

## AUTHOR:

Me. E. Kruger<sup>1</sup>

## AFFILIATION:

<sup>1</sup>University of the Free State,  
South AfricaDOI: [http://dx.doi.](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i1.10)[org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i1.10](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i1.10)

e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2021 39(1): 157-172

## PUBLISHED:

12 March 2021

## RECEIVED:

17 November 2020

## ACCEPTED:

20 January 2021

---

# ADAPT OR DIE IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC: TOWARDS A GROUNDED THEORY OF STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENTS BY AN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT TRAINING ORGANISATION

---

## ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic has led all role players in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in South Africa, including the particular non-profit organisation (NPO) under investigation, into unchartered territory. The organisation, which is involved in training and mentoring community-based Early Childhood Development centres in marginalised settings, was forced to pivot its service as the country went into lockdown in March 2020. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to discover how employees and associates of this organisation view the adjustments that had to be made during and after lockdown to support principals, staff members and through that the children, their parents and the community during COVID-19 lockdown. Findings indicated that the team was able to rely on existing strengths that intersected on several points to tackle the challenges, namely strong internal and external relationships, sound administrative and business systems and a flexible, risk-taking and social entrepreneurial ethos. This kaleidoscopic combinations of relational, attitudinal and organisational factors, permitted swift adjusting, a strength that may support the sustainability of this NPO and others of its kind, not only during the pandemic but also in its aftermath and with the socio-economic upheaval it has caused particularly among indigent communities.*

**Keywords:** *Business systems; change management; social entrepreneurship; resources; community well-being.*



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie>© Creative Commons  
With Attribution (CC-BY)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The world we live and work in has changed irreversibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps taken to minimise infection rates such as the complete lockdown instituted by the South African government on 27 March 2020 affected citizens at every level of society, every sphere of life and in many different ways. This includes the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in general and in particular

non-profit organisations (NPOs) involved in training and mentoring community-based Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in marginalised settings.

The decision to halt ECD services on 18 March 2020 has had wide-ranging consequences caused and amplified by existing structural weaknesses in the sector including poor leadership and ineffective communication from the Department of Social Development (DSD) (Giese, 2020). Giese (2020) refers to the “deeply inadequate response” that “called into question our commitment to the rights of children that are enshrined in Section 28 of our Constitution”. Moreover, closing ECD centres also emphasised deeply entrenched socio-economic and political fissures in the country that not only affected children’s right to education but also access to food, shelter and protection. This rigid approach necessitated the 16 July 2020 court case compelling the Department of Social Development to open private ECD centres if they met health and safety requirements (Grobler, 2020).

To fully understand the particularities of the ECCE sector in South Africa and the reasons why the pandemic regulations had such severe consequences, I briefly explore the landscape of ECCE service provision and training.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The socio-economic significance of ECCE

Early childhood covers three age-groups: 1) conception to two years or the first 1000 days; 2) three to five years and 3) the first year of formal schooling or Grade R (Aubrey, 2017). It is a period of immense mental, emotional, physical and social expansion for children, making it critical for their future cognitive and physical development, health, wellbeing and self-actualisation (Kotze, 2015; World Health Organization, n.d.). Effectual ECCE includes opportunities for learning but also nurturing care related to health, nutrition, safety and security.

The academic, emotional and socio-economic benefits of quality ECCE with the lasting effects of these, have received widespread recognition from several areas of study in the past decade (Bakken, Brown & Downing, 2017; Gomez, 2016; Weinert *et al.*, 2016). A report by the National Research Council as far back as 2001 identified three trends that was to propel ECCE to the foreground: 1) the number of women participating in the formal labour force and who require child care; 2) professionals and parents advocating for young children to receive education; 3) increasing evidence their learning capabilities have been underestimated and 4) that ECD programmes can stand them in good stead when they enter formal schooling. Studies also indicate that such programmes can also help mitigate developmental disparities (Weinert, *et al.*, 2016). ECD programmes can bring about considerable decreases in special education placement and grade retention as well as improve high school grades. It results in reduced demands on the tax base and imbalances (McCoy *et al.*, 2017).

These findings support the neoliberal market-economy perspective that investing in ECCE is important to develop human capital in service of the economy and creating equity by uplifting economically disadvantaged children (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; WHO, n.d.). ECD programmes also assist parents, particularly those from low-income households, by providing safe places for the children while the parents are at work.

## 2.2 ECD service provision in South Africa

*ECD service* refers to a commercial service offering that supports the physical, mental, emotional and social development of a child between birth and school-going age (the year in which the child turns seven) (Jules-Macquet, 2016). The term *ECCE service provider* encompasses several types of ECD services offerings: partial care by someone taking care of no more than six children in a private or public venue during set hours, with or without remuneration (Jules-Macquet, 2016). Such centres follow a formal ECD programme appropriate to children's levels of development and which may or may not be officially prescribed. To receive funding from the state, an ECD centre has to comply with norms and standards and be registered with the DSD although not all registered centres receive state support. ECD centres may be affiliated with a school as a pre-school and/or Grade R. Another option is to establish an ECD centre as a private for-profit business (pre-school, day-care service, crèche or home-based care facility) (Jules-Macquet, 2016).

A sizable number of ECD centres are established informally and are mostly not legally constituted. These are run by individuals as businesses or by community-based committees (ETDP SETA, n.d.). As is often the case in indigent communities and informal settlements, such privately-owned centres begin as informal arrangements among parents and usually a female carer, making their homes or other spaces available to care for children at a fee. Over time some of these child-minding ventures develop into more organised centres that introduce structured programmes and employ other community members. However, they remain unregistered as the regulations are unattainable for most. From this group some owners will show the desire to grow their businesses. Typically, they will enrol for training courses, invest in their employees by sending them for training or partner with an NPO or other organisation such as a church to expand their services.

In communities with high levels of poverty, joblessness, substance abuse, crime and low levels of maternal education, ECD centres often fulfil not only socialisation and educational functions. It also sees to the children's basic needs by providing food, primary health care and looking after their general welfare (Harrison, 2020; Munthali, Mvula & Silo, 2014). An organisation like Joint Aid Management (JAM) (Joint Aid Management SA, n.d.) is currently feeding more than 120 000 South African children in more than 2 500 centres in nine provinces (Joint Aid Management SA, n.d.). With no access to ECD centres, children forfeit meals, often their only meal of the day. Furthermore, as not only the children gain from ECD services but also their families and broader community too, when centres close it affects everyone (Munthali, *et al.*, 2014). This includes the service providers. The COVID-19 lockdown has severely affected the livelihood of owners and staff members of ECD centres, in some cases irrevocably so.

## 2.3 ECCE training in South Africa

As with other areas of the ECCE sector, training opportunities for ECD educators also vary greatly, this despite the consensus among educationalists that quality ECCE depends on knowledgeable, skilled and self-reflective educators able to navigate changing and challenging circumstances (Harrison, 2020).

Training remains mostly at vocational and occupational level with diploma and certificate courses at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. Entry-level ECD qualifications offered at Level 4 and Level 5

for Grade R educators have been introduced at some universities. Higher education ECD qualifications are offered at both TVET colleges and universities starting at NQF Level 6 (diploma and advanced certificate) and can go up to Level 10 (Doctorate). Yet, according to Harrison (2020:2), these often offer no more than “a Foundation Phase (FP) degree that may have a module that addresses the basics of ECD”.

In summary, despite the consensus among educationalists, psychologists, social workers, healthcare professionals, economists and politicians that ECCE is vital for the development of individuals, society and the economy (Yizengaw & Tessega, 2020), it would not be an understatement to describe the South African ECD sector as complicated, disjointed and ineffectual. Services to the diverse society with its varied economic, education and cultural needs can be described as inadequate at best (Harrison, 2020; Excell, 2016). Some of it can be attributed to the organisational complexity of the sector, the plethora of laws and policies governing it as well as historical factors reaching back to the pre-democratic dispensation. This is exacerbated by an administrative quagmire, fragmented oversight responsibilities and a lack of effectual communication and collaboration among the many public and private sector stakeholders (Harrison, 2020; Jules-Macquet, 2016). The upshot is disparities in the type and quality of ECD service offerings and training. It must however, be stated that the intricacies inherent in the ECCE sector is not unique to South Africa with researchers from developed and developing countries alike, commenting on variations in content, capacity, policy, regulation, quality and funding (Harrison, 2020; Weinert, *et al.*, 2016).

## 2.4 THE ROLE OF NPOs INVOLVED IN ECCE

As this article focuses on the functioning of a particular NPO and the lived experience of its staff members and associates, the role of such organisations has to be highlighted. Harrison (2020) points out that NPOs are the primary providers of private ECCE training at various levels by way of the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority’s (ETDP SETA) at NQF Levels 4 and 5. NPOs also offer informal and enrichment courses primarily to educators from indigent communities who cannot gain access to formal training due to inadequate finances and/or schooling. As in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, these are often faith and community-based initiatives (Yizengaw & Tessega, 2020).

## 2.5 The NPO under the spotlight

The organisation under the spotlight provides training to approximately 300, primarily female ECD educators, caregivers and staff members annually. The organisation’s vision is based on the widely held premise that for children from disadvantaged communities, timely and appropriate interventions holds the potential to mediate the effects of poverty and early deprivation through access to good quality ECD programmes (Yizengaw & Tessega, 2020). The aim is to empower women and children within marginalised communities to become self-reliant, independent and to reach their full potential benefitting the whole community. Training courses include basic and advanced ECD training; a First-1000-days course; business management for principals, teaching enrichment workshops for educators and well-being programmes for staff. Training programmes are combined with post-training on-site mentorship to increase knowledge retention and skills application. Mentors guide ECD leadership to plan and implement management, financial, operational and human resource systems. Educators are supported in developing and executing ECD programmes.

Further support provided by the NPO includes ensuring that nutritious meals are served to children daily by 1) sourcing, building partnerships and managing food donations and 2) training ECD centre cooks in menu planning, budgeting, portioning and healthy food preparation methods. According to the NPO's founder, over 2 000 children from 48 ECD centres had been served meals during 2019<sup>1</sup>.

Resources to supplement and enrich lesson plans are available from the early learning resource library including lesson plans, theme table items games, activity ideas, equipment, teaching aids and books based on the themes taught at the centres. Educational items are donated and procured from donations. Between March 2019 to February 2020, 329 theme bags and 5 838 items had been issued.

Since 2019, annual developmental assessment of children from 4 to 6 years old has been undertaken by occupational therapists. The aim is to improve formal school readiness. The results are shared with the educators and principals to inform parents on how to encourage developmental skills. The results are also used to adapt the NPO's training, mentorship and in-service training programmes to improve teaching and to better support children facing developmental delays. According to the NPO founder, in March 2019, 100 children were assessed and results indicate that 76% of the children in this sample group experienced delays in the essential areas of development, with only 24% of children showing competent development according to age group. Results of post-intervention re-screening in October/November 2019 indicated that only 22% of the children tested in October/November showed delays, with 78% of children showing developmental competencies according to their age group.

Two other projects are worth mentioning. In mid-2019, the organisation embarked on developing a curriculum for 2 to 5-year olds which is relevant for South African context. The project is sponsored and the team members include ECD educationalists and occupational therapists. The second noteworthy project is the NPO having been tasked by DSD to audit and assist with registering all Partnering Partial Care Facilities (PCF) within the geographical area.

Until end of March 2020, when lockdown was instituted, these activities had been going ahead as planned. However, it all came to a halt when people were prohibited from leaving their homes. Owners and principals of ECD centres were forced to close their doors indefinitely not knowing for how long they would be without an income and the means to pay staff. NPO training activities also immediately ceased. However, the organisation's involvement with the community continued in other ways focusing on relief work and finding innovative ways to support educators to support parents in teaching children at home.

This article explores the lived experience of this NPO's leadership, staff and associates of the role it played during the lockdown and their understanding of how the support role differed from what had been done before. The aim is to develop an informed grounded theory (IGT) from themes emerging from interviews with the participants based on the question:

*How do staff and associates perceive the support this NPO had offered the leadership, staff children at ECD centres and the broader community during the COVID-19 lockdown as compared to its role prior to the pandemic?*

1 Details in the section that follows are available on the NPO's website as well as in annual reports. However, in order to protect the identity, the sources have been withheld. References have been provided to the editors of the journal to confirm the information.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) is a suitable technique to investigate “What is happening?”-questions specifically during a time of social upheaval such as the pandemic (Nathaniel, 2020). It can reveal novel and unfamiliar patterns, processes and practices of human behaviour through observation and interrogating people’s lived experiences (Nathaniel, 2020). Rather than describing a phenomenon or attempting to prove a hypothesis rooted in a particular theory, the emphasis in GT research is to develop a substantive theory from the raw data itself (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

However, much debate surrounds the researcher’s ability to prevent contaminating emerging theory by ignoring their personal and project-specific context, prior knowledge and experience and theoretical assumptions, even if classic GT insists that the literature review is delayed until after the analysis. Thornberg (2012) holds that shifting between the data set and existing literature in the researched field to compare, interpret and find patterns that best explain the data, is acceptable, even advantageous as long as “data sensitizing principles” such as open-mindedness, critical thinking and recorded reflection are applied. Research rigour resides in the researcher’s relentless commitment to remain noncommittal and to allow emerging theories to be constructed from the data itself. The theoretical and contextual influences on the researcher as well as her interactions with the participants and field of study, although useful, remains background to the “empirical figure” (Thornberg, 2012:11).

Unlike classic GT that uses inductive reasoning, informed grounded theory (IGT) requires abductive reasoning to form a conclusion from information that is known about a specific case and has the possibility for general application. This is achieved by combining themes emerging during data collection, coding, conceptualisation and theory-identification processes with the use, even modification of one or more external, but firmly fit-for-purpose theory. The introduction of extant literature at this point should not strong-arm the data in a particular direction. The aim is to serve as a heuristic tool to inform, to create associations and to draw attention to potential patterns that will, in the final analysis, assist in identifying one hypothesis among many that better explain the data set under investigation (Thornberg, 2012).

#### 3.2 Setting and respondents

In this study, participants were purposefully selected on account of my familiarity with the work of the particular NPO. The name and location of the organisation have not been disclosed and pseudonyms have been used for the six out of the eight all-female staff and associate complement who participated. The women’s roles and background in the organisation include training manager, resource library manager, mentors, head of curriculum development, occupational therapist and auxiliary social worker. The age-range of the participants is between 30 and 55. The process started with gathering data by way of an unstructured focus-group meeting to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic and generate narrative data through natural conversation, an individual interview with the founder, field notes and memos. Electing a focus group interview to gather data was to simplify logistical arrangements as the team does not have set office hours as well as to harness the group dynamic and to take advantage of the interviewer’s trusted relationship with the participants and the organisation.

### 3.3 Procedure

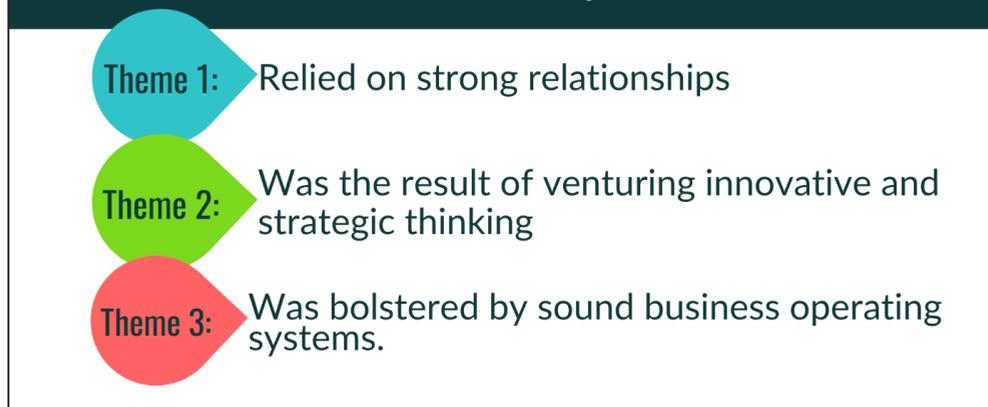
After receiving signed informed consent forms, a general discussion was initiated and participants' conversation was recorded and notes taken by the researcher. They were asked to answer one broadly-stated "what is happening?" question (Glaser, 2020) to avoid delimiting the phenomenon under scrutiny and allow the problem to emerge in the iterative constant comparison process during open coding and thematic analysis. In line with IGT, no specific problem or hypothesis was defined, and no formal literature review was conducted prior to data analysis. The abbreviated GT two-stage coding procedure followed, using only one data set and themes were clustered around related concepts emerging from the data until data saturation was reached.

The nature of IGT requires rigorous attention to establishing trustworthiness, conceptual reliability, confirmability and transferability of the findings to ensure reliability and validity. Guidelines posted by Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) guided this study namely methodological self-consciousness as well as being transparent about the how's and why's of the specific topic, the type of GT methodology, the processes, the influence of the researcher and openness, criticality as well as sensitivity to and tolerance of ambiguity (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). This is reinforced by collecting rich data and following an iterative process to compare data with data, data with themes and with literature and themes with themes and literature until the analysis yielded strong categories and laser-focused findings rooted in theoretical explanations that answer the "What is happening?"-question.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first stage of the open-coding meant sifting through the data to identify broad themes around the organisation's re-directed efforts to support the leadership, staff, children at ECD centres and the broader community during the COVID-19 lockdown. The following topics kept cropping up in relation to the NPO's response to the lockdown: the leadership and team being proactive, sensitive to the needs of the ECD community, agile and well-organised, a strong team spirit, deep and trusting relationships with "clients", committed donors and a supporting community. During the second stage of coding, the initial themes were combined, collapsed and integrated until three themes emerged that characterises the participants' lived experiences of the NPO's revised service offerings: 1) that it relied on strong relationships; 2) that it was the result of venturing innovative and strategic thinking and 3) that it was bolstered by sound business operating systems.

## NPO's revised Covid 19 lockdown and subsequent service offerings to support the leadership, staff, children at ECD centres and the broader community:

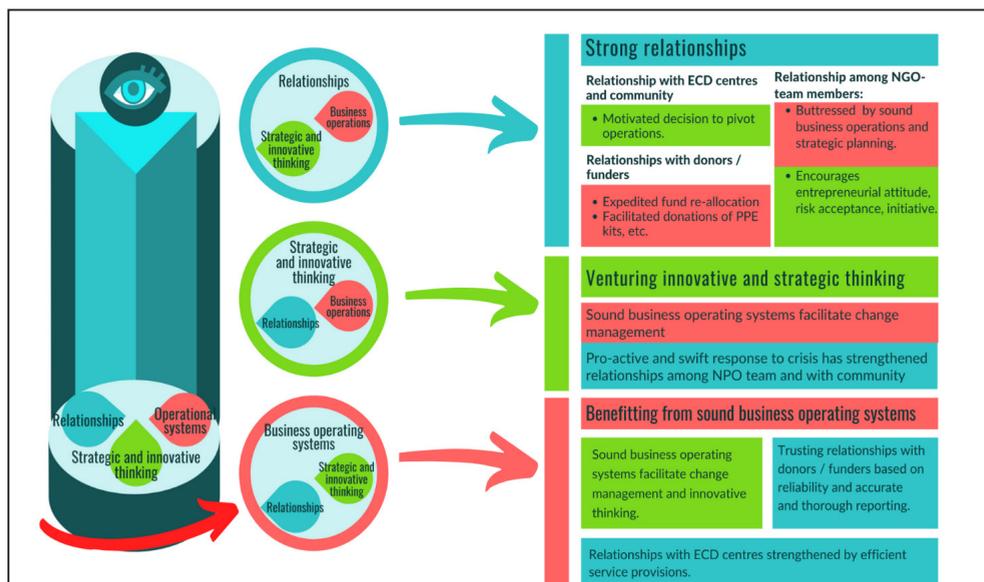


**Figure 1.** Themes emanating from the data regarding the NPO's revised COVID 19 lockdown and subsequent service offerings to support the leadership, staff, children at ECD centres and the broader community

In the interviews with the participants, they were asked to reflect on how the role of the NPO they are involved in, had to be adjusted during the lockdown. The general impression noted was that despite being thrust out of their professional and personal comfort zones in the last few months, the team was proud of what had been achieved. They were grateful for the support they had received from within and without the organisation. Also, despite some apprehension for the financial future of the NPO, and uncertainty about the form training will take, they were certain that they will be able to continue serving the community in future as they had managed in this time. As indicated previously, three themes characterised their lived experiences of the NPO's revised service offerings emphasising relief work and educator support rather than formal educator training and mentoring: 1) that it relied on strong relationships; 2) that it was the result of venturing innovative and strategic thinking and 3) that it was bolstered by sound business operating systems. The cogency of the emerging themes was reinforced by the leitmotifs of the NPO Sustainability Model (NPO-SM) after a 2017 investigation of Romanian organisations (Ceptureanu, *et al.*, 2017). According to this model, three determinants are correlated with NPO sustainability: 1) social awareness and 2) cognitive competence and 3) financial vulnerability. These factors align with the themes identified in this study.

Furthermore, as the thematic analysis of the data progressed, the image of a kaleidoscope came to mind. In the same way as the succession of changing patterns of a kaleidoscope is created by the same pieces of coloured glass in the object chamber, the same motifs (themes) kept emerging from the data in assorted combinations and configurations. These interconnected patterns formed thematic nodes as illustrated in Figure 2, that further illumine the situation under scrutiny: firstly, strong internal and external relationships (Theme1) support and are supported by the NPO's business operations (Theme 3) as well as its change management proficiency (Theme 2). Secondly, an innovative and strategic problem-solving capability (Theme 2) contributes to client/stakeholder satisfaction and strong relationships

(Theme 1) and thirdly, employing sound operating systems to make internal processes more efficient and build organisational capacity (Theme 3) contribute to sound governance (financial and otherwise) that expedite new projects that fulfil the changing needs of the ECD centres and the community.



**Figure 2.** Kaleidoscopic combinations form thematic nodes that underpins the re-direction of support efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic of a South African NPO involved in ECD training.

The thematic notes are highlighted throughout the discussion of individual themes.

### 4.1 Relying on relationships

Building relationships imply moving outward to engage another party. Successfully doing this requires astute social awareness. Ceptureanu *et al.* (2017) refer to the relational aspects of an NPO as its external activities – cooperating to solve common problems, accepting joint responsibilities, sharing ideas and resources and addressing the community’s needs.

Every participant emphatically stated that the sole motivation for every decision and every action during the first few weeks of lockdown, was their concern for the welfare of the centres’ staff and the children. “We were worried for them”, Emelia explained. “It was clear that lockdown was not going to last for a few days or weeks only. With no children around, what was going to happen to the centres’ income? How will they be able to pay the staff members?” Another major concern was that with the centres closed, the feeding programmes also ground to a halt.

The depth of these relationships facilitated consultation with ECD centre principals to establish the needs at the centres and in the community. According to Linda this affiliation with the ECD staff has been reinforced by the emphasis the NPO puts on face-to-face mentoring. “We know them, and they know us personally, so when we asked what it was

they needed, the open, caring and trusting connection that already existed, made honest communication possible.”

Having strong relationships among the NPO team members also fostered a pro-active approach and becoming, as Sonja (NPO founder) puts it, change agents guided by the needs of the ECCE community. Once they had realised the enormity of the pandemic and the lockdown’s impact on ECD centres, children and communities, the team instituted regular web-based meetings to plan their own and the community’s short-term survival and build long-term resilience. Linda, Babalwa and Kirsten said that they were able to build on an already strong bond among team members and with the NPO leadership. “There were no question in our minds, when Sonja said, we are meeting to plan our response to the crisis, that this was what we would be doing. No shutting down”. Iwu, *et al.* (2015) make a direct link between bringing together and retaining a talented management and operating team and the viability of an NPO.

The team showed its true colours during this time, Kirsten adds. “We are stronger and more committed than ever”. The results of a survey conducted among 41 principals revealing what had been accomplished in 2020, has further strengthened their resolve. Most outstanding among these successes is that 95% of ECD centres involved with this NPO had managed to reopen compared to a national average of 15%. However, Sonja says, feelings of uncertainty and being overwhelmed by loss of income and the general state of affairs persist. “There is still much to be done”.

Soon after lockdown, consultations with the ECD centres leadership made it clear that the first priority was to assist them to continue the existing feeding schemes. According to Sonja, the collaboration among the NPO principals and donors, made it possible to by early April 2020, deliver 525kg of porridge and 804 bars of soaps to be distributed from the ECD centres. Each kilogram provides a child with a nutritious breakfast for a month. “By July 2020”, she says, “we were able to provide food parcels to almost 2 000 families and supporting five soup kitchens each feeding over 80 people per day at least three times a week”. Books and educational kits for over 2000 children were also donated and distributed.

Sonja points out that making food provision the first priority meant approaching long-standing project funders to request that aid be re-allocated. “They happily agreed”, and she bases this on the NPO’s strong operational and financial systems.

“It quickly became apparent that there was a huge need for financial relief for principals, staff and their families”, Sonja recounts. “We were fielding daily calls of women and children in dire need of food, electricity and hygiene products.” A call for funding for store vouchers was put out and by mid-April 2020 they were able, thanks to multiple generous donations, to purchase 700 vouchers of R250 each to be redeemed at local supermarkets. Participants reiterated that open and trusting relationships between the NPO and funders, local and international businesses and individual donors, is the result of building strong and long-standing networks over years.

However, by July 2020, and after a court case compelling the DSD to allow private ECD centres to reopen (Grobler, 2020), the NPO team again had to come up with a plan to support the centres as the majority were not able to afford nutritious meals for the children. Thanks to generous donations, Sonja says, the organisation was able to supply 31 centres with over 900 children with cooked meals three times a week. This was in addition to the long-term project of providing fortified porridge to 45 centres.

More evidence of the value of good relationships, according to Emelia, was the drive to help ECD centres to acquire personal protective equipment (PPEs) when centres were preparing to reopen. "This had to be done among great confusion, uncertainty and anxiety in the sector as a result of a lack of national leadership" in the sector. "The centres had not had any income since March including the few that receive state subsidy", Sonja explains. "They could simply not afford PPE kits". To make matters worse, while principals were already fretful and frazzled by the fallout of the pandemic, scant official guidance emerged besides the DSD's 66-page operating-and-best-practice manual, which left the women overwhelmed and dispirited. "That is when we decided that our role as trainers and mentors were now more needed than ever", Sonja explains. The NPO team stepped in to simplify the manual and make it fit for purpose. This morphed into a fully-fledged COVID19 Management Programme that included documentation requirements, policy development, protocols for screening and sanitisation. "We also included COVID19-specific human resources and financial management practices, adapted from our business management training", coordinator, Laetitia explains. Two training sessions were organised attended by 58 women. "In the end", she says, "besides the training sessions, we were also able to supply over 70 centres with PPEs and information posters thanks to donations".

"With the centres reopening yet few children returning, and their income limited, we realized the level of stress and anxiety were climbing. We created a wellbeing course for 18 educators to help the women develop tools and strategies to improve overall emotional wellbeing during this time of great uncertainty," Sonja says.

Sonja attributes the NPO's longstanding and trusting relationship with funders and donors to responsible financial management and consistent and thorough reporting. This is corroborated by the NPO-SM indicating that the concept *social awareness* includes building and maintaining a good public profile and strong relationships and networks to help access resources, funding and donations. However, it also has to be supported by solid organisational systems and processes (Ceptureanu *et al.*, 2017). This underscores the value of strong relationships (Theme 1) and benefitting from sound business operation systems (Theme 3). Both of these are expected to be critical in the aftermath of the pandemic with possible donor fatigue and funding constraints (Southern African NGO Network, 2020). Several participants expressed apprehension about how these factors might affect the work of the NPO and how to counteract it with improved efficiency of production, resource allocation and planning. As Linda emphatically states: "This pandemic is no longer a health problem only. It is a long-term financial issue for most people and organisations. What if resources dry up?" "We are concerned that, despite the determination, drive and passion of the principals, they may not have the resources to maintain their centres and their staff until February 2021 when the new year will begin for them," Sonja adds. "This will obviously affect our activities and decisions".

A number of the suggestions offered by the Southern African NGO Network (SANGONeT) (2020) to respond to the possible drying up of funds, align with the organisation's approach to redirecting efforts: 1) staying in touch with beneficiaries to better understand their needs 2) keeping communication with donors transparent and consistent; 3) leveraging existing partnerships 4) creating new forms of support and 5) continuing to plan for the medium and long term.

One of the NPO's first steps undertook halfway through the lockdown was to redefine the functions of its board to actively advocate for the NPO and identify potential funders.

Strategies to continue training and other services offered in case of reduced funding, are under discussion (Sonja).

Under social awareness, the NPO-SM also includes aspects like project management proficiency, entrepreneurial know-how and financial and legal expertise, all of which contribute to strong and professional relationships in and with the community (Ceptureanu *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the authors quote the Ashoka Foundation, an international NPO promoting social entrepreneurship, that a viable NPO must also be ready to learn and change (Theme 2).

## 4.2 Venturing strategic and innovative thinking

Linking an organisational vision to strategic objectives for long, medium and short-term goals strengthens operations, establishes agreement around the intended outcomes and, rather than hinder it, allows for adjustment as circumstances change (Quesado *et al.*, 2018). While long-term thinking is vital, being able to adapt to unexpected challenges creatively has proven to be equally important. These are important features of a social entrepreneurial mind-set and the social awareness concept of the NPO-SM of (Ceptureanu *et al.*, 2017).

An indication of the social entrepreneurial approach of the NPO, is evident in Sonja's reference to the organisation's desire to act as "change agents" during the crisis and to transform the way the organisation functioned during lockdown. The aim was to introduce new initiatives, processes, procedures and structures to facilitate official directives, communicate reliable information and generally deliver value to the ECD community. A social entrepreneur is driven by necessity, has a high tolerance to risk and actively seeks out opportunities and novel options (Purdy, 2018; Kerr, Kerr & Xu, 2017). This aligns with the determinants identified in the NPO-SM construct of social awareness, namely entrepreneurial attitude, risk acceptance, initiative and a relaxed attitude towards change. Iwu *et al.* (2015) link quality of service to innovativeness, creativity and successfully adapting to environmental change, which they consider critical to effectiveness and sustainability.

According to Linda, the reason why she thinks this NPO managed to swiftly change direction to respond to the crisis was because its mission is clear: "We went back to what started this organisation – we exist not because we [the staff and volunteers] need to do something for the community. We exist to fulfil a need they had. And as their needs changed, so we had to change."

The NPO's handling of the crisis provides numerous examples of innovative thinking such as the use of technology to stay in touch with their customers. After lockdown was declared and the ECD centres had closed its doors, the burning humanitarian issues, Sonja explains, had to be addressed from a distance. Like the rest of the world, the solution was to turn to technology. However, a number of problems had to be overcome: 1) the nature of ECD education is a hands-on, face-to-face interaction 2) the high cost of data in South Africa and 3) the financial pressure ECD staff and the parents are under. Cell phones became the instrument of choice to communicate and share educational material to principals for distribution to educators and parents. It was also implemented as a tool dealing with the hunger issue. Sonja relates that the NPO responded immediately by distributing data vouchers to the principals to ensure access to communication. Then followed distribution of almost 2 000 printed and SMS food vouchers.

Mentorship for 30 centres also continued via regular cell phone contact. "Our initial thoughts were to support the principals and their staff as best we could, Sonja says. "We formed a WhatsApp group of over 70 principals to share relevant and accurate COVID-19

information, to assess their needs and to offer guidance and support". The group also became a source of emotional support with motivational messages sent on Sundays and when needed during the week.

The concern at the NPO however, remained how to support ECD centres to continue children's learning while at home. Sonja explained that team members got down to business and acquired new skills like using online programmes to design and share creative activities daily so that parents and caregivers could engage the children whilst using minimal resources. These were also shared on several social media platforms to make it widely available. Emelia explains that increasing the use of technology has been a priority in the organisation's long-term strategy. The crisis merely pushed this goal forward.

### 4.3 Benefitting from sound business operating systems

A business system is what links all the building-blocks (systems and procedures) of an organisation to effect its strategy and achieve its goals as efficiently as possible. It also improves management practices and problem-solving and decision-making processes (Zhao, Kuo & Wang, 2014).

The combination of social entrepreneurial awareness and sound business, financial and operational systems encourage innovation and risk-taking leading to improved results, quality services and increased financial efficiency (Purdy, 2018; Ceptureanu *et al.*, 2017). Aspects related to operations emphasised in the NPO-SM are comprehensive reporting, complying with specific donor rules, allowing less options to reallocate expenditures, revenue diversification, financial planning and publishing financial and other results.

Regular and detailed report-back to funders and ECD centres throughout the lockdown and continuing now, has enabled the researcher to confirm the participants' versions of events with up-to-date information via reports and newsletters posted on the website and in correspondence to board members. Features of the reports are transparency, clear communication of measurable results fostering trustworthiness and accountability. Sonja quotes from an email she has received from a donor organisation lauding the NPO for being reliable and not needing to be supervised with respect to using funds. "Then he added how impressed he had been with the way information was presented in the report illustrating the extent of the project, but also the efficiency of our work and the strategic thinking in regard to next steps and measures".

Extracting the relevant and accurate data that inform long-term objectives but also about decisions such as those related to the pandemic, relies on efficient operational systems. Accurate data depend on realistic needs assessments and on access to trustworthy sources and which in turn, is strengthened by trusting internal and external relationships.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led all role players in the ECCE sector into uncharted territory. As the pandemic rages on, and undoubtedly in its aftermath, NPOs will be compelled to find new ways of serving the ECD community as their needs change. In the case of this NPO, many innovative and out of the ordinary measures were taken to support the centres. However, the conversations with employees and associates highlighted that although the role changed from training and mentoring to include relief work, it was the fact that they were able to rely on existing strengths that saw them through and which they will rely on in future too.

Aspects such as strong internal and external relationships, sound administrative and business systems and a flexible, risk-taking and social entrepreneurial ethos enable them to adapt and ensure the NPO's sustainability not only during the pandemic but also in its aftermath and the socio-economic upheaval it has caused particularly among indigent communities. The aspects that assisted this organisation to pivot effectively during lockdown, as identified by the staff and associates, are in line with studies done internationally on the sustainability of NPOs.

Typical of a GT exploration, this study has limitations. Although it has provided deep and rich data, it looks at the functioning of only one NPO which limits its generalisability. Also, being personally affiliated with the organisation may have led to skewed assumptions despite a rigorous and systematic data analysis process. Investigating other NPOs in the same way will greatly contribute to learning more about their lived experience during an assessment of their future after the pandemic to shape a theory of sustainability.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, L., Shinn, C. Fullilove, M., Scrimshaw, S., Fielding, J., Normand, J., Carande-Kulis, V. & the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. 2003. The effectiveness of early childhood development programs: A systematic review. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 24(3S): 32–46. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(02\)00655-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(02)00655-4)
- Atmore, E. 2013. Early childhood development in South Africa – progress since the end of apartheid. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 21(2–3): 152–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.832941>
- Aubrey, C. 2017. Sources of inequality in South African early child development services. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 7(1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v7i1.450>
- Bakken, L., Brown, N. & Downing, B. 2017. Early childhood education: The long-term benefits. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31(2): 255–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285>
- Ceptureanu, S.-I., Ceptureanu, E.-G., Orzan, M. & Marin, I. 2017. Toward a Romanian NPOs sustainability model: Determinants of Sustainability. *Sustainability*, 9(6): 966. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9060966>
- Charmaz, K. & Thornberg, R. 2020. The pursuit of quality in grounded theory. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2020.1780357> [Accessed 9 November 2020]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1780357>
- Department of Basic Education. 2020. *ECD migration from DSD to DBE; Tracking progress in ECD service delivery: NGO briefing*. Available at <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/29937/> [Accessed 9 November 2020].
- Duncan, G. J. & Magnuson, K., 2013. Investing in preschool programs. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(2): 109–132. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.2.109>
- Excell, L. 2016. Interrogating quality in early childhood development: Working towards a South African perspective. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 6(1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v6i1.406>

- Giese, S. 2020. The collapse of early childhood development is a constitutional crisis – urgent action is needed now. *Daily Maverick*, 11 October.
- Glaser, B.G. 2020. Getting started. *The Grounded Theory Review*, 19(1). Available at <http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2020/08/12/getting-started-2/> [Accessed 9 November 2020].
- Gomez, R. 2016. Sustaining the benefits of early childhood education experiences: A Research Overview. *Voices in Urban Education*, 43: 5–14.
- Grobler, R. 2020. *All private preschools may open immediately, court rules*. Available at <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/just-in-all-private-preschools-may-open-immediately-court-rules-20200706> [Accessed 9 November 2020].
- Harrison, G.D. 2020. A snapshot of early childhood care and education in South Africa: Institutional offerings, challenges and recommendations. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 10(1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.797>
- Iwu, C.G., Kapondoro, L., Twum-Darko, M. & Tengeh, R. 2015. Determinants of sustainability and organisational effectiveness in non-profit organisations. *Sustainability*, 7: 9560–9573. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su7079560>
- Joint Aid Management SA, n.d. *Joint aid management SA*. Available at <https://jamsa.co.za/programmes-and-campaigns/nutritional-school-feeding/> [Accessed 9 November 2020].
- Jules-Macquet, R. 2016. *Early childhood development centre reference guide for registration with the department*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.
- Kerr, S. P., Kerr, W. R. & Xu, T. 2017. *Personality traits of entrepreneurs: A review of recent literature working paper 18–47*. USA: Harvard Business School. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w24097>
- Kotze, J. 2015. *The readiness of the South African education system for a pre-Grade R year*. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v5i2.380>
- McCoy, D.C., Yoshikawa, H., Ziolo-Guest, K.M., Duncan, G.J., Schindler, H.S., Magnuson, K., Yang, R., Koepf, A. & Shonkoff, J.P. 2017. Impacts of early childhood education on medium- and long-term educational outcomes. *Educational Researcher*, 46(8): 474–487. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17737739>
- Munthali, A.C., Mvula, P.M. & Silo, L. 2014. Early childhood development: The role of community based childcare centres in Malawi. *SpringerPlus*, 3(305): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-3-305>
- Nathaniel, A. 2020. From the editor's desk. *Grounded Theory Review*, 19: 1–2.
- National Research Council. 2001. *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington: National Academy Press.
- Purdy, C. 2018. How nonprofits can incorporate entrepreneurship into their work. *Philanthropy Journal*, 16 July.
- Quesado, P., Aibar Guzmán, B. & Lima Rodrigues, L. 2018. Advantages and contributions in the balanced scorecard. *Intangible Capital*, 14(1): 186–201. <https://doi.org/10.3926/ic.1110>
- RSA DBE. 2015. *Action Plan to 2019. Towards the realisation of Schooling 2030. Taking forward South Africa's national development plan 2030*. Pretoria: Government Printers.

RSA Department of Social Development, n.d. *Services: Partial care and early childhood development programme*. Available at <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/social-development/services/1078> [Accessed 3 November 2020].

RSA Republic of South Africa. 2009. *National early learning development standards*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

The Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA). n.d. *Early childhood development sector skills plan 2019–2020 update*. Available at [https://www.etdpseta.org.za/education/sites/default/files/2018-06/Early-Childhood-Development-Sector-Skills-Plan-2019-2020-Update\\_0.pdf](https://www.etdpseta.org.za/education/sites/default/files/2018-06/Early-Childhood-Development-Sector-Skills-Plan-2019-2020-Update_0.pdf) [Accessed 3 November 2020]

The Southern African NGO Network (SANGONeT). 2020. *The impact of Covid-19 on the non-profit sector*. Available at: <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/2020/10/02/impact-covid-19-non-profit-sector> [Accessed 7 November 2020].

Thornberg, R. 2012. Informed grounded theory. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 56(3): 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2011.581686>

Weinert, S., Linberg, A., Attig, M, Freund, J-D. & Linberg, T. 2016. Analyzing early child development, influential conditions, and future impacts: Prospects of a German newborn cohort study. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 10(7): 24–42. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-016-0022-6>

Wolfson Vorster, R. 2020. Can South Africa's early childhood development sector be saved? *Daily Maverick*, 23 June.

World Health Organization, n.d. *Health topics: Early childhood development*. Available at: <https://www.who.int/topics/early-child-development/en/> [Accessed 23 October 2020].

Yizengaw, J.Y. & Tessega, M. 2020. The implementation of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Bahir Dar city administration: A comparative study between private and public pre-primary schools. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 2(1): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssoho.2020.100013>

Zhao, D., Kuo, S.-H. & Wang, T.-C. 2014. The evaluation of the business operation performance by applying grey relational analysis. In: P.S. Pan, V. Snasel, E.S. Corchado, A. Abraham, S.-L. Wang (Eds.). *Intelligent data analysis and its applications, volume I. Advances in intelligent systems and computing* (pp. 441–450). Switzerland: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-07776-5\\_46](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-07776-5_46)