry leading to personal emancipation. It is through self-emancipation that teachers may liberate the oppressed members of society (Freire, 2000). As a result, teachers working with children with diverse needs, have a responsibility to raise their awareness above their own subjective individualities, and seek solutions to promote the basic human rights of minorities or marginalised groups of people. To achieve this in cycle two, the ALS were involved in activities that allowed themselves to become more aware of privilege and power. In addition, the ALS reflected on the concept of the intersectionality of diverse identities and how hegemony maintains social dominance by a majority group.

7.2.2.1 Conscientisation Reveals our Position on Privilege

Conscientisation as mentioned earlier refers to the development of critical awareness through an iterative process of action and reflection. Therefore the participants were asked to play the privilege game in cycle two to begin the process of determining their awareness of personal privilege. Since their game was a virtual board game, they were unable to ascertain the position of the other participants but they shared their reflections with the group afterwards. The game allowed participants to become more aware of the areas in which they were advantaged or disadvantaged as well as how they were advantaged in some ways and disadvantaged in other ways. Co-researchers were

reassured that recognising their own privilege in relation to others should not make them feel guilty, as these unearned advantages did not make them less hardworking. Instead, the purpose of this game was to reveal that people generally have unearned advantages in different ways that others don't. It revealed that teachers need to be exposed to training and discussion on power, privilege, and difference that impacted, often negatively, on their attitudes towards diverse groups of people. In chapter three, Kiguwa (2018) terms this as a 'forced introspection', a means of engaging with the complexity of diversity in classrooms and the everyday world. A co-researcher, also termed this "*as seeking the uncomfortable*" (c.f. 6.3.2.2). Consequently, this aligns with the concepts of conscientisation which results in an awareness that is developed to change the current reality. Essentially without being equipped with knowledge of the concept of privilege, teachers are unaware of the underlying issues of power present in the learning environment. To create an inclusive learning environment, teachers need to become aware of the issue of privilege and how it affects the awareness of our position in relation to others.

7.2.2.2 Conscientisation Reveals that Diversity is Intersectional

In addition to privilege, participants also developed a critical awareness of the concept of diversity. The discussion that follows, draws once more from Freire's theory of conscientisation, and the theory of intersectionality as proposed by Crenshaw (c.f. 3.2.2.2). In chapter three, I presented a wide range of diverse identities that characterise people and I introduced the concept of intersectionality, where people are categorised into multiple categories each with a set of perspectives, affiliations, interests and social rankings. Following from the previous discussion, we are also aware that not all identities are equally privileged in society, as certain identities who are undervalued may experience marginalisation or oppression. Thus to be inclusive the early years professional needs to be aware of the intersectionality of these multiple identities that may compound experiences of oppression and marginalisation among certain groups of people. To become more aware of this intersectionality, the members of the ALS completed the power flower activity. This served to conscientise the ALS, as the effects of the interplay of their varied identities and the effects of this interplay in their learning spaces came to light. Freire also commented that the development of a critical consciousness is inadequate for social transformation but serves as a starting point. He states that,

> "*conscientização does not stop at the level of mere subjective perception of a situation, but through action prepares men for the struggle against the obstacles to their humanization*" (2010, p. 119).

Consequently, following their awareness of intersectionality, participants needed to act to effect social transformation. These actions would facilitate the teacher to create a more inclusive learning space contesting hegemony in the learning environment.

7.2.2.3 Conscientisation also means Action

Following the above discussion, the task for ECCE teachers would be to become aware of various levels of power and privilege operating among a diverse group of children and to take action against these (Villanueva & O' Sullivan, 2019). This is conceptualised as hegemony, which is shared through the literature on critical theory (c.f. *2.2.2.3.2;* Aliyu et al., 2015; Thompson, 2017) and critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2017; Freire, 2000). Literature further highlights counter-hegemony as part of the process of becoming aware, where ECCE teachers become conscious of how dominant groups maintain unequal and oppressive social practices and ideologies of power and privilege are assigned to dominant groups not just as a historical legacy but as a current social practice (c.f. *2.2.2.3.3;* Reygan, et al., 2018; Villanueva & O' Sullivan, 2019). In the ECCE context, dominant groups, for instance, would be those who are white, able-bodied, English-speaking or male.

Focusing the camera (literally) on the ECCE learning space, identified hegemonic practices that served to maintain the status quo and to support the privileged and powerful. Cycle one critically observed displays, resources, stories, toys and books that reinforced stereotypical ways of thinking in the learning environment. Dark complexioned story characters reinforced messages that dark skin resonates with an evil character. Gendered hegemonic principles are identified in stories with helpless princesses who required rescuing. These hegemonies were also intensified in traditional stories where feminine beauty and vanity were more important than character and skills (c.f. 6.3.2.3.1). Additionally, observations in the fantasy area pinpointed a need for teachers to encourage gender-neutral toys, positive racialised conversations and to avoid practices that promote gender binary.

Since *action* prepares people for the struggle against the obstacles to their humanisation (Freire, 2000) participants sought to address these stereotypical practices in cycle two. These attempts in cycle two can be aligned to Freire's theory of counter-hegemony. Counter-hegemony contests political and economic arrangements, while ultimately aiming at human liberation (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; c.f.2.2.2.3.2). Consequently, ECCE role players challenged stereotyping by using specialised learning resources partnered with meaningful discussion in the learning environment. Suggestions to include diverse groups in the hierarchical organisation of centres, with equitable employment for minority groups was a noteworthy consideration. It is also noted that adopting a 'colour blind' approach to

differences may magnify bias and stereotyping of people who look different (Kemple et al., 2016). Hence, when teachers fail to address stereotyping and bias, they maintain the *status quo* and reinforce negative beliefs about the 'other'.

7.2.2.4 Summary

This second phase explored how co-researchers can create an awareness of privilege, intersectionality and hegemony and their associated underlying power dynamics. This awareness is a central concept in the conscientisation of critical pedagogy, the critical consciousness of critical theory and the elimination of false consciousness in critical emancipatory research. As mentioned throughout, the process of fostering inclusion required the role players to become critically aware of their notions regarding the 'other'. The above discussion highlights that developing a critical consciousness is imperative as it plays a "significant role in promoting a more free and democratic culture across the globe" (Liu, 2015, p. 206). Findings also highlighted that critique is a dialogical process of deconstructing and reconstructing the world and this critical stance serves to unmask hegemony as a way for ECCE teachers to reconstruct their learning environments through action and critical reflection. This discussion highlighted how members of the ALS, became conscientised towards the intersectional nature of privilege and diversity, keeping in mind that conscientisation does not stop at the level of a mere subjective perception of a situation. Essentially these findings highlight that *action* prepares people for their struggle against the obstacles to their humanisation (Freire, 2000). Therefore we witness, the ALS acting upon the hegemonies that abound in their learning environments. The subsequent findings focus on further action in the form of adopting an inclusive play-based pedagogy.

7.2.3 Implementing an Inclusive Play-based Pedagogy

This theme draws on my epistemological position of a critical perspective, where knowledge is socially constructed and needs to benefit and transform society, using democratic and participatory methods. This perspective negates the seeking of an absolute truth, where knowledge is value free and exists independent of human perception. Consequently, Govender (2018, p. 48) proposes that

> "*education bent on social justice should not fixate on theoretical possibilities of equity, but on the development of critical and socially equitable practice.*"

Thus to facilitate this PALAR approach, I needed to adopt a participatory method to model to my co-researchers on how to action democratic and inclusive practices in their own classrooms. Cycle two

highlighted the use of critical dialogue, cultural responsiveness, play-based learning and flexibility as key components to replace traditional teaching methods.

7.2.3.1 Knowledge through Invention and Re-Invention

Freire's metaphor of 'banking' deviates from acting critically in education as it represents an ontology where the teacher is the bestower of the gift of knowledge on the children who have no knowledge. Hence, the use of a traditional banking method needs to change from a teacher monologue into a dialogic exchange of ideas when children become empowered to question knowledge critically by interrogating persistent ideologies of viewing the world. Freire claims that by assigning the roles of teachers as depositors and children as receivers, the banking concept transforms humans into objects. The findings of chapter one revealed a need to move away from rote and repetitive ways of learning that re-inforced the power dynamics of the teacher as the knower. Findings also implicated a need for teachers to become better listeners to engage in more dialogical interactions. To obliterate this, Freire proposed a 'problem-posing' approach to education where the role of student and teacher become interchangeable and both receive knowledge from each other. In cycle two, one participant mentioned, *"when I ask questions I get an idea on where to start or how to continue with my lessons."* So while asking questions I learn more about my students" (c.f. 6.3.5.2). Accordingly, Freire (2000) states that

> *"knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 244).*

Hence ECCE teachers, using a problem-posing approach become jointly responsible in the pedagogical process. A pedagogy that lays to rest dichotomies of a teacher and a learner, a pedagogy where all learn and grow.

7.2.3.2 Moving towards Cultural Responsiveness

Through a process of dialogue, children are able to give voice to their lived experiences. Freire (2000, p. 19) stated that,

> *"if students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing".*

Children are not empty shells or vacuums but rich sources of knowledge and experiences. Consequently, Delpit (2006) coined the term 'culturally responsive teaching', and her research showed that learners must be able to connect school and their lived experiences (c.f. 3.2.3.5.3). She claims that teachers need consistently to create activities, where students' lives are brought into the

classroom and connections are made, between their lives and the content being taught. In cycle two, one of the co-researchers mentioned the need to use examples from the child's life in teaching that creates a bridge between the child's home and school (c.f. 6.3.5.1). In addition, teachers who use a culturally responsive method in their teaching see culture as a strength which can be used effectively to enhance academic and social achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In support of this Bassey (2016, p. 1) alludes to the fact that

> *"culturally responsive teachers are grounded in pedagogical practices, teaching conceptions, and social relationships that enhance social justice because these teachers relate the curriculum to students' backgrounds, establish connections with families, understand children's cultural experiences, establish connections with local communities, create shared learning experiences, and recognize cultural differences as strengths on which to build programs."*

 In an ECCE context, we see that no individual enters a classroom as a vacuum and the valorising of the lived experiences of children is a cornerstone of creating a democratic ECCE learning space.

7.2.3.3 Play as a Channel to Disrupt the *Status Quo*

MRQECDE stipulates that one of the required competencies of the ECCE teacher is the planning and facilitating of learning through play and other transformative pedagogies (DHET, 2017). Consequently, play serves as a channel for young children to develop in all domains, and allows children to make sense of the world by relating to others (c.f. 3.2.3.6.2). Findings in cycle one revealed that centres took on an approach of formal schooling that negated a focus on learning through free and unstructured play. Several co-researchers indicated that outdoor activities get in the way of 'real learning' and raised concerns about play distracting them from the real learning. Several also stated that multisensory activities require time and effort to prepare for and indicated that crayons and drawing on paper were convenient for younger children (c.f. 5.4.7). Moreover, play often exposes power relationships between children, and each child's attitude to free participation is dependent on deeply entrenched attitudes about the 'other'. Findings in cycle one revealed how children enacted false ideologies and hegemonies to privilege certain groups and to denigrate others. Instances of dark- skinned children asked to take on roles of the 'robber' in children's role-play or telling a black girl that she cannot play the role of a princess were such examples. Consequently, during play, imbalances in power relationships caused by the interplay of various factors, including racism, sexism, homophobia and classism, are foregrounded. Undoubtedly, young children are aware of differences during play, and it is the aim of early childhood teachers to foreground diversity as something positive rather than negative. Play offers opportunities for children and teachers to embrace diversity and to challenge stereotypes.

7.2.3.4 Flexibility Promotes Greater Child-Centredness

Flexible teachers are able to respond to individual learner abilities, needs and interests. When facilitating this project, I attempted to take on an approach that was flexible and tailored to the ideas of my co-researchers. In the early years curriculum, the NCF states emphatically that the content for observation and planning of the early learning programme, should highlight that all children are unique in their learning needs. Therefore, the activities are not prescriptive and offer a great deal of flexibility for early year teachers. Numerous items of literature also highlight the importance of flexibility in the curriculum, teaching approaches and assessment in the creation of an inclusive learning environment. Despite this, findings in cycle one revealed that teachers were given a daily schedule by the managers which they were expected to follow. Deviation from this required an explanation and participants needed to account for the lost time. Messages in cycle one also revealed a need for children to 'own' their learning and choose their activities. This aligns with learner agency and autonomy. Notwithstanding these demands, teachers found ways of ensuring that learning was child-centred. For instance, one participant emphasised that she was unable to adhere consistently to her daily activity plan as learning takes place incidentally. She did not follow her daily schedule and followed the needs of the children.

7.2.3.5 Summary

This theme focused on the implementation of an inclusive play-based pedagogy in the early years. The exploration revealed that the adoption of an inclusive pedagogy required an epistemological transformation where knowledge is value laden and collectively constructed by the teacher and the learners. The findings foregrounded the role of dialogue, play, cultural responsiveness and flexibility as essential components of an inclusive pedagogy in ECCE. The theme highlights that pedagogies that *"suffer from narration sickness"* (Freire, 2000, p. 70) where children are passive recipients of knowledge, refute epistemic justice and consequently the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

7.2.4 Building Relationships

I draw on the principle that relationships require a mutual trust and care in the learning environment Freire (2000). Consequently, students and teachers enter the school from varying positions and relationships involving love, trust and humility have to be built into the learning environment. Freire also maintains that failures in love, trust, and humility disable the educational relationship (Margonis, 1999). Hence, teachers in this context build partnerships among stakeholders, inclusive communication strategies and collaborative learning.

7.2.4.1 Moving Beyond the Cognitive Domain – The Role of Affect

> *"Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialogues is the logical consequence"* (Freire, 2000, p. 91).

As a result of this mutual dialogue, it is inevitable that relationships of trust and positive regard should develop in the learning environment. In keeping with this statement of Freire, John Macmurray holds that *"teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations"* (Macmurray, 1964, p. 17; Noddings, 2012). Macmurray further claims that the act of teaching can never be a business or an industry as relationship building is a foremost task in education. Within this relationship between teacher and learner

> *"dialogical relations are endorsed where there is no intention to control or influence each other; rather, the basis of dialogue is co-presence, turning towards the other with a body and with the soul"* (Buber, 1947; Noddings, 2012, p. 5).

For Montero (2009), developing a critical consciousness is not restricted to cognitive aspects as emotions are central in attaining awareness about the circumstances influencing one's living conditions. Opportunities to build partnerships arise also between staff at the ECCE centre, family and community members associated with the centre. Concerted and ongoing efforts need to be made to maintain these relationships. Further to this, Zuber-Skerritt (2015) claims that PALAR methodology promulgates a holistic approach to learning, research and development. The author adds that this approach not only emphasises logical, rational, analytical, and critical thinking in the cognitive domain but highlights emotions, feelings and intuitions that interact with the social environment. Hence, through this research project, human relationships of care, trust and friendship were built through the interactions of the PALAR methodology that recognises how our feelings influence our actions. Therefore, ECCE teachers move beyond the cognitive domain. An understanding of the role of emotions, building relationships of care with people, play an important role in becoming more inclusive. Language is an important tool for building and maintaining human relationships. The following discussion explores how language may exclude or include diverse groups of people.

7.2.4.2 Language is Never Neutral

Freire stated that language is never neutral (c.f. 3.2.2.1.5) and the nuances of power and privilege are not easily detected but are often coded and require specific awareness to be perceived in the learning environment. Therefore, in keeping with Freire's statement, that competent teachers are successful communicators, and one of the challenges to communication in practice is diversity (Powell & Powell, 2016). But diversity is not something to be overcome in a classroom but it is rather a valuable resource that adds multiple dimensions to the classroom. This was evident in cycle two, when a participant

indicated that the children greeted each other in the different home languages present in the class group (c.f. 6.1.3). Teachers also allowed children to share stories, sing rhymes and read books in different languages. These practices emphasised the value of learning diverse languages within the learning environment.

In addition, teachers need to be in possession of

> "*a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of privilege and oppression*" (Steyn, 2015, p. 385).

Therefore, teachers need to develop an appropriate vocabulary for diversity fluency as

> "*language shapes our behaviour, and each word we use is imbued with multitudes of personal meaning*" (Newberg & Waldman, 2013 p. 1).

In keeping with this, ALS statements in cycle two, identified a need to use 'person first' language, as people experiencing barriers do not want these barriers to become their main identifier. Consequently, Seiter (2020) reaffirms that historically, language has excluded a multitude of individuals and groups due to marginalisation and discrimination of particular cultures, races and ethnicities, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, socio-economic status, appearance and more. Accordingly, The ALS indicated that certain gendered terminology served to exclude certain groups of people. Some examples of terminology that excluded, were words like postman, policeman, chairman and fireman that the ALS had used previously. Another participant highlighted how the use of certain words served to denigrate certain groups. For instance, words like 'special needs', 'normal' or 'slow' need to be removed from teacher terminology. Hence inclusive language seeks to treat all people with respect, dignity, and impartiality. It is constructed to bring everyone into the group and to exclude no one.

Moreover, in terms of language diversity, many South African children learn in a language that differs from their home language. Sometimes teachers may develop a negative attitude to children who speak different languages and believe that these children have a deficit that needs to be fixed to ensure academic success. A participant in cycle two supported this by stating that one language can never be superior to another and a common mistake is to label a child who is struggling to understand the language, as slow (c.f. 6.3.4.4). In addition, this may cause a power differential that privileges a particular language and the people that speak it. In support of this Nieto (2009, p. 81 – 82) and Powell and Powell (2016, p. 12) argue that:

> "*it is evident that issues of status and power must be taken into account in reconceptualising language diversity. This means developing an awareness that privilege, ethnocentrism and racism are at the core of policies and practice that limit the*

use of other languages other than officially recognised high-status languages allowed in schools and the society in general. When particular languages are prohibited or denigrated, the voices of those who speak them are silenced and rejected as well."

I therefore conclude that ECCE teachers to be critically aware of their attitudes to diverse languages and power issues that arise and should seek a way of including the language of minority groups into lessons and the use a non-offensive lexicon. I concur with Steyn (2015) that power is always obfuscated and hegemony is never openly promulgated. Therefore Reygan et al. (2018, p. 11) suggest that teachers need to

"translate and interpret coded hegemonies." *"Language is never neutral"*

and teachers need to be aware of language to facilitate the unmasking of coded hegemonies in the daily communication of the ECCE learning environment. Besides building partnerships with different role-players and inclusive communication, the subsequent section highlights a need for a collective meaning- making to facilitate greater inclusion.

7.2.4.3 Collaborative Learning as a Collective Meaning-Making

In line with a critical emancipatory paradigm, the methods used to procure knowledge in this project was a 'collective meaning-making' between the co-researchers and the researcher. This relationship building through social interactions emphasises the social and collective nature of human interaction. This research was driven forward by a sense of belonging and collectivism that determines our response to others and the need to recognise that these feelings are "operative within systems of power and have social effects" (Steyn, 2015, p. 387). Being aware of these power differentials, required me to step back to allow my co-researchers to facilitate and share their valuable knowledge. In accordance with Booth et al. (2006, p. 3) the inclusive early years curriculum enables playing, learning and working in collaboration with others. Despite this, findings in cycle one revealed that many participants were concerned about the disadvantages of collaborative learning, stating that children do not learn to work independently if they are assisted by their peers. Following these statements, the ALS later reflected that they could see the benefits of collaboration when children learnt socially from each other. They also reflected that during the pandemic, children were isolated during play and much collaboration was not possible.

7.2.4.4 Summary
This chapter focused on building relationships. The exploration revealed that the adoption of a climate of mutual trust, care, respect and humility was an inevitable result of an inclusive learning environment. The theme also highlighted the ALS's emphasis on effective communication as a cornerstone of

inclusive relationship building as language is always value laden and never neutral. Findings also highlighted that collaborative learning facilitated deeper connections and more profound realisations were prompted throughout the PALAR process. The next part of this chapter attempts to answer the third research question by relating these four findings to the wider agenda of this research.

7.2.5 Moving towards Praxis, Leadership, Emancipation and Social Transformation

To answer the question of "why we create inclusive learning environments the way we do?" I revisit the purpose of my research design, theoretical frameworks, research paradigm and my research phenomenon. I build on the key findings above to justify a wider phenomenon of this research that is to develop praxis through an iterative cycle of reflection and action, to develop teacher agency and leadership and to enable the voices of the members of the ALS to be heard. The findings above theorise on why we create inclusive learning environments the way we do in the learning environment. The following discussion highlights the higher purpose of this research. We employ suitable methods and are steered by a critical stance to facilitate wider societal transformation. The aim of critical research is not just to understand a phenomenon but to go beyond interpretation to transformation. This also aligns to the agenda of PALAR, critical pedagogy, critical emancipatory research as well as inclusion. Figure 7.2 represents the common agenda of the research design, phenomenon, theoretical perspectives and the research paradigm. We create inclusive learning environments to facilitate positive transformation in society at large.
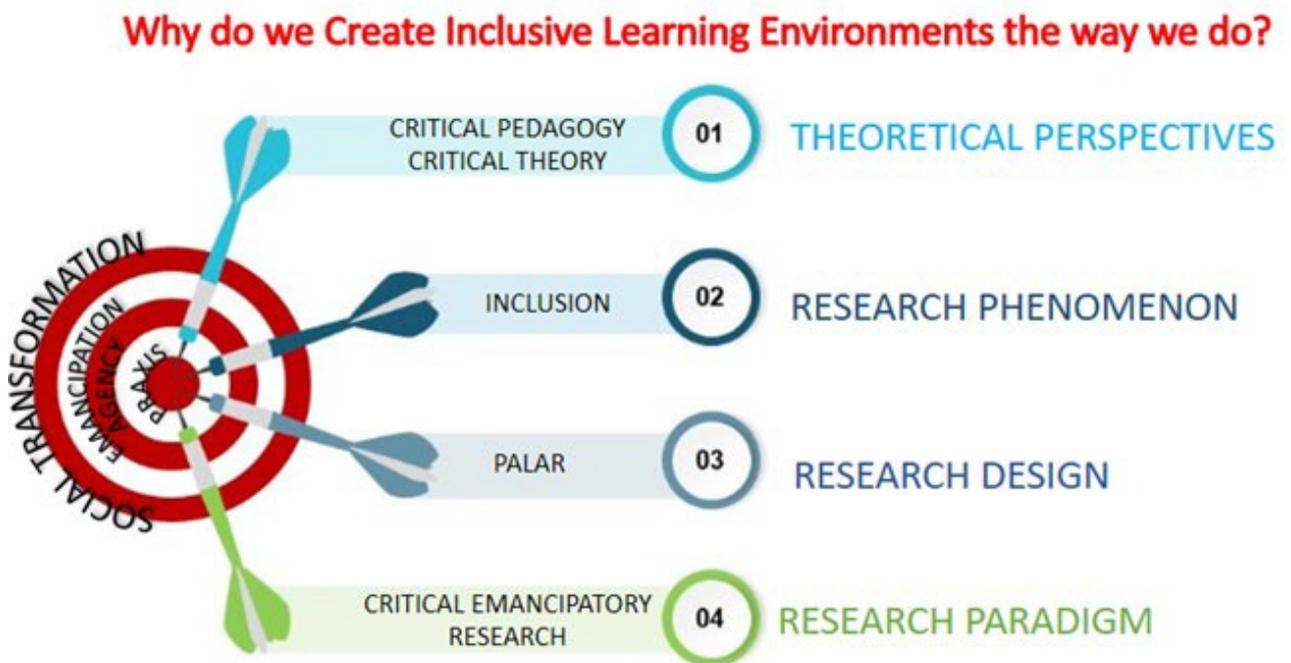
Figure 7.2 Moving towards praxis, leadership, emancipation and social transformation

The first part of this chapter theorised the findings from cycle one and two and attempted to explain why we create inclusive learning environments the way we do. Findings revealed that we create inclusive learning spaces by disrupting false ideologies regarding the conceptualisation of inclusion. The above findings also revealed that a process of conscientisation enabled the ALS to challenge current ways of thinking and doing. Creating an inclusive play-based approach to teaching was regarded as an essential way of maintaining dialogue and redefining the role of teachers and learners by democratising the learning space. Indeed this participatory approach to teaching created epistemic justice and encouraged the co-construction of knowledge between children and teachers. Emphasis on human affect, partnership-building and human relationships were also essential to build inclusive learning environments. These four findings contribute to a broader agenda of inclusion, critical research and PALAR design. Considering that schools are a microcosm of society and ECCE has been targeted as a means to effect social change, this research aims for social justice and a more inclusive society. Hence the agenda of the research aims not just to understand and describe inclusion but to be a catalyst for positive societal change. The discussion below explores the question "why we create inclusive learning environments the way we do." I draw on Freire's concept of praxis, emancipation and agency that developed throughout the research cycles.

7.2.5.1 Reflection and Action leads to Transformation

For Freire (2000 p. 60), *"liberation is a praxis which is the action and reflection of people upon their world in order to transform it."* Chapter three maintained that the iterative processes of reflection and action that teachers encounter when trying to apply critical pedagogy in the classroom is Praxis. However, for Freire this dialogue was not just about gaining a deeper understanding through the process of reflection, but also going beyond the classroom for a more apparent benefit to society. As PALAR researchers this iterative cycle was modelled together with ALS members to foster this change. Members of the ALS went through three cycles of reflection and action to achieve this result. In their cycle three reflections, the group commented on the benefits of the activities in developing their skills and knowledge as well as on contributing to the wider agenda of emancipation and social change. The research process enabled the role players to apply their new knowledge in the ECCE

learning environment. In their journals in cycle three, the ALS noted the importance of reflection on pedagogical practice during and after action. For instance, in her cycle three reflections Annerly stated

"We reflect so we can do something to make a change. Reflection is important as teachers because it helps us to become better at what we do. We can reflect during our teaching or later during our planning for the next day."

She also suggested the use of the same reflection and action during classroom activities to facilitate critical thinking in children.

"Children must reflect too. We can ask questions to get them thinking in a deeper way."

Kaveri expanded on this idea by stating that,

"At the end of the day get children to reflect on their own day. How was your day? What was good? What was bad? What can we change for tomorrow? It teaches them that they have a say in their own learning. It gives them power and a sense of control in their learning and it builds self-esteem in a child."

In a similar way, Jessica indicated a willingness to adopt reflection in her daily planning schedule.

"The process of critical reflection allows me to think about how to improve my teaching every day. I can be myself and learn from the children as well. At the end of my lesson or at the end of my day I think about how I could have done things better. How I can improve my teaching for tomorrow. Who are the children who require more support than others? And how I can help them."

In accordance with a critical pedagogy, the above co-researchers regarded critical reflection as an essential component to effect changes to improve their inclusive practice in ECCE. A few participants also alluded to the value of reflecting in collaborative groups compared to a quiet reflection. In addition to reflection, action and praxis, members developed a leadership and agency to cascade their knowledge to others.

7.2.5.2 True Leaders Help People Help Themselves

To effect social change, members of the ALS also demonstrated the need to become leaders and agents of change. Freire (2000, p. 168) stated that:

"leaders-in spite of their important, fundamental, and indispensable role-do not own the people and have no right to steer the people blindly towards their salvation. Such a salvation would be a mere gift from the leaders to the people-a breaking of the dialogical bond between them, and a reducing of the people from co-authors of liberating action

into the objects of this action."

In line with PALAR, Freire suggests that good leaders engage in dialogical practice with members of the community and empower people to help themselves. In accordance with this, the findings revealed that to members of the group, leadership is independent of role and status and is chiefly concerned with the relationships and the connections among individuals within a school. With reference to the research activities, members were encouraged to lead by facilitating and presenting their own topics for the learning aspects. Findings related to their work at the centres, indicated that teachers felt a need for autonomy, as they were expected to follow daily plans that were formulated in advance with no relevance to the current classroom context. ALS members also indicated a desire to eliminate hegemony and stereotypes from their curriculum. They were also eager to mentor and coach other ECCE role players on how to create inclusive learning environments. For instance Raadia wrote in her journal that,

> *"We need to lead others who are unaware of inclusion and share this knowledge far and wide."*

Supporting this idea, Kaveri stated

> *"Since we have learnt so much about inclusion, we may use it in our classes and share our knowledge and skills with the people around us. We can hold meetings and share and even allow other teachers to come into our classrooms and learn how to be inclusive. Because we can learn from each other and build a strong bond. For example if there is a difficult child I can speak to his teacher from the previous year. We also work together and plan activities for our classes. Teachers having friends at school offer support to each other in many ways. An inclusive school requires a team effort."*

The above further suggests that teachers would become leaders at varying times, where inclusive centres promote leadership as a shared attempt for the emancipation of learners and themselves. To become leaders, one participant mentioned, required teachers to move away from neutrality. In her journal Jessica wrote

> *"I have learnt that a teacher can never be neutral, ….to me this means that there is no neutrality when you are targeted for discrimination because of your race, ethnicity, immigration status, or gender, sexual orientation, and so on. There is no ability to be neutral or stay out of the discussion when it's YOU and people like you who are being targeted and harmed. So for us to say our role is to be neutral in this field of work does not work for me. We have a lot of privilege in this field of teaching and it is our place of privilege in whether we choose not to pay attention to these stories or take a position on them because we are not personally impacted."*

Being neutral, means to side with the powerful (Freire, 1985, p. 122).To be quiet amounts to the acceptance of exclusionary practices which goes against teacher leadership and activism. In keeping with PALAR, co-researchers were motivated to think critically and move away from neutrality

throughout the research process. This facilitated the development of greater agency and subsequent leadership. In addition to agency and leadership, working in this PALAR design also created a platform for members to demonstrate their knowledge, attitudes and skills in a non-threatening environment.

7.2.5.3 Sectarianism in any Quarter is an Obstacle to the Emancipation of Humankind

When groups are divided and allocated a status of inferiority or superiority according to their differences, this is regarded as sectarianism. Leading to exclusion, it is a form of prejudice and discrimination that exists between members of a group. Freire regards this sectarianism in any quarter (be it religion, race, gender, socio-economic status) as an obstacle to the emancipation of mankind. The concept of emancipation has a two-fold relevance for my study. I seek firstly to emancipate learners who are excluded and marginalised within ECCE centres and secondly to give voice to the marginalised group of teachers in this sector. Using the photographs, reflective drawings and journals, co-researchers' voices were enabled. This form of research also requires a level of transparency that is not often evident in other forms of inquiry. Hence, members were involved in the analysis and validation of the data. In addition, Moleko (2014) states that people achieve emancipation from their circumstances if they are provided with an arena that affords them an opportunity to build their knowledge and skill sets. In the context of this study, one of my values as a PALAR researcher was to give equal voice to the various role players in my study irrespective of their education, position or cultural background. The sector constitutes an undervalued and marginalised sector of the education workforce, with qualifications at National Qualifications Framework levels 4 and 5 (Ebrahim et al., 2013). This PALAR project created an opportunity for the co-researchers to communicate freely without fear of judgement. The viewpoints of all co-researchers were given equal value with regard to creating an inclusive learning environment for a diverse group of children. The attainment of emancipation, the development of agency and leadership led to a deeper form of praxis – transformation of not just the learning environment but of a wider and broader impact on society.

7.2.5.4 Transformation

Villanueva and O'Sullivan (2019) and Motta (2013) explain that praxis to some researchers refers to the iterative process of reflection and action that teachers encounter when trying to apply Critical Pedagogy in the classroom while other scholars claim that it transcends the classroom to make a change to society at large. I agree that praxis is an iterative, reflective approach to taking action and moves between practice and theory which aims for the wider transformation of society. Therefore, a quality inclusive learning environment is created by the teacher and goes deeper than just the physical learning space. In their reflections for cycle three, co-researchers mentioned the benefit of the

research to them as teachers and human beings. For instance, Amina stated that,

"I feel that before bringing about changes in the world or even expecting change from others you need to bring about change within yourself and your own thinking. I recently myself was feeling very low, my confidence was low because I cared about what other people saw in me and how others are better than me. But from here [this research] I came to believe in self-love and this changed my thinking. I realized that the important thing that matters is how I see myself and that I should be happy and grateful to be me."

Similarly Bahle wrote in her reflections

"Inclusive learning environments benefit me as a teacher is I am now aware about the differences children have, and how to meet the needs of different children. It gave me lot of understanding when it comes to different people and how to deal with them without treating them in a way that will feel unwelcome or as if they are different from other people. This gave me the understanding of how to speak using other types of language that will not offend another person or hurt other people's feels [feelings]. It contributed positive feelings and gave me enough knowledge about diverse children with diverse needs. Now I am able to work with children and I have good understanding of diversity and inclusion."

On a similar note, Kaveri reflected

"I have become better because I have realised that some people who may appear different are actually very similar to me. My interactions with adults and the children have also improved. I can understand that sometimes people are not just disadvantaged in terms of abilities but also in terms of race, gender or language abilities and being poor. There is a child who I know who is unable to speak English, is very poor and he does not have parents. This study has made me realise that he is much more disadvantaged than children who are just poor."

Alluding to the facilitation of wider societal change research participant three reflected that the study impacted and benefited the children. She wrote,

"It benefits children who are marginalised to see that there's nothing wrong with them. They feel welcome when we do inclusive learning. They start to enjoy being in school."

Rangeni also noted that

"by reading other researche[r]s experiences and sharing my own has made me more aware that there is so many discriminations that people and children face daily. Personally it made me more aware of areas I should focus on to teach to my children about diversity and inclusion."

We therefore are able to see that the process of acquiring knowledge was liberating to the individuals as the PALAR process advocates cognition, instead of a mere reproduction of information (Freire, 2000). Members of the ALS were active in their quest for more knowledge, they presented their

understanding of the concepts according to their unique understandings. From my participant reflections I could see that this project changed who they were and in so doing could lead to the transformation of wider society. This is in keeping with Freire (2000) who states that education does not change the world. Education changes people and people change the world. Hence, the value of the research to the children in their ECCE centres was acknowledged as well as the publication of a printed and digital handbook authored by the ALS that should serve to cascade their learnings to other members of the ECCE community and society at large.

7.2.5.5 Summary

This theme focused on the purpose of this research to bring about transformation. The exploration foregrounded the vital importance of a dialogical process of reflection and action as two necessary components of praxis. We see praxis as the iterative process of reflection and action that results in the application of theoretical knowledge to practice. This praxis should result firstly in the transformation of the individual, then in the learning environment and finally in a wider social transformation. The theme also emphasises that inclusive teachers need to equip their children with skills to deal with exclusionary and discriminatory practices, then only can true emancipation occur. Thus to achieve emancipation, the voices of the marginalised need to be valorised resulting in their own liberation. The findings also suggests that for teachers to transform society they had firstly to transform themselves.

7.3 INCLUSION AS AN INNER JOURNEY

Resulting from the above discussion, I propose that to be inclusive is largely dependent on work that we do within ourselves. The removal of false ideologies regarding inclusion was the first step of the process. In order to move forward in our research, the concept of inclusion needed to be clarified by the ALS. Following this the ALS set out to 'seek the uncomfortable' by addressing their own personal position in terms of privilege by playing the privilege game. The ALS also needed to become aware of the intersectional nature of diversity and to conscientise themselves to identify existing hegemonies in the learning environment. These activities undertaken by the ALS had a profound impact on the thought patterns that shaped the groups attitudes to diversity. As suggested by Reygan et al. (2018, p. 1) the ALS needed to move away from "outmoded ways of thinking" about diversity to achieve truly inclusive learning environments. Only when this consciousness awakens can teachers mobilise

themselves to facilitate transformation in the learning environment and ultimately the wider microcosm of society. Encapsulating these ideas Amina reflected

> *"I feel that before bringing about changes in the world or even expecting change from others you need to bring about change within yourself and your own thinking. I recently myself was feeling very low, my confidence was low because I cared about what other people saw in me and how others are better than me. But from here [this study] I came to believe in self-love and this changed my thinking. I realized that the important thing that matters is how I see myself and that I should be happy and grateful to be me. Change starts within."*

Aligned with Amina's reflection, the iceberg model represented in figure 7.3 proposes the magnitude of inner work that is required *below the surface* for teachers to become truly inclusive. The journey of removing false ideologies and the process of conscientisation allowed the participants to come to understand their own power to become emancipated. Essentially oppression, for example, through patriarchy or racism is internalised by the oppressed and in the absence of an oppressor, the oppressed continue to think in ways that retain this status. Freire alludes that this internalisation occurs because the oppressed are treated as passive receptacles who do what is asked of them. Hence, Freire suggested that through conscientisation this process could be remedied. Using his 'culture circles' Freire developed a process of iterative collaborative reflection and action that enabled a sense of agency in the peasants he worked with. He stated that only through awareness can the oppressed develop agency. This results in praxis and emancipation of the oppressed causing ripples that result in wider societal transformation.

Iceberg Model
An Inclusive Learning Environment in ECCE

Building Relationships
Building Partnerships
Inclusive Communication
Collaborative Learning

03

04

Inclusive Play-Based Pedagogy
Democratic Classrooms
Culturally Responsive Teaching
Play-Based Learning
Curriculum Flexibility

Praxis Leadership Emancipation
TRANSFORMATION

Conscientisation
Awareness of Privilege
Awareness of Diversity
Counter Hegemony

01

02

Understanding Inclusion
Broader Views of Inclusion
Inclusion as a Process
Macro-exclusion
Micro-exclusion

Figure 7.3 The Iceberg Model

Adopted from Freud's Model (Castle & Buckler, 2021)

7.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter offered a theoretical explanation of the themes identified in cycle one and two. Using a critical thematic analytical framework, the themes for both cycles were synthesised with the theoretical framework, research design and the paradigm. The theoretical 'why' question of this study meant deeper prodding that resulted in a more critical examination of the data that was collected. The findings revealed that creating an inclusive environment requires critical awareness. The theorising also explained the role of conscientisation to determine one's position in terms of privilege, diversity and hegemony in the learning environment. This critical awareness and change in ideologies are an uncomfortable examination of one's own attitudes towards groups of people regarded as the 'other'. The iceberg model demonstrates the magnitude of inner work that needs to be done to become truly inclusive teachers. The chapter also theorises on the adoption of an inclusive play-based pedagogy and the value of relationship-building in an inclusive learning environment. The chapter goes further to explain the wider agenda for this research. A synthesis of the research phenomenon, paradigm, theoretical perspectives, research design and messages from the ALS reveal a common transformative agenda for this research. This research attempts to transcend the learning environment to create a more democratic and just society. Reflections from participants on the research process indicate the development of greater emancipation, agency and leadership that should result in personal, institutional and ultimately societal transformation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter seven centred on offering a theoretical explanation of the themes identified in cycle one and two. In this chapter I will attempt to conclude by revisiting the aim and objectives that framed my study. As mentioned in chapter one, this study focuses on filling a theoretical, methodological and practical gap on how to create inclusive learning environments in ECCE. Hence this chapter culminates by presenting an overview of the key research findings by revisiting the objectives of the study The chapter also delineates my learning as a member of the ALS and a facilitator of this PALAR design. Thereafter the contributions, recommendations and limitations of the research will be outlined.

8.2 REVISITING THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to investigate inclusive learning environments using a PALAR design among six ECCE teachers and two trainers. The specific objectives were:

- To explore the current situation regarding inclusive learning environments in ECCE;
- To explore how we create inclusive learning environments in ECCE; and
- To explore why we need to create an inclusive learning environment in ECCE the way we do.

8.2.1 Exploring the Current Situation Regarding Inclusive Learning Environments in ECCE

To answer this research question, I synthesised the key principles of my theoretical framework, research paradigm and research design as well as key learnings from my literature review and my participant responses. During the relationship phase we saw that members of the ALS defined common goals, developed a shared interest and also began to answer the first research question. The use of the news images in this phase also provided the basis for a discussion on diversity and exclusion in present day society (c.f. 5.2.1.3). With current incidences of homophobia, racism, poverty and gender- based violence coming to the fore, we concluded that research like this is essential. Cycle one began with the distribution of baseline checklists to establish the current situation at the ECCE centres that the co-researchers worked at. This process was not as clear-cut as expected, as I needed to revisit the answers that were given by my co-researchers and to probe further to gain a better understanding of their current situation. Consequently, the baseline checklist, purposeful conversations, reflective drawings and photovoice were all used to ascertain the areas of need .

The data was collected, triangulated and analysed to reveal four broad areas of need (c.f. 5.3.2). Firstly, the ALS needed to adopt a broader understanding of inclusion that encompassed children with all types of vulnerabilities, not just disabilities. Discourses from co-researchers also centred on a deficit model where the child was seen as a problem and not the inability of institutions to accommodate diverse groups of children. In keeping with the ontological assumptions of a critical theory, where reality is fluid and dynamic, co-researchers required an understanding of inclusion as a process of becoming rather than a product. Further, the ALS could not see segregation as a blatant disregard for human rights and indicated many advantages to this practice. The ALS also misunderstood practices of celebration, integration and assimilation as inclusion (c.f. 5.4.1). Secondly, messages revealed the need for conscientisation or personal awareness of one's attitude towards groups of people regarded as the 'other'. Responses suggested a necessity for awareness regarding their privilege, concepts of diversity and intersectionality in the next cycle. Clearly indicating a lack of awareness, photovoice captured incidences of stereotyping of particular diversities and a lack of representation of particular diversities in the learning environment (c.f. 5.4.2). Thirdly, responses from co-researchers indicated the use of more traditional banking methods of instruction. Play was regarded as a supplementary activity and not a chief medium for learning in the early years. Instruction was teacher-centred where rote and repetition were encouraged instead of cognition (c.f. 5.4.3). Fourthly, messages from the ALS also suggested that better relationships needed to be fostered with children and among children, parents, members of staff and the community at large. Building relationships also entails inclusive communication skills among all role-players. Hence the use of derogatory terminology like 'special needs' and 'abnormal' were also revealed as well as a lack of knowledge of inclusive terminology (c.f. 5.4.4).

8.2.2 Understanding How We Create Inclusive Learning Environments in ECCE

The process of identifying gaps leading to exclusion at their centres indicated an important catalyst for the participatory learning process for cycle two. Co-researchers now had to ascertain how to create an inclusive learning environment within their unique context. A PALAR design called for an iterative process of collaborative planning, acting, observing and reflecting to transform their current realities (c.f. 4.4.4). Co-researchers selected an area of need and with my coaching prepared videos and slide presentations to share their new knowledge with the group. Based on their area of interest these presentations stimulated further discussion and collaborative reflections enabled a deeper understanding of how to create inclusive learning environments.

Consequently stemming from the four areas of need a further four broad themes addressed these concerns. Firstly, to ascertain an understanding of inclusion a participant used drawings and captions

to highlight inclusion as a broad concept encompassing all vulnerable groups not just disability. These drawings and captions also moved away from medical or deficit models. To represent their lived experiences participants used drawings and photographs of pegboards and shape sorters found in the playroom to explain concepts of integration, segregation and mainstreaming. Further to this a participant demonstrated inclusion as a process of becoming by using photographs and captions of a messy art lesson, where similar to the art work inclusion is regarded as a fluid and dynamic process rather than a goal or destination that is never reached. In addition, to demonstrate the complex concept of assimilation, participants used a photograph of a 'melting pot' that demonstrated the loss of individual identity where each ingredient lost their identity in an effort to 'fit in' with the rest of the stew. Other subtle forms of exclusion like discourses of celebration that exotify minority groups instead of addressing uncomfortable issues of power and privilege related to these groups were also addressed by the ALS (c.f. 6.3.1).

The second theme of this cycle called for a greater awareness of personal privilege and attitude to diversity. Co-researchers agreed that their life experiences were responsible for their attitudes to groups of people. Hence the journey of inclusion needed to start within each member of the ASL. Without awareness of bias and stereotyping, action cannot be taken. I designed a board game that served as a 'privilege walk.' This game enabled the co-researchers to gain a profound knowledge of themselves that created greater gratitude within themselves. Although a few members reported guilt, they all mentioned how this activity fostered greater empathy towards people belonging to marginalised groups. Additionally, to better understand the nuanced and intersectional nature of personal identity, members engaged in a 'power flower' activity that assisted with their understanding of the nature of diversity. Since conscientisation also requires action, co-researchers looked at correcting the bias, stereotyping and exclusion that were identified in the learning environment (c.f. 6.3.2).

The third theme challenged the use of traditional teaching methods where the role of the child was to receive knowledge passively. Hence, this theme foregrounded the need to revisit the role of the teacher where the teacher becomes the learner, and the learner becomes the teacher. Co-researchers recommended listening to what young children had to say and to allow them to 'own' their learning by offering a choice of activities in the learning environment. There was a need to question learners to ascertain their prior knowledge as well as teaching in a way that brought in their lived experiences to the ECCE learning environment. A member used a photograph of elastic bands to represent the need for greater flexibility in the planning and activities of the day. The value of informal play-based modes of learning in opposition to formal work at tables were also highlighted in this theme (c.f. 6.3.3).

Finally, the fourth theme of this cycle centred on human interaction emphasising values of respect, care, trust and humility as a bedrock for good relationships in the learning environment. Members highlighted ways that they could increase parent and community partnership in centres by inviting parents to assist in numerous school activities like gardening, fund raising, storytelling and other projects. Members alsodiscussed how effective communication were essential to foster relationships. The use of inclusive language and person first terminology were encouraged while the use of offensive terms needed to be eradicated (c.f. 6.3.4).

8.2.3 Understanding Why We Need to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment in ECCE the Way We Do.

Answering this question required me to reflect on the themes presented in cycle one and two. I attempted to synthesise the themes with the research design, research paradigm, theoretical perspectives as well as literature reviewed on the phenomenon of inclusion. As these multiple aspects converged, I firstly theorised that for an inclusive learning environment to be created an inner journey of self-understanding is required. Inclusion can only be achieved when one commits oneself to inner change. An individual needs to be emancipated from past ideologies, and current ways of thinking and doing need to be challenged. Inclusion can only be fostered when the ALS are able to understand their positionalities in terms of privilege and to embrace a commitment to equity. Inclusion is therefore a philosophy that decrees social justice and human rights for all.

Hence the first finding emphasised a need for conscientisation or critical awareness as hegemony is never openly demonstrated and needs to be identified and addressed (c.f. 7.2.1). Counter-hegemony aims to emancipate individuals from current ways of thinking and being resulting in personal liberation. The second finding revealed the need to disrupt false ideologies regarding the concept of inclusion as beliefs were centred on narrow and deficit models. As proposed by the iceberg theory much work has to be done below the surface. Hence equipped with greater self-awareness and an understanding of inclusion as proposed by the iceberg, teachers may proceed outwardly to create the inclusive learning environment (c.f. 7.2.2). Cycle three theorised the adoption of an inclusive play-based pedagogy based on principles of critical pedagogy that aims to liberate learners from their roles as passive receivers of knowledge. Essentially education is a political tool for liberation or oppression depending on the conscientisation of the teacher (c.f. 7.2.3). The fourth finding drawing on Freire's pedagogy of love emphasises the human aspect where teaching can never be a business but the building of mutual trust, care and respect between individuals. Therefore, teaching in the early years is not just centred on cognition but also on the affective domain where care and education are emphasised (c.f. 7.2.4). Hence the above proceedings can be aligned to praxis – the collaborative iterative process of reflection and action that aims at transformation of firstly the individual and then the learning environment. We

may also see praxis as the application of theoretical knowledge to practice that transcends the learning environment resulting in a wider social transformation (c.f. 7.2.5). The findings of this theme also emphasise that inclusive teachers need to be engaged in continuous reflection that forms a catalyst for action against injustice. After achieving emancipation, teachers need to emancipate others by becoming agents of change and by cascading their knowledge. Hence the publication of an inclusive handbook aims to cascade knowledge to other ECCE centres. It is important that teachers of young children model and coach children to become aware and to act against injustices from a young age. Hence the methods, theories and phenomenon of this study resonates with a common aim for societal transformation through praxis, agency and emancipation.

8.3 REFLECTION ON MY PERSONAL LEARNINGS

The following section highlights my personal reflections as a PALAR researcher. Earlier in chapter five in phase one of this research I used the head, heart and hands model as a means to ascertain the current knowledge, skills and attitudes of my co-researchers (c.f. 5.2.1.2). I revisit this model once more in an attempt to reflect on my personal learnings enabled by this study. Wood (2020) uses the head, heart and hands (knowledge, skills and value) model to group the required competencies for a PALAR facilitator. Wood suggests that these skills serve as a guide that all members of the ALS should strive for. Further, the use of this model resonated with my background as an early year's teacher seeking a more holistic representation of learning. This model does not just encompass cognitive learning nor a skill set, but goes deeper to examine learnings in the affective domain. This further aligned with mystudy that calls for more humane research that centres on the needs of people rather than the acquisition of academic knowledge by university researchers. Hence to present a holistic representation of personal growth I have grouped my learnings into the three domains of head, heart and hands below.

8.3.1 Cognitive Domain (Head)

The cognitive domain encompasses my learnings in terms of knowledge acquisition and mental processing skills that I acquired as a PALAR researcher. I identified three key areas of positive growth in this domain. They comprise the ability to reflect, knowledge acquisition and creative and critical thinking skills.

8.3.1.1 Reflection

Reflection is the ability to look within and to examine one's thoughts and actions (c.f. 4.4.2.2). The initial challenge was to understand the research project as a means of giving voice to a group of teachers and trainers. I could not do this effectively if I just focused on my own research agenda. Completing my

study was important to me but PALAR has a wider, deeper and more important agenda. PALAR is about enabling communities to take action against problems using their own strengths and skills. Essentially it is emancipatory and aims for wider societal change. Therefore, I could not just tell my co-researchers what to do, as this would go against the key principles of my theoretical perspectives and research paradigm. Consequently, I recorded my thoughts at the end of each learning activity, using a reflective journal. These recordings assisted me with the planning for future cycles. I was also able to use my reflective journal as a cautionary tool as I often lost sight of my research goals. I also needed to remind myself that instead of telling my co-researchers what to do, I needed instead to guide them to make their own discoveries. At the end of each activity, I would spend time reflecting on the key learnings and the process of knowledge acquisition and ultimately ascertain how I could improve my facilitation skills to ensure greater epistemic democracy. I also developed the ability to meta-reflect that is to reflect upon my reflections – which led to even deeper realisations and fine tuning of my practice. For example, the content of the learnings centred on inclusion, dialogue and active learning in an ECCE learning environment, however these approaches were only adopted later in the project. Only through reflection at the end of cycle one, was I able to identify my own dominance in this research as I had initially used a traditional top-down pedagogical approach that directed cycle one. This may have been beneficial at the beginning of the research process however only through reflection did positive change occur. In cycle two co-researchers were thus able to exercise greater autonomy by presenting their learnings to the group using self-made videos. After each learning, the group also reflected to improve the effectiveness of subsequent presentations by co-researchers. This enabled a collaborative meta-reflection resulting in deeper realisations. Therefore, through the use of a collaborative meta-reflection I was able to improve my practice as a researcher as well as a facilitator of the learning process.

8.3.1.2 Knowledge of Inclusion

For the initial six months of this study my knowledge of inclusion was minimal. I had a narrow view of inclusion and planned to find a centre that accommodated children with disabilities for my research (c.f. 3.2.3.1; 5.4.1.1). I believed that the attendance of children in a school automatically meant inclusion. I also had a one- dimensional view that diversity referred to race or ethnicity; hence similar to my co-researchers I believed that diversity did not exist in homogenous groups. Prior to this study, I also regarded privilege as something to be 'pushed under the carpet' as I could not see my own privilege in relation to other people. I was also unaware how specific life experiences had shaped my beliefs regarding 'other'.groups of people, which resulted in my subtle stereotyping of certain groups. This knowledge of inclusion, diversity, privilege, my theoretical framing and research methodology has not just shaped this study but has resulted in enormous personal transformation. These values of inclusion fostered

greater compassion, empathy and acceptance of others. A deep level of knowledge acquisition goes deeper than just recalling facts or understanding the principles of a concept. This new knowledge enabled me to apply inclusive values not just to the context of the ECCE centre and the members of the ALS but to make connections with my inner self. Hence equipped with this new knowledge I was able to critique my own thoughts and actions and integrate inclusion as an essential human value to live by.

8.3.1.3 Creative and Critical Thinking Skills

Thus equipped with a deeper understanding of key concepts and the ability to reflect upon my thought processes, the development of critical thinking was inevitable (c.f. 2.2.1.2). My character in general is to avoid disagreements and conflict. In so doing I would sometimes remain silent about important issues that mattered. During the course of this doctoral journey this had changed as I began to question my belief system that shaped my thoughts, words and actions. I found a need to revisit my current ways of being and doing. It was the privilege game and the activity on intersectionality that served as a turning point for me. These exercises forced me to look at other perspectives and develop greater empathy toward others. Becoming aware of my own bias was an important step in starting to question myself. There were also times where I used heuristics or certain rules of thumb to make snap decisions according to my 'gut reaction' (Castle & Buckler, 2021, p. 77). For example, when finalising roles and responsibilities of the research group, I was guilty of assuming that the younger members were more technologically savvy than the older members. To my surprise an older member taught everyone a great deal of skills regarding the use of smart phones for photography and video making. Hence this stereotype of mine was proven wrong, and I saw the role of these mental shortcuts in perpetuating stereotype and bias toward older people. As I progressed with my new-found critical perspective when the people around me made comments based on prejudice or bias towards certain groups of peopleI would speak up. Freire's voice often loomed strongly that teachers can never be neutral as "neutrality meant siding with the powerful."

8.3.2 Affective Domain (Heart)

The affective domain encompasses my learnings with respect to my attitudes, emotions and feelings during the relationship-building phase of the research. For the purpose of this report I grouped my learnings into two categories comprising the ability to accept uncertainty and the ability to manage group dynamics with greater emotional intelligence.

8.3.2.1 Ability to Accept Uncertainty

During this research project I was forced to accept that research can be unpredictable. Co-researchers respond in ways that do not fit into a well-planned research proposal. Theories and ideas that were predetermined *apriori* were dismantled as we went along. To proceed authentically with PALAR means letting go of certainties. This created great anxiety within me because major changes to the project would impact on my ethical application. Fortunately, the research aim and objectives remained the same and a new ethical agreement was not required. Further the use of an online platform to carry out this research was not something I had planned. Sometimes co-researchers were unable to respond within the agreed time frames nor was synchronous engagement always possible. I had to deal with these uncertainties. An important learning emerged that certain occurrences were beyond my control and I just needed to learn acceptance.

8.3.2.2 Managing Group Dynamics with Greater Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the acquisition of emotional control to positively manage emotions and to respond to situations after careful consideration (Castle & Buckler, 2021). The execution of a PALAR project no doubt requires a certain degree of emotional intelligence to facilitate smooth interaction within the group. Conventional research requires limited interactions and few opportunities for social relationships like PALAR does. In this section I reflect on four important PALAR principles that contributed to my development of greater emotional intelligence. PALAR design calls for effective communication, collaboration, compromise and commitment between the members of the ALS. As a facilitator I had to ensure that communication was dialogical and that all participant voices were heard. Despite power hierarchies within the group the opinions and ideas of all members needed to be respected. My emerging listening skills enabled me to respond with greater empathy towards the people in my research group. Members were also encouraged to collaborate and work in pairs where possible. When members were paired together, I needed to ensure that responsibility was equally distributed for the tasks. For example if one was responsible for drawings the other needed to be responsible for the captions. To allow collaboration it sometimes meant remaining silent and just observing their interactions. Consequently purposeful group discussions revealed a deeper set of reflections and I learnt the value of collaborative reflection and action. When individuals worked together this created ample opportunities for compromise. I needed to let go of some of my expectations and meet my co-researchers half way. For example, one participant was silent for weeks due to a change of career and wedding arrangements during the course of this research. I needed to put my research goals aside and understand that she would be unable to participate in the group as

before. Further to this the process required the discussion of inner feelings resulting in a certain amount of risk, hence trust needed to be fostered for successful facilitation. I had to emphasise rules of confidentiality throughout our interactions. This research also required me to show care at times when my participants went through personal issues due to a loss of income and loved ones during the covid-19 pandemic. I had to identify with their situation and took the time to respond to their messages or voice calls. I also needed to motivate my group to keep going during quiet moments and develop greater self-regulation when I felt frustrated as things could not always go my way. I also needed to recognise the strengths and achievements of my group by offering praise and incentives for completed tasks. Members felt that their efforts were valued and this built their self-esteem. Hence managing the group dynamics of my PALAR design fostered in me the ability to facilitate with greater emotional intelligence.

8.3.3 Psychomotor Domain (Hands)

The psychomotor domain encompasses my learnings with respect to the development of a skillset. For the purpose of this report, I grouped my learnings into two categories comprising enhanced technological skills and pedagogical skills.

8.3.3.1 Technological Skills

The onset of the global pandemic necessitated a virtual PALAR engagement. As a result, my plans for a face -to- face meetings needed to be discarded. Virtual engagements required me to take urgent action and brush up on the required skills to research and teach in a virtual environment. To plan a virtual PALAR design meant finding creative ways to convey messages to my group and to ensure that their learning took place in an active and engaged way. Hence while universities adopted an emergency remote learning, I attended numerous online learning sessions to cope with the technological demands of the new normal. Learning to record and present videos, setting up my You Tube channel for easier distribution of videos, using WhatsApp as a learning platform and a smart phone to capture and present visual data were all skills acquired during this study.

8.3.3.3 Pedagogical Skills

Despite being a teacher for twenty years, this project has transformed my pedagogical approach from a traditional teacher centred stance to one that encourages greater learner autonomy. The theory of Critical Pedagogy has assisted me in understanding education as a political tool that either oppresses or liberates people. Hence this required moving away from 'banking' knowledge into passive minds, but encouraging my researchers to make decisions, think and act with agency. The learning that took

place encouraged members to research content and to make their own videos to present their knowledge to the group. It was not just me delivering content to the group, instead co-researchers made sense of the content and presented their learnings to teach others. Hence PALAR afforded me the opportunity to model this transformative pedagogical approach resulting in deeper learning and greater agency among my co-researchers.

8.3.4 Summary

The above section explored my personal reflections as a PALAR researcher. Using the head, heart and hands model I categorised the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during my research. I revisited this model once more in an attempt to reflect on my personal learnings enabled by this study. In the cognitive domain, I identified areas of positive growth comprising improved ability to reflect, acquire theoretical knowledge and the development of critical thinking skills. In the affective domain, I grouped my learnings into two categories comprising the ability to accept uncertainty and the ability to manage group dynamics with greater emotional intelligence. Finally in terms of skills acquisition, I explored the development of pedagogical and technological skills. All-in-all, this PALAR project has made an indelible mark on both my professional and personal development by contributing holistically to my positive transformation. Besides contributing to my development as the researcher, this project has also made valuable contributions in relevant theoretical, methodological and practical domains.

8.4 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

A review of literature in chapter three identified gaps in studies of inclusion within the unique context of ECCE, underpinned by critical perspectives and the use of PALAR as a research design. This section outlines the contributions of this study with regard to theoretical, methodological and practical knowledge gaps that were identified.

8.4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study should make an important contribution by providing new insights into how the principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy may be useful in creating an inclusive learning environment in a unique context of early childhood care and education (c.f. 2.2.1; 2.2.2) It is essential to remember that the ultimate aim of critical theories is to transcend understanding, and to move towards transforming society. This study foregrounds that transformation begins with the individual and later moves to institutional and societal change. Therefore, inclusion starts with people recognising and critiquing power structures as well as personal attitudes to diverse groups of people. Only once this critical consciousness is achieved, canthe journey to inclusion really begin. Hence this study offers ways for teachers to become conscientised to contest current ways of being and doing. Becoming

conscientised in this study also means acting against hegemony by identifying stereotyping, bias and inequities in the learning environment. Counter hegemony was attempted in this study by correcting these biases, stereotypesand inequities in the learning environment. This study also strengthened the idea that in order for transformation to be achieved, false ideologies that dominate current discourses on inclusion need tobe dismantled. Only once critical consciousness awakens and dominant ideologies are dissipated can the outer journey of inclusion begin. The use of a critical pedagogy in this study offers a unique application of Freire's theory in the ECCE landscape where informal play-based learning, role-play and flexibility contribute to a democratic learning environment that promotes liberation instead of oppression. This study further contributes to the epistemological assumptions of a critical perspective by demonstrating the value of a collective meaning making, where the ALS worked collaboratively in iterative cycles of reflection and action to gain the required knowledge to solve societal issues. This study offers a unique perspective of inclusion drawing from critical theory and critical pedagogy as overarching frameworks for this study. It makes its contribution by supporting and offering unique insights into how both frameworks, are useful in the creation of inclusive learning environments.

8.4.2 Methodological Contributions

The methodological contributions of this study are two-fold. Firstly, the study contributes to a fairly new and scarcely utilised research design (c.f. 4.4). Secondly the study showcases PALAR as a completely virtual engagement for the first time. It goes without saying that this research makes unique contributions toPALAR as a research design geared towards emancipation and social transformation. PALAR is a research design that aims for more than just gathering relevant data from a group of people. PALAR is about inclusion, ownership, activism, dialogical interactions and ultimately liberation from oppression. Grounded in the Freirean concept of 'culture circles' these cycles of collaborative iterative reflection and action (c.f. 4.4.1) were geared towards increasing the voice of marginalised groups resulting in greater agency, democracy and social justice. Of extreme significance to this study is that the Freirean culture circles and PALAR both require 'eye contact' and authentic human relationship building. The onset of Covid-19 and faced with a new normal, meant adjusting my research to a virtual platform offering no physical interaction. Hence this study offers a unique contribution to PALAR research as relationships were built without physical contact. Months were spent prior to the start of this researchwhere co-researchers developed trust for each other, common goals were shared, and mutual purposes were identified despite the social distancing rules. This study offers a unique perspective of inclusion using a virtual PALAR design. Essentially this study contributes by supporting and offering

unique insights into how a virtual PALAR engagement can be useful research and learning about inclusive learning environments.

8.4.3 Contributions to Practice

The study contributes practically by offering a handbook on inclusion that serves as a guide for other ECCE teachers and centres to become more inclusive. The handbook also serves as a means to cascade the learnings of the ALS as well as to recognise their efforts as pioneers in the emerging field of ECCE knowledge production. The handbook draws on the key themes from this study which are represented by photographs, drawings and captions by the co-researchers. The handbook should be easy to read and should serve as an appropriate resource for teachers in the sector. This handbook also serves as a tangible representation of praxis. Earlier chapters define the iterative processes of collaborative reflection and action that teachers encounter when trying to apply critical pedagogy in the classroom as praxis. This handbook is a product of the collaborative reflection contributed by the ALS that highlights how the different aspects of inclusion can be practically tailored to an ECCE learning environment. Table 8.1 provides a summary of themes covered in the handbook.

THEMES	SUB THEMES
CONSCIENTISATION BECOMING AWARE	Forced Introspection, privilege and intersectionality
CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES	Challenging common stereotypes of certain identities
WELCOMING ALL	Including diversities of gender, race, socio-economic status and disability in the curriculum and learning environment
UNDERSTANDING INCLUSION	Integration, segregation, assimilation, celebration. Inclusion is a process not a product, diversity and inclusion
INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY	Participatory pedagogy, a pedagogy of play, multisensory approaches, choices, flexibility, reflection, listening, observation, individual educational plan, collaboration
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	Building relationships with children, parents, extended families and the community
INCLUSIVE TERMINOLOGY	Use person first terminology, an inclusive lexicon and avoid labelling.
LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	Role of an inclusive manager and an inclusive teacher leader

Table 8.1 Themes covered in the Handbook on Inclusion

8.4.4 Summary

The above discussion highlighted the theoretical, methodological and practical knowledge contributions of this study. I am hopeful that the knowledge created in this study would be effective in assisting teachers to better understand and apply the learnings presented by my co-researchers. The knowledge gathered should also assist me in developing a module on inclusion for the projected ECCE degree programme. Policy makers, school leaders and other interested role-players may also find the information useful. The ultimate contribution of this study is that children's lives should be bettered, particularly those who belong to marginalised groups vulnerable to exclusion.

8.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Throughout my study I did make epistemic justice a central goal, however as the chief facilitator with an already approved research plan, the outcome of the findings was influenced considerably by my own agenda. Authentic PALAR research has no such researcher driven agendas and are steered completely by the members of the ALS. Further, being forced to adapt to the new normal allowed for asynchronous participation on a virtual platform which was a huge advantage, however considerable time was required for the relationship building phase. It took me a lengthy period to achieve this prior to the research phase. This was indeed limiting as I had to exceed my research timeframes to authentically complete the relationship building phase. It is also essential to note that due to a small sample size the findings of this study are relevant only to the unique set of eight ALS members and their unique life contexts. Hence it would be incorrect to generalise these findings to the wider ECCE sector. Having said that, it is important to be mindful that most ECCE centres in South Africa may experience similar problems that this study has addressed.

8.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on my learnings, I make the following recommendations for teacher education, ECCE policies and further studies.

8.6.1 Recommendations for Teacher Education

For future development of ECCE preservice teachers, I recommend that a module on inclusive learning environments, place considerable focus on examining teachers' awareness of privilege and diversity. To become inclusive teachers, this inner work of 'forced introspection' is essential. Activities like the 'privilege game' and the 'power flower' activity enable teachers to gain an awareness of the impact of privilege and power in our attempt to include diverse groups. Hence, teachers need to examine their personal bias towards groups of people they consider as 'other'. Then only will they be

able to practise inclusion in a meaningful way.

Additionally, the use of PALAR as a teaching methodology will allow pre-service teachers to 'own' their learning by participating completely and developing their agency towards becoming activists for inclusion. PALAR also models to teachers how to become critical pedagogues in their own classrooms. Teachers learn how to teach in a way that minimises 'banking', increases democracy and awareness in learners by allowing greater autonomy in the learning environment. Hence, PALAR resonates with the principles of education for liberation and transformation.
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8.6.2 Recommendations on a Policy Level

The study reveals the neglect that this sector has endured from the South African Government. Although this study documents the experiences of a very small sample size, it reveals a common issue that is documented in the media. Teachers in this sector require greater respect for the important work that is done. Government policy needs to be adjusted to enable these teachers to earn a liveable wage with greater job stability. The impact of Covid-19 has also exacerbated the exploitation of teachers working in the sector. Neglect at this level and false promises have dire consequences for the future of our country.

8.6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

The study reveals that inclusion is context specific and every ECCE site, would consequently develop their own guidelines on how to become more inclusive. Using collaborative research like PALAR, serves to develop teachers as agents of change. More work like this needs to done in the South African ECCE sector as I have not come across any studies on inclusion in the South African ECCE sector. Research like this enables the voice of teachers to be heard and provides useful guidelines for centres to become more inclusive. Seeing that South African centres are largely owned privately, future studies need to be geared towards centre matrons or managers, who have the power to precipitate change quickly.

8.7 CONCLUSION

After responding to the research questions of my study, noting my personal learnings, contributions limitations and recommendations of my study, I now draw my study to a close. It has been an emotional journey fraught with difficulties but a journey that has reached joyous completion nonetheless. The principles of PALAR have transformed my personal philosophies and facilitating a project of this magnitude has been nothing less than a realisation of my own potential. This self-actualisation

becomes more meaningful when we are able to help others reach this state too. How wonderful it would be if all research could be geared towards the upliftment of marginalised communities. Research needs to have a higher purpose because at the end of the day the work we do, and our very lives are successful only if we can make a positive difference in the lives of others. PALAR enables this. In fact PALAR resonates with the philosophy of inclusion. As a future recommendation I would like to use PALAR once more-but this time without a research proposal in hand. A project completely controlled by the members in my group.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Gatekeeper's Permission

ETDP SETA Accreditation No.: 10034 / NPO No.: 008-473

7 July 2020

Mrs Ashnie Mahadew

School of Education

College of Humanities

Edgewood Campus

UKZN

Dear Mrs Mahadew

Re – Student No:215 081 467
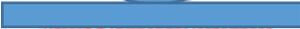
I hereby confirm that permission is granted for the staff members of New Beginnings Training & Development Organisation to participate in your post graduate research studies, with the proviso that ethical clearance has been obtained. We note that your title of your research project is:

An Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education.

Please ensure that you have the following:

- Ethical Clearance Certificate
- Research Title and Details
- Attendance Register

It is noted that data collected for the research will be on the virtual platforms with strict adherence to the Covid -19 regulations as per the South African Government.

Please note that you or the staff are not allowed to take any photographs of the New Beginnings ELC children. Staff are not allowed to submit any New Beginnings materials without written permission of the Director. Any material developed by New Beginnings that you may want to use in the research must also have the written permission of the Director.

Thanking You

APPENDIX B: Ethical Clearance Letter

UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL

INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI

03 April 2020

Mrs Ashnie Mahadew (215081467)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mrs Mahadew,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00001146/2020
Project title: AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: A
PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH STUDY
Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 11 March 2020 in connection with the above, was
reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been
granted FULL APPROVAL

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

This approval is valid until 03 April 2021.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be
submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report
to be submitted when study is finished.

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

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

Yours sincerely,

Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

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

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APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Letter

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School of Education

College of Humanities

Edgewood Campus

Dear Prospective Participant

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

- My name is Ashnie Mahadew and I am a PhD candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus.
- I am interested in learning about an Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).
- To gather the information, I am interested in undertaking a research project that involves mutual learning and community engagement within the ECCE sector.
- You are being invited to consider participating in a study from a distance on WhatsApp that involves research about inclusive education in the ECCE context. You require a smartphone to participate.
- The aim and purpose of this research is to gather knowledge of Inclusive Education within the ECCE context.
- The study is expected to enrol eight participants in total. It will involve the collection of data using reflective journals, transcription of WhatsApp discussion, drawings and photo voice.
- The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be about six months.
- The study will involve the sacrifice of your valuable time to complete reflective journals, WhatsApp discussions, photos and drawings.
- The study will culminate in the production of a Handbook on Inclusion which you will co-author. The handbook will be distributed online and in print to other ECCE centres and serve as a practical guide for future students and practicing teachers.
- This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00001146/2020).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the researcher at 083 555 0600 or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Kindly Note that:

- Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any point.

- In the event of refusal or withdrawal of participation, you will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or benefit to which you are normally entitled.

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed, as your inputs in my research report will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.

- Any information contributed by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.

- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.

- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.

- If you are willing to be involved in this project, online meetings will be recorded using audio equipment.

- A method of data collection called Photo Voice will be used. This will involve taking pictures of your inclusive learning environment, no faces of adults or children will be taken.

CONSENT

I,_____have been informed about the study entitled:

Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) by Ashnie Mahadew.

I understand the purpose is to gather knowledge regarding Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Care and Education.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

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

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

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher using the details provided below.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable:

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / discussion   YES / NO

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   **Date**

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_____   _____

Witness   **Date**

(Where applicable)

__N/A_____   _____

Signature of Translator   **Date**

(Where applicable)

The Researcher can be contacted at:

Email: mahadewa@ukzn.ac.za

Cell: 0835550600 / 031 260 - 3489

My supervisor is Professor Hlalele.

Email: hlaleled@ukzn.ac.za

Contact Number: 031 – 260 3858

Thank you in anticipation of your contribution to this research.

APPENDIX D: Invitation to Participate

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School of Education

College of Humanities

Edgewood Campus

Dear Prospective Participant

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

My name is Ashnie Mahadew and I am a PhD candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus. I am interested in learning about an Inclusive Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). To gather the information, I am interested in undertaking a research project that involves mutual learning and community engagement within the ECCE sector. You are being invited to consider participating in a study on WhatsApp that involves research about inclusive education in the ECCE context. The aim and purpose of this research is to gather knowledge of Inclusive Education within the ECCE context. The study is expected to enrol eight participants in total. It will involve the collection of data using reflective journals, transcription of WhatsApp discussion, drawings and photo voice. The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be about six months.

The study will involve the sacrifice of your valuable time to complete reflective journals, WhatsApp discussions, photos and drawings. The study will culminate in the production of a Handbook on Inclusion which you will co-author. The handbook will be distributed online and in print to other ECCE centres and serve as a practical guide for future students and practicing teachers.

In the event of any questions, you may contact the researcher at 083 555 0600. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards

Ashnie Mahadew

APPENDIX E: Baseline Observation Checklist

Participant Observation - Baseline Observation

Checklist   YES / NO / SOMETIMES – TICK IN THE APPROPRIATE COLUMN   PARTICIPANT 1 - ADELLE

	YES	NO	S	Comments (if any)
1. Do the ECCE teachers, assistants, leaders work collaboratively to achieve a common goal?	☆			
2. Are parents encouraged to decide the policies of the centre?		☆		
3. Inclusion is about assisting including children with disability in our classrooms	☆			
4. There are special education teachers who are trained to work in inclusive education	☆			
5. In the past certain groups were discriminated against and others were more privileged.	☆			
6. My background and experiences has an effect on my attitude to children from different groups.	☆			
7. Are there specific days set out to meet parents besides - meetings to discuss the child's progress?		☆		
8. Do school managers prioritise inclusion?	☆			*Our manager is very clued up*
9. Are you able to make your own decisions about a child's welfare?		☆		
10. Are community members involved in the life of the centre?			☆	*Volunteers / donors but very seldom*
11. Are different races or cultures represented in the staff at your centre in an *equitable* way?			☆	*We have two different race groups.*
12. Is the teacher staff composition both male and female?		☆		
13. Are there team building exercises that encourage staff socialisation – besides end of term dinners?		☆		
14. Are marginalised groups taking on leadership roles at your centre? (For example foreigners who are not just cleaners/parking attendants/security guards at your centre).		☆		

15. Is the setting used by a wide cross section of the local community?		☆		
16. The school has a formal policy on inclusion		☆		
17. A key person approach is used who fosters a deep relationship with individual children.		☆		
18. The school is well supported by the local clinic, doctors or other health service professionals that offer services to the children for free?		☆		
19. Staff are trained regularly to cope with diversity and to be more inclusive.	☆			*We try and attend courses at TREE*
20. The setting has a co-ordinator to support and take on a leadership role to promote greater inclusion.		☆		
21. Parent opinions are asked about school matters.			☆	
22. Have you removed the word" normal" from your vocabulary as a teacher?		☆		
23. Have you removed the word "special needs" from your vocabulary as a teacher?		☆		
24. Have you removed gender stereotypical terminology for professions e.g. postman/policeman?		☆		
25. Do you use person first terminology? e.g. a child diagnosed with ADHD instead of that child is hyperactive.		☆		
26. There is an inclusion policy drawn up for the purchase of toys and other resources.		☆		
27. The centre is accessible for children / adults with disability		☆		
28. There are ramps for children in wheelchairs to access		☆		
29. School displays represent a wide range of diversities		☆		
30. Are children who are unable to pay school fees included at your centre?		☆		
31. Toys do not favour stereotypes e.g. dolls for girls		☆		

Statement				Comment
32. Dolls/puppets are of different races, gender, age, disability		☆		
33. Books and puzzles cover a wide range of diversity e.g race, gender, disability, language.		☆		
34. Boys and girls play together interactively	☆			*In the early years children play together – sometimes boys take on feminine roles*
35. Children are grouped irrespective of race, gender, language, ability markers.			☆	
36. Class Registers have boys and girls names written together		☆		*This is a school policy to keep them separate*
37. Different languages are represented on the centre display boards			☆	*Only English and Isizulu*
38. Newsletters and correspondence to parents are available in different languages		☆		
39. Different religions are represented during school prayer.		☆		
40. All religious festivals and celebrations are given equal time and importance according to the school demographics.	☆			
41. Young children learn best through repetition and rote learning	☆			
42. Asking questions in class is time consuming and many young children do not really think deeply		☆		*Asking questions allow teachers to monitor the child's progress*
43. It is difficult to adapt tasks to cater to different learning styles with younger children – most learn visually anyway			☆	*This requires a lot of pre-planning and is not always possible to include all learning styles*
44. It is difficult to really listen to such young children and to cater to their individual needs all at once.			☆	*The day does get busy*
45. If I focus properly on my goals I will meet my lesson outcomes and not get distracted by the children and what they want to do.	☆			
46. I need to stick to my lesson plan and achieve my outcomes daily.	☆			
47. The NCF document stipulates that the curriculum needs to be followed to ensure that learning takes place.	☆			

48. Outdoor activities sometimes get in the way of 'real learning'	☆			*There are however teachable moments during outdoor activities*
49. Multisensory activities require time and effort to prepare. I prefer crayons and drawing on paper for younger children.		☆		*I believe that teachers should take pride in what they do and go the extra mile to ensure that the child is stimulated all around.*
50. Diverse children need to be treated equally in my class.	☆			
51. If I work with the children, they expect me to do the tasks for them and do not meet the learning outcomes.		☆		*I assist the children – but they complete the tasks on their own.*
52. Children do not learn to work independently if they are assisted by their peers.		☆		*Children learn to work independently*
53. When children choose their activities-they only play with certain toys in certain play areas.	☆			
54. When children ask questions it distracts me from my teaching plan		☆		*We need to use these opportunities to teach and educate them*
55. I know much more than the children who I teach.	☆			
56. It is difficult for children to have a say in the planning of classroom activities.	☆			*The teacher is in charge*
57.It is time consuming to plan tasks to accommodate all children	☆			
58. Children love to play but it distracts them from the real learning			☆	
59. Daily reflection is time consuming and not very essential in my practice	☆			*Reflection is time consuming – but it helps us to better our roles and to have more knowledge.*
60. I am totally responsible to create an inclusive learning environment in my classroom / play centre	☆			

APPENDIX F: Reflective Journal

EXCERPT FROM A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

CYCLE ONE

Due to COVID 19 the ECD centres are treated so badly. Our jobs are not even valued in this world. Most ECD practitioners were not getting paid during this covid 19 period - not even getting funds from government. ECCE is not taken seriously like other teachers who are teaching big grades.

Current situation of ECCE / ECD

4. A time when I felt discriminated against that still affects my interactions with people:

In high school I was the only black girl doing swimming classes and the swimming coach was not paying much attention to me. He used to say my race doesn't like water. Another day he said if you want to hide something from black people write it down because they don't like to read. These were my experiences that still hurt my

Experiences of racism in personal life

6. Diversity exists in my classroom because:

I have children and students who are different because they are coming from different cultures from others and different backgrounds.

7. Coping with diversity in my learning environment is challenging for me because: **Diversity**

Students and children have different barriers and I must be able to identify them so they will be able to get help with their difficulties. I would like to know how to teach children and students with different barriers and differences. In the centre I would like to involve the community and create a space where each student or child feels welcome.

8. After completing the checklist activity I realised that:

I felt I was well trained about a range of different things especially when it's comes to different children in my classroom. I am able to cope with children and students who need my special attention – but I realise that there is lots more to learn.

Reflecting on the observation checklist

9. In the next cycle, I would like to focus on these aspects:

I feel that I need to learn more about how to teach in a way that is inclusive and how to involve the community and family in the centre. Being a trainer and assessor in ECCE also makes me a leader so I need to develop those skills.

A way forward for cycle two

An excerpt from a cycle two reflection

<u>Reflective Journal</u>   Name: xxx

<mark>Reflecting on Understanding Inclusion</mark>

1.1. Describe your feelings about the activity.

I feel that children may want to lose their roots *in order to "fit in" with everyone else.*

We should not label a child "naughty" and say go to the naughty corner. This is not inclusion. A child's behaviour must be investigated. *There is always a reason or trigger for bad behaviour.*

1.2. How will was this activity useful / not useful to you in the ECCE learning environment?

I had a child from Malawi, who did not want to speak his mother tongue any longer. Not even at home. His mother was worried as she felt he would lose his roots. *He was saying to his mother that the children laughed when he spoke and he needed to learn English really fast. We had to* talk about this issue of respecting differences *and not teasing. We are now having more discussion about the Malawi language and culture in the discussion ring.*

When celebrating diversity and culture, I see that I need to be wary *of stereotyping certain cultures.* Not all cultures dress and behave in the same way as they did in the past.

<mark>Reflecting on Awareness of Diversity and my own Privilege and Bias</mark>

Activity 2.1: The video

2.1.1. Describe your feelings about the activity.

The concept of privilege exposes the power dynamics *that come into play in my occupation when a job requirement is to have years of experience. Yes I do have experience in ECD but it's as if holding a degree is not enough. In aspects of* family life power dynamics are often experienced through gender roles. *I am limited in terms of going out and socializing but my brother on the other hand is much more free (I secretly think he is also the favourite child).*

2.1.2. How was this activity useful / not useful to you in the ECCE learning environment?

Yes definitely as a teacher you are the authority figure over the children. *You are in a position of power. They are aware of the fact that they have to be respectful towards*

APPENDIX G: Photovoice Instrument

Cycle 2 – How Do We Create Inclusive Learning Environments?

Photo voice Discussion using "SHOWED"

THEME: CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: **RP 8** Contesting Gendered Careers **FOR NEXT CYCLE:** Why do we challenge stereotypes about gender?	**What do you See here?** A Classroom Craft on the theme "People Who Help Us" **What is really Happening here?** Contesting male dominated professions. Gender stereotypes need to be contested **How does this relate to Our lives?** Making toilet roll puppets - An activity done in class based on the theme of community helpers. Here we see that children made both female and male firefighters, police and engineers. **Why does this problem or strength exist?** Strength – children learn that there are no longer male or female jobs – anyone can do anything. **How could this image Educate the community or policy makers?** Get the message out there using our handbook. Have workshops to emphasize the importance of care. **What can we Do about it?** Challenge Gender roles and gendered careers.

APPENDIX H: Privilege Game Instructions and an example of a reflection

The Privilege Game

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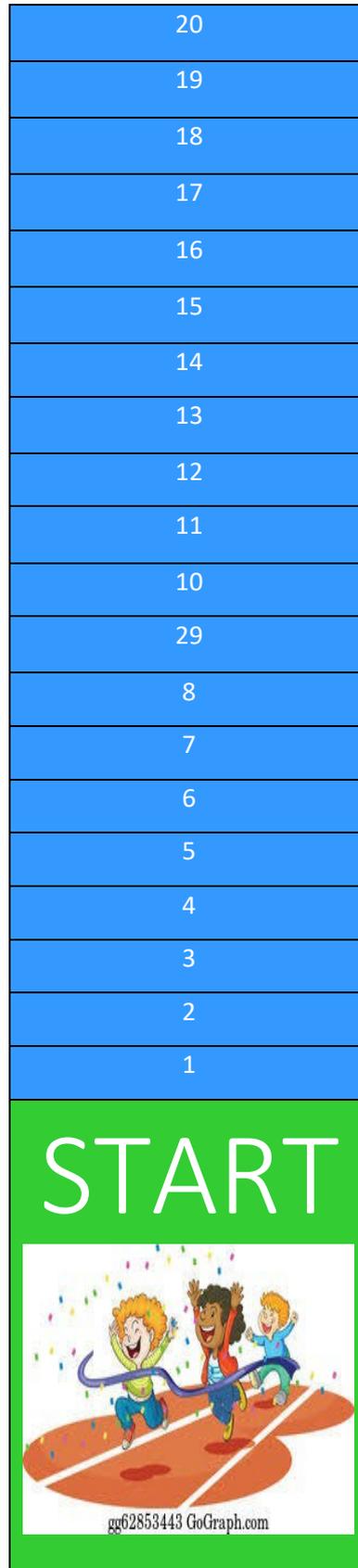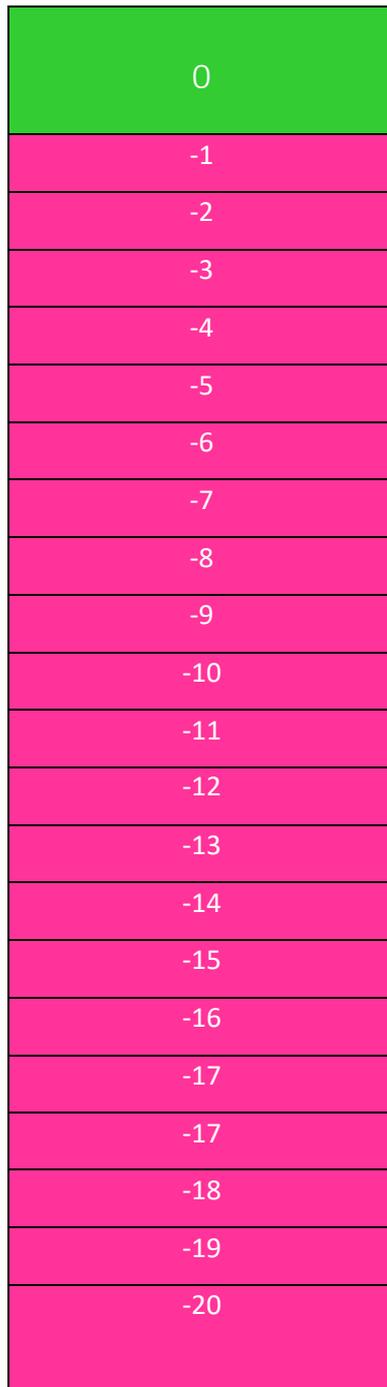
The Privilege Game:

We will play this game electronically. For every step forward +1. For every step backward -1.

START at 0 – the green block.

1. If you were ever called names because of your race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back. (-1)

2. If there were people who worked for your family as servants, gardeners, nannies, etc. take one step forward.

3. If you were ever ashamed or embarrassed of your clothes, house, car, etc. take one step back.

4. If one or both of your parents were "white collar" professionals: doctors, lawyers, etc. take one step forward.

5. If you were raised in an area where there was prostitution, drug activity, etc., take one step back.

6. If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behaviour to avoid being judged or ridiculed, take one step back.

7. If you studied the culture of your ancestors in school, take one step forward.

8. If you went to school speaking a language other than English, take one step back.

9. If there were more than 50 books in your house when you grew up, take one step forward.

10. If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food when you were growing up, take one step back.

11. If you were taken to art galleries or plays by your parents, take one step forward.

12. If one of your parents was unemployed or laid off, not by choice, take one step back.

13. If you have medical aid take one step forward.

14. If you attended private school take one step forward.

15. If your family ever had to move because they could not afford the rent, take one step back.

16. If you were told that you were beautiful, smart and capable by your parents, take one step forward.

17. If you were ever discouraged from academics or jobs because of race, class, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, take one step back.

18. If you were encouraged to attend college or university by your parents, take one step forward.

19. If you have a disability take one step backward.

20. If you were raised in a single parent household, take one step back.

21. If your family owned the house where you grew up, take one step forward.

22. If you saw members of your race, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation portrayed on television in degrading roles, take one step back.

23. If you own a car take one step forward.

24. If you were ever offered a good job because of your association with a friend or family member, take one step forward.

25. If you were ever denied employment because of your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, take one step back.

26. If you were paid less, treated less fairly because of race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, take one step back.

27. If you were ever accused of cheating or lying because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.

28. If you ever inherited money or property, take one step forward.

29. If you had to rely primarily on public transportation, take one step back.

30. If you were ever stopped or questioned by the police because of your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, take one step back.

31. If you were ever afraid of violence because of your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, take one step back.

32. If you were generally able to avoid places that were dangerous, take one step forward.

33. If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation, take one step back.

34. If your parents were refugees, take one step back.

35. If your parents told you that you could be anything you wanted to be, take one step forward.

Excerpt from a reflection on privilege game

1. What does privilege mean?

> It's a special advantage that only a few people have.
>
> Some people have advantages that others do not have.

2. What did you feel like moving forward and back in the game?

> This game has made me more grateful than anything as there were more positives than negatives for me and I feel privileged for so many things that have not affected me.
>
> greater appreciation for the positive aspects

3. What were some factors influencing your privilege that you have never thought of before?

> The fact which I feel has the most influence and which I generally take for granted is having supportive parents who have always been there to motivate me and push me to do my best.
>
> Personal realisations after the game

4. What statement made you think the most?

> It's hard to really choose one question as they all made me really think about how some people really face many issues. But I would choose the one about changing my appearance and ways to try to fit in at some point we all do this and now it makes me think why? And for what? How did any of it benefit me.
>
> Greater empathy towards others

5. If you could add a statement, what would it be?

APPENDIX I: Purposeful Conversations

2020/11/19, 18:00 - A█: SO THE BIG QUESTION IS...... HOW do I create an inclusive learning environment? Let us share some ideas on the group .... Remember we have established that an inclusive environment can be created by Teachers who are aware of diversity and power and privilege issues. So how do I do this in an ECCE centre? You can just drop a word or two to help me.

2020/11/19, 18:11 - A████: We can provide reasonable and easy access facilities for learners with disabilities eg lower tap for kids in wheelchairs. We must strive to be fair to all children and not put aside children with slower learning abilities rather , we need to help them and compliment their efforts. We should celebrate all religious holidays in the classroom and not specific ones eg Christmas, Eid, Diwali. We can also create rules that all children must follow.. teaching them to treat each other with love and care & make fun of children who are different than them because we are all humans and deserve love and kindness

2020/11/19, 18:15 - A█h: So I see that we need to adapt the physical environment if the need arises. We need to have high expectations for all children irrespective of their barriers. Be humane compassionate and fair to all children

2020/11/19, 18:15 - A█b: Lovely ideas ★

2020/11/19, 18:20 - A███ Crache: Hi .. so from a young age children start to notice that they all may be different in some way. I feel the first step should be to instill respect and regard into these children so that they grow up with these values. Sometimes children follow their parents attitudes which may not always be fair but by being understanding differences they will develop respect to those around them.

2020/11/19, 18:27 - ████: Absolutely true. And if a teacher notices that a child demonstrates a certain bad attitude towards a group of people it must be addressed immediately.

2020/11/19, 18:28 - A█h: This means lots of active listening and informal discussion around the issues of gender, race or other types of discrimination.

2020/11/19, 18:29 - K████: Another common bad attitude is about people who are living in poverty. There is a general feeling that hard work gets you out of poverty. As we know this is not true as many people are prepared to work hard but are unable to find jobs.

An Inclusive Learning Environment in ECCE

A participatory action learning and action research project
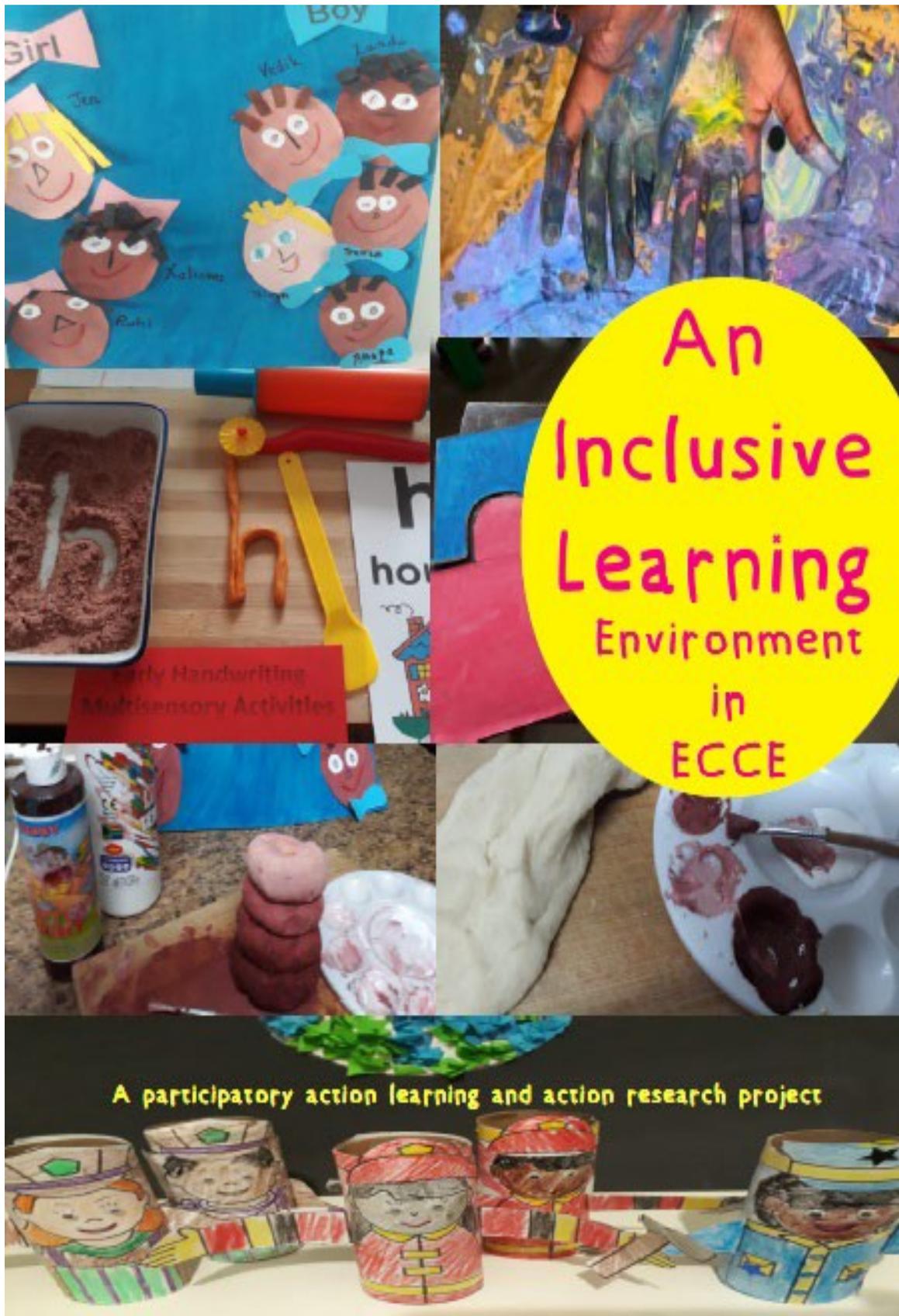
Elephant Analogy

Elephant Classroom Craft

Inclusive teachers understand that their experiences and knowledge is limited and value the knowledge of others.

A famous story describes how six blind men came upon an elephant. Each had a different opinion about what it was. The one who touched the tail said it was a long snake, while the one who touched the tusk described the elephant as a sharp spear. Essentially each man was correct. The inclusive teacher has much to learn from this story. When the blind men get together and connect their stories only then will they form a true picture of the elephant. This story brings to light how limited our perceptions are. It also promotes the need for collaboration in order to be able to understand the bigger picture.

APPENDIX K: Certificate from Inclusive Education South Africa

APPENDIX L: Turnitin Report

AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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APPENDIX M: Letter from the Editor

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ASOKA ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITING

45 Vausedale Crescent, Escombe, 4093.

CELL NO.: 0836507817

DECLARATION

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE FOLLOWING THESIS HAS BEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITED

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AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

CANDIDATE: MAHADEW A
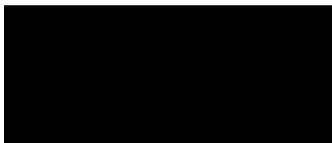
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Prof. Dennis Schauffer, M.A.(Leeds), PhD, KwaZulu (Natal), TEFL(London), TITC Business English, Emeritus Professor UKZN. Univ. Cambridge Accreditation: IGCSE Drama. Hon. Research Fellow, DUT. Durban University of Technology.