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Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology

Research Report

**Early Childhood Separation Anxiety during the Transition to Preschool: Exploring Teachers'
Experiences and Perspectives**

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A research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by Coursework and Research Report in the field of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2012.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

Delysia Pillay

Date

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to Su God, for all the guidance, arrangements and blessings bestowed on me so generously. Thank you for showing me such love and kindness and allowing me this opportunity and experience.

I would like to convey my sincere gratitude to the following people:

To my parents, Sarvasan and Pribashnee and my siblings, Terishia and Kamesh, thank you for supporting me throughout my journey and encouraging me to achieve my dreams. Your love, patience, understanding, advice and belief in me have always been more than I could ask for. I am truly blessed to have you as my family.

To my supervisor, Dr. Esther Price, your wisdom and guidance have been invaluable. I am truly grateful for your time, patience and understanding in guiding me throughout my journey. Thank you for encouraging and supporting my interests and ideas.

Sincerest thanks are owed to my friends, who were always available to listen, offer advice and assist me. This was a challenging journey, but your willingness to support me made all the difference.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the preschool principals and teachers who so willingly participated in this study and offered their experiences and perspectives for the development of research. May you continue to nurture and inspire the lives of many.

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Abstract

The transition from home to preschool is a very emotional and sometimes distressing period for both parent and child. The teacher plays a significant role, in that they are entrusted with the distressed and separation anxious child, and assist in helping both parent and child to adjust to the change. Research in the field of early childhood separation anxiety has suggested that, when the child has difficulty managing their anxiety, maladjustment can potentially predispose them to various other forms of pathology later in life. Thus, the potential implications of maladjustment simultaneously imply the importance of understanding and helping anxious and struggling preschoolers to adjust to developmental demands.

This study qualitatively explored the perspectives and experiences of teachers, and how they have come to make sense of and respond to separation anxiety in children. Four private preschools in the Johannesburg area participated in the study and a sample of thirteen teachers were interviewed. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews which were audio-recorded. A thematic content analysis of the collected data revealed two core themes concerning teachers' views on separation anxiety. The first theme addressed the 'challenges encountered' during the transitional period, which focused primarily on the presentation, impacts and predisposing factors of separation anxiety. The second major theme addressed 'helpful qualities in the caregiver role', which discussed useful qualities to be considered when engaging with a separation anxious child. Collectively, these findings presented an understanding of the various ways in which teachers make sense of and respond to separation anxiety during the transitional process. These qualitative insights also add to the existing body of literature, highlight areas for future research and attempt to offer thoughts on how separation anxiety can be managed, as to avoid further exacerbation and implications on later development.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Rationale

A child's development is subject to a variety of factors which serve to promote or hinder their growth. Research has suggested that one such factor pertains to their interaction with adults. These adult-child relationships have frequently arisen in studies as predictors of both behavioural problems and psychopathology (Greenberg, Speltz & DeKlyen, 1993; Hirshfeld-Becker & Biederman, 2002) and therefore appear to be an important source of interest for research in the field of early childhood development. Pianta and Walsh (1996) noted that during the initial school years, such as preschool, these adult-child relationships hold strong influence, especially with regard to their school and age appropriate competencies. In keeping with the preschool years, this period was also observed as a time when the child transitioned from their primary adult attachment figure to another adult, who had the potential to play the role of a secondary attachment figure. Pianta, Nimetz and Bennett (1997) identified these two significant figures as the parent and the teacher. "By leaving children with the teacher, the parent explicitly or implicitly tells the child that the teacher is to be his or her main person until the parent returns" (Howes & Hamilton, 1992, p. 860).

In addition to the above mentioned importance of adult-child relationships during the preschool years, developmental transitions such as the one from home to preschool was also considered a significant influencing factor in the child's growth. This transition is not always a smooth process and while some children advance comfortably, others struggle and the separation from their parent is described as difficult and debilitating (Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005). It is a transition from a familiar world, into an environment which is unknown (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Krapp & Fink, 1992). Separation anxiety was a common feature when engaging with this unfamiliar experience, such as entering into preschool, for both parent and child. In the literature, separation anxiety symptoms were also reported as common and somewhat situationally appropriate (Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005). However, when the symptoms took on a more severe form, it placed the child at risk for other forms of pathology and dysfunction. Hirshfeld-Becker and Biederman (2002) noted that a history of anxiety disorders in childhood may be linked with more acute cases of anxiety disorders

in adulthood, and that once they develop in childhood they can become quite impeding for the child, resulting in significant academic and social dysfunction.

To link the developmental importance of understanding adult-child relationships in childhood (particularly with the teacher), to early childhood separation anxiety during the transition into preschool, it seemed essential to shed light on the relation between the two. In the preschool context, the teacher holds a position of significance, as their role allows them to mediate the child's experience, by assisting them to adjust to the new world of preschool that exists without the presence of their parent (Howes, Whitebook & Phillips, 1992). There is also potential for new attachment bonds to be established with teachers, over and above those with their parents, which can offer alternate support and security in the absence of parents (Cicirelli, 1991). With such a core role to play (Howes et al., 1992), it seemed valuable to explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers and how they negotiated the transition to preschool with separation anxious children.

For the purpose of this study, teachers' experiences and perspectives were explored in a manner respective to the aim of the study. Hence, teachers' work related experiences and encounters with separation anxious children, and teachers' perspectives on the possible causes, manifestation and management regarding separation anxiety was the focus of enquiry. The teacher role was a source of qualitative information about separation anxiety, as well as of personal experiences in responding to separation anxious children (Briggs-Gowan, Carter & Schwab-Stone, 1996; Miller et al., 2003). In light of the discussed research, the findings of this study provided qualitative information which contributes to the larger body of literature through its understanding of the current perceptions held by teachers about separation anxiety, as well as provided insight to all parties who may be struggling with the same experience.

Moreover, the merit of the current study can be said to be rooted in the work of Robert. C. Pianta; a key figure associated with research within the field of early childhood development. It was grounded by Pianta's (1997) research which proposed the value of researching and making sense of mother-child and teacher-child relationships during early childhood. The value of the proposed research was further supported by the abundance of literature that marked the influence these two significant care-giving adults provided in the

children's development. Thus, in light of the importance of understanding teachers' perspectives, the current study developed awareness to teachers' significant and influential role, with regard to helping children adjust to the transition into preschool.

1.2. Aims

This study explored the ways in which early childhood separation anxiety was experienced, understood and responded to during the entrance into preschool, by the key adult figure in the school context, i.e. the teacher. This entailed exploring how teachers' make sense of separation anxiety through their work related experiences, teachers' descriptions and perspectives on separation anxiety behaviours, and how their role allows them to engage with the child and the parent during this time. It also explored teachers' approaches to managing separation anxious children and their rationale for their methods.

Current literature in this field appeared to be lacking in qualitative information from the teacher perspective, thus insights attained served to expand on the greater body of knowledge by offering meanings and interpretations attached to early childhood separation anxiety by teachers. Furthermore, the study aimed to expand and complement current literature, by presenting an alternative and personal perspective to a broadly correlation-focused and preventative-based approach to research in the field. Also, the majority of the literature has been internationally based and this study therefore adds to the body of knowledge from a South African context (Ahnert & Lamb, 2003).

1.3. Research Questions

This study was explorative in nature and posed two broad and key research questions. First, how do teachers make sense of and understand separation anxiety during the transition to preschool, and second, how do they respond to it from a work related position. It can be said that the simplicity of the questions posed, aimed to identify the various elements regarding the phenomenon, thereby creating space for further studies and rigorous assessment on the findings of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

There are multiple factors that influence the occurrence and presentation of separation anxiety in early childhood (Cobham & Dadds, 1999). The literature presented in this chapter sought to critically address some of these factors, thereby highlighting the findings in which this study was grounded, as well as the potential gaps it may aim to contribute to. For the purpose of this study the term 'preschool' was used to refer to formal child care institutions utilised by the public before commencing school. More specifically, children too young to be attending school, but older than approximately thirty months of age. A discussion on the relevant aspects of attachment theory, as well as some of the pertinent literature on early childhood separation anxiety is presented below.

2.2. Theoretical framework: Theory of attachment

Traditional psychoanalysis has leaned upon theories offered by Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein for a depth of understanding regarding the mother-infant relationship, however John Bowlby digressed from drive theory and object-relations theory asserted by the above mentioned theorists and proposed attachment as a psychological bond linking mother and infant, which accounts for more than just primitive instincts aroused by the need to satisfy feeding or infantile aggression and sexuality (Holmes, 1993). Bowlby's theory of attachment "grew out of observations of the behaviour of infants and young children who were separated from their primary caregiver (usually the mother) for various lengths of time" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 512). In light of the emphasis on the mother-infant relationship by the above mentioned theorists, particularly Bowlby and his fellow theorist Mary Ainsworth, as well as other research in the field that similarly observed and identified the mother as the customary primary caregiver, this study also conceptualised mothers as the primary caregiving figure in support of the larger body of literature.

Attachment was noted to initially form a bond between mother and child and then functioned to mediate their relationship (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). The

attachment itself can also be understood to be “mediated by looking, hearing and holding”, thus also modifying the quality of the relationship (Holmes, 1993, p. 67). Initially, the theory was largely developed through the study of the mother-infant relationship during infancy; however Bowlby regarded attachment as dynamic in nature and holding value throughout one’s life, despite the lack of studies that centre on attachment after infancy (Cicirelli, 1991; Greenberg, Cicchetti & Cummings, 1990). Thus, in light of the vast facets and influences that attachment theory may hold across one’s life span, it seemed necessary to impose focus on theoretical application toward the relevance of attachment in early childhood and the respective developmental transitions. The transition from home to preschool is an example of a normal developmental transition (Hanson et al., 2000). An introspective look at this transition entailed the clarification of two pivotal aspects; namely the distinction between attachment and attachment behaviour and the distinction between brief and major separations.

In terms of attachment, research has shown that preschool aged children, who were classified as insecurely attached during infancy, are more likely to manifest anxiety and distress upon separation from their caregiver, as opposed to those children who were regarded as securely attached during infancy (Cassidy & Main, 1984; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Hinde, 1982a). Erik Erikson also used these terms of secure and insecure attachment and provided an eight stage psychosocial explanation to understand development across the lifespan. Erikson’s theory asserted that at each stage there was a conflict which needed to be resolved, and a functional balance should be attained in order to attain healthy development. The first stage of psychosocial development was termed ‘trust versus mistrust’, which occurred during infancy (Fonagy & Target, 2003). This stage was characterised by the infant’s effort to establish trust through a process of establishing a secure attachment with a parent or caregiver. “Infants who are securely attached to their caregivers have confidence that the attachment figure will be available and accessible if needed” (Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005, p. 394). If the infant does not receive satisfaction from the attachment figure, the stage is not achieved and the child is left with feelings of mistrust and the development of an insecure attachment.

These divisions of 'secure' and 'insecure' attachment can be rooted in Mary Ainsworth's work, which provided insight into the types of attachment through her 'strange situation' procedure. Ainsworth et al. (1978) spoke of 'secure', 'insecure-avoidant', and 'insecure-ambivalent' attachment types, which prevailed in the presence of a stranger, an unfamiliar environment and new stimuli. The strange situation aroused attachment behaviour typical of the child's attachment type, which was dependent on their early infancy care. This attachment behaviour can be more explicitly described as "any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated or preferred individual" (Hinde, 1982a, as cited in Holmes, 1993, p. 68). Ainsworth et al. (1978, p. 19) concluded that "the presence or absence of overt attachment behaviour and the intensity with which it is manifested clearly depend on situational factors". Linking this to the developmental stage of preschool, the young child is both bombarded by strange and new stimuli during their transition from home to school, and anticipates the certain separation from their caregiver. Thus, it seems likely that both these factors contribute to an environment conducive for attachment to be perceived as threatened, and attachment behaviours to manifest.

The second aspect necessary for distinction is between brief and major separation. Ainsworth et al. (1978, p. 18) articulated brief separations as lasting for only a limited duration such as minutes or hours and also occur in a more familiar environment, whereas major separations last "for days, weeks, or months, during which a child may be cared for by unfamiliar persons in an unfamiliar environment". Moreover, young children beyond infancy may view the long, recurrent separations from their caregiver, typical of day care, as rejection or a sense of abandonment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Blehar, 1974).

It is possible that an infant who begins day care in the first year of life, before he has become attached to his mother-or at least before attachment has become well consolidated-may accustom himself more readily than older preschoolers to long, daily separations and be less apt to experience them as implying rejection or abandonment from the mother (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. 210).

Blehar (1974, as cited in Ainsworth et al., 1978, p. 209) also suggested that with regard to full-time day care, "many repetitions of minor separation may have effects similar in form

(although not in severity) to major separations". In linking this with the preschool arena, one needs to hold this 'separation' differentiation in mind, as well as the possibility for overlap between the two when making sense of attachment and the form of attachment behaviour, particularly with regard to separation anxiety experienced during the transition to preschool.

Following the above mentioned clarifications regarding the transition to preschool, which highlighted the perceived threats to attachment and respective attachment behaviours typical of major separations (in form, but not severity), Bowlby's notion of 'affectional bonds' comes to the fore. This can be described as a mutual effort between mother and child to sustain proximity and maintain the affectional bond between them. "On some occasions it is the mother who takes the initiative; on others, the child will instigate distance-reducing behaviours" (Hock, McBride & Gnezda, 1989, p. 794). Bowlby theorised that closeness and affection are appraised and perceived as pleasurable and joyous by both mother and child, in contrast to the displeasure and pain brought on by distance and threat of loss (Bowlby, 1973, as cited in Hock et al., 1989). "When a young child finds himself with strangers and without his familiar parenting figures, not only is he intensely distressed at the time, but his subsequent relationship with his parents is impaired, at least temporarily" (Bowlby, 1970, p. 81). Thus patterns of attachment behaviour emerge at separation and reunion, both of which aim to restore the bond between caregiver and child. Robertson and Bowlby (1952, as cited in Bowlby, 1973, p. 24) put forward a series of responses based on their research observations which they termed "protest, despair and detachment". To illustrate, it is typical for the child to engage in protest behaviours such as tantrums, crying and aggression upon the threat of separation (Bowlby, 1973). In the next phase of despair, the child appears to be "mourning the loss of the parent, appearing despondent and often showing depressed affect", and if separation persists for an extended period of time, the detachment phase follows, where mourning subsides and the child begins to "show anger and ambivalence toward the parent when reunification occurs" (Cummings & Cicchetti, 1990, p. 346).

Furthermore, the mutual quality of the bond has the potential to arouse particular responses in the mother. Mothers' attachment behaviours were characterised by an excessive display of attention and affirmation, such as hugging and kissing at separation and

reunion, particularly when reunion required an element of soothing because of the depressed affect expressed by the child, such as crying. In this way it can be understood that affectional bonds arouse some of the most intense emotional responses during the development, maintenance, interruption and renewal of these bonds (Bowlby, 1970). The transition from home to preschool has largely been identified as one of distressing emotional intensity, due to the perceived rejection and threat of loss of the parent by the child. Holmes (1993, p. 72) stated that “stress will lead to the enhancement of attachment behaviour even when the source of that stress is the attachment figure itself”. Thus this particular situationally aroused anxiety between the caregiver and child can be referred to as separation anxiety and can be understood as a disruption in the affectional bond.

From the literature on attachment theory, emphasis was also placed on the quality of the primary attachment (particularly the mother) as a crucial element for the development of future attachments and emotional adjustment (Pianta, 1997; Pillemer & McCartney, 1991).

A securely attached child will store an internal working model of a responsive, loving, reliable care-giver, and of a self that is worthy of love and attention and will bring these assumptions to bear on all other relationships. Conversely, an insecurely attached child may view the world as a dangerous place in which other people are to be treated with great caution, and see himself as ineffective and unworthy of love (Holmes, 1993, pp. 78-79).

In light of this theoretical underpinning, the preschool teacher may present as the first adult caregiver outside of the child’s familial world, and provide a developmental opportunity for the child to apply their internal working model to the teacher-child relationship. The transition further insinuates the pass over from one caregiver to another (parent to teacher) over different contexts (home to school) and as a result, the teacher role calls for the eventual development of some form of attachment between teacher and child, as the teacher becomes an additional significant adult in the child’s life.

From this perspective, attachment theory provided a suitable theoretical framework from which to understand separation anxiety within the primary caregiver-child relationship and the transition to preschool. The literature also proposed that the separation anxiety can be contained if an appropriate substitute can be provided, for example, the teacher. The

teacher ideally becomes a substitute attachment figure who can alleviate distress and provide the child with a level of suitable mothering in the absence of the child's real mother (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1973). In light of this possibility, Bowlby offered additional factors for consideration when attempting to understand a perceived threat to the attachment bond and aspects that may aid or exacerbate the situation.

Bowlby (1973) makes note of two factors for consideration; first the quality of the care provided to the child in the mother's absence, and secondly, the quality of relationships with the significant caregivers in the child's life prior to the transition. A teacher's perspective proves valuable in understanding these two above mentioned factors, due to the significant role they play during this developmental transition (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Their role permits them insight to the different presentations of behaviour, both in the handling of a child in the absence of the mother, as well as an observer position of parent-child interactions (Briggs-Gowan et al., 1996; Miller et al., 2003). Their key and favourable role in gaining such understanding has supported the decision to locate teachers as the desired sample, in an effort to better understand separation anxiety during this period.

2.3. Early Childhood Separation Anxiety

There are numerous milestones which an individual will encounter and overcome in their life in an effort to further their psychological and physical development. The entry into a school facility is a fundamental milestone that many have encountered. The preschool environment is a significant "context for early childhood development, and is the primary context in which many developmental tasks of the preschool years are mastered" (Miller et al., 2003, p. 682). However, change even when positive and beneficial can prove stressful and anxiety provoking. Anxiety experienced by a child during the transition to preschool is intrinsically linked to a perceived threat and fear regarding losing their loved one (an attachment figure) during separation, and about the worry of possible abandonment by their caregiver in an unfamiliar and demanding environment (Hofer, 2008; McIntyre & Wolf, 1973; Miller et al., 2003; Poulton, Milne, Craske & Mezie, 2001).

There are various characteristic behaviours displayed by the child upon separation and these are often influenced by the intensity of the separation experienced and the child's

perception of the environment. The entrance to preschool can expose the child to an overwhelming amount of new experiences, such as unfamiliar social rules and roles, thereby exponentially increasing their awareness of the world (Greenberg et al., 1990). Thus “it seems reasonable that so many changes in types of interaction with the surroundings could lead to feelings of anxiety in the child” (Krapp & Fink, 1992, p. 397). Most children will adjust to the new environment, new experiences and stimuli, however for those who do not adjust with ease and rather experience a transient or extended period of difficulty with adjusting; this can be highly emotional and a somewhat traumatic time (Laishley, 1983).

In addition, these struggling children may be at risk for childhood anxiety disorders, which present similarly in children as they do in adults, but they may show greater signs of irritability and inattention. “Anxiety disorders are one of the most prevalent categories of disorder amongst adults and children” (Hirshfeld-Becker & Biederman, 2002, p. 161). Therefore, literature in the field has focused almost exclusively on variables that identify and predetermine risk, providing a variety of preventative measures that parents can apply, as well as coping skills for both parent and child (Land & Norton, 1985). Research has also primarily been international and of a quantitative nature, thus there is an abundance of comparative and statistical information. This abundance of quantitative research respectively brings to light the lack of current qualitative studies present in the field of separation anxiety relating to the preschool period. This extends to a possible gap in the literature regarding the manner in which separation anxiety is experienced and understood during this time, particularly by the significant adults in the child's life.

In light of the overall existence of literature, separation anxiety has become a popular field for research and has therefore possibly increased the occurrence of premature diagnosis. Thus, it is important to recognise that it is developmentally appropriate for all young children to display symptoms of distress and anxiety when separated from their parent or primary caregiver. Laishley (1983) discussed the normative nature of separation anxiety during the transition to preschool and put forward the opinion that children need an adjustment period to make sense of, and link their old environment to their new environment and the demands that each brings. She also asserted that this adjustment period would vary across children, as well as be influenced and mediated by numerous other factors in the child's world. She also postulated that it would be concerning if young

children were able to make such a significant adjustment to new people and environments so easily, as that may allude to the quality of the child's internal attachment model. Cicirelli (1991) supported the idea of normative separation anxiety, as well as normative separation anxiety behaviours. Cicirelli (1991) stated that young children have only a limited capacity for understanding the goals and plans of their mother, as well as a limited capacity for verbal expression of their overwhelming feelings, thus proximity-seeking behaviours during separation can be seen as a developmentally appropriate means of moderating distressful emotions. In summary, separation anxiety symptoms can be common, developmentally and situationally appropriate and transient; however when factors of age and symptom persistence and severity come into play, there may be cause for concern for the development of separation anxiety disorder. Separation anxiety symptoms are a milder and briefer form of the disorder. "Separation anxiety disorder involves fear and avoidance of a variety of situations involving the common theme of separation (with school avoidance being only one of a number of avoided situations)" (Hagopian & Slifer, 1993, p. 272). Hagopian and Slifer (1993) also noted the value in differentiating between separation anxiety symptoms and separation anxiety disorder as it will aid to tailor interventions with respect to the degree of anxiety experienced by the child. Supporting literature in the field also states that it is vital to monitor a child's transition during this period for the possibility of a more pertinent underlying cause, as the manner in which a child transitions into preschool is a "critical social transition that can set the stage for a child's future school engagement and adjustment" (Miller et al., 2003, p. 695).

Literature on maternal separation anxiety has also been relatively extensive in the field of early childhood separation anxiety. Research suggests a positive relationship between maternal separation anxiety and children's anxieties and separations from their mother (Mayseless & Scher, 2000; Peleg, Halaby & Whaby, 2006). "Maternal separation anxiety is defined as an unpleasant emotional state tied to the separation experience: it may be evidenced by expressions of worry, sadness or guilt" (Hock et al., 1989, p. 794). This phenomenon can be understood by the postulation that when a woman takes on the role of a mother, ideally her identity is shifted from one that is individualistic and self serving, to one that nurtures and protects. In this way an attachment bond between mother and infant is established and progresses with the child's development (Ainsworth et al., 1978). When

this bond is challenged, the mother may respond in ways that arouse anxiety, first in herself which can lead to what is termed maternal separation anxiety, and then in her child who senses her anxiety. Cobham and Dadds (1999, p. 221) added that “mothers of anxious children seemed to selectively focus on future negative outcomes for their children”. Thus, mothers may be anxiously attempting to adjust to the transition as well, wondering how their child will like their new school, and whether or not he or she will get along with other children and be understood by the teachers. However, just as with early childhood separation anxiety, there is some degree of maternal separation anxiety that can be considered appropriate (Lutz & Hock, 2001). In linking with maternal anxiety, Hanson et al. (2000) spoke of the parental anxiety regarding concerns and decisions held by parents prior to and during the transition to preschool. He noted the precedence placed on educational and social aspirations, as well as the desire for activities that best met the needs of their child. Thus, one can anticipate a large degree of anxiety with regard to parental concerns of leaving their child, their child’s care and a large part of their child’s development to a stranger and a new school, which consequently harvests anxious fantasies of the unknown in the parent.

Furthermore, parents often watch the painful reaction of their child when they are removed from their care. The associated feelings of guilt, self hate and sorrow, may resonate within the parent, causing them to reflect on themselves and their actions toward the child. This direct linkage between maternal parenting self-efficacy and separation anxiety relates to Bandura’s self efficacy theory, which asserts that efficacy beliefs regulate an individual’s emotional experience and that beliefs in self-efficacy are an important personal resource in positive adaptation (Hsu & Sung, 2008). “When first-time mothers’ appraisal indicates that they are inefficacious in meeting the demands of parenting, they may view separation from the child as a threat to the fulfilment of their caregiving responsibilities” (Hsu & Sung, 2008, p. 299). Thus, the parent’s anxiety once again becomes a source of anxiety for the child. Parental influence on separation anxiety also extends to their involvement in the child’s life. Ehrenreich, Santucci and Weiner (2008) speak of the intrusive and overprotective parent who hampers the child’s sense of autonomy and capacity for decision making. “Parental intrusiveness is often enacted by providing excessive assistance in the child’s daily activities, such as dressing or bedtime routine, thus preventing the child from mastering age-

appropriate behaviours and activities” (Ehrenreich et al., 2008, p. 390). As a result, dependence is fostered and any attempt at separation from the caregiver gets responded to with avoidance and distress. In this way resistance to separation is likely to extend to other situations such as the entrance to preschool, possibly cultivating a distressing experience for both parent and child.

Research in the area of parent pathology has also been widely covered. The common thread through the various studies was the proposition that children of parents who are themselves experiencing pathological symptoms, place their child at greater risk for childhood disorders, such as the development of separation anxiety disorder. The two prominent disorders that present in the literature are anxiety disorders and depression in adulthood, with anxiety disorders elevating risk. Hirshfeld-Becker and Biederman (2002) attributed the higher risk to the parents own lack of appropriate coping skills in managing anxiety, which they then model to their child. Furthermore, anxiety disorders in mothers has also been identified as a contributing factor to the development of an insecure attachment between the mother and child, which was earlier discussed as a type of attachment style which is likely to arouse separation anxiety. Cobham and Dadds (1999, p. 230) suggested that “parental anxiety places anxious children at increased risk of having their anxiety maintained by the negative expectations their parents hold for them”. Moreover, one needs to consider the reasons a child is being placed in preschool, as the parents rationale may range from an age appropriate transition and voluntary choice, to a work-related and forced decision. The rationale supporting the child’s entry to preschool may be a factor of influence in the mother’s ability to separate from her child. Thus it is important for the teacher to gain an awareness of some of the expectations and concerns held by the parents, especially during the transition to preschool, as it may hold a lot of ambivalence for the parents as well. Such parent-teacher communication was described in a survey by Sharpe (1991), which revealed that parents want to be involved in their child’s education as well as be kept up to date with information concerning their child’s progress.

In addition to parental influence and the daily home environment, there are other life stressors that impact on the child’s sense of security. Changes in the child’s environment such as moving, bereavement or divorce can cause a child’s behaviour to change to one that is more clingy and dependent. Literature proposes that children locate their security and

stability in their caregivers and home, and when this foundation is challenged, the child over-compensates to stay within proximity of the parent.

An early stressful event may cause physical changes that influence the child's most developed coping abilities. The stressful experience may sensitise the child to future events; that is, an early experience of stress may serve to change the child's coping style in such a way as to increase vulnerability to, or give limited immunity to, later stressors (Rutter, 1983, as cited in Trad & Greenbelt, 1990, p. 33).

To complement the multiple causal and influencing factors researched, literature in the field also provided an overview of some of the symptomatic behaviours presented by the child during the transition. The behaviours exhibited can be categorised into covert and overt symptoms. Mansdorf (1981) identified somatic complaints, such as stomach-aches and headaches, as possible covert indications of physical distress or a means to avoid separation through sympathy. These behaviours can result in the mother feeling guilty for the child's distress or frustrated with the child's behaviour and her loss of control. For the concerned child, there was also the associated social and academic problem due to these symptomatic behaviours. "Longitudinal studies indicate that school refusal behaviour can lead to serious short-term problems such as, academic decline, alienation from peers, and family conflict" (Ehrenreich et al., 2008, p. 391). This would ultimately affect the child's development and education attainment. Ehrenreich et al. (2008) also described overt and covert separation reducing behaviours, such as avoidance and dependence, which is illustrated by the child running away from a teacher and hanging onto the parent; as well as regressive behaviour such as thumb-sucking and wanting to be carried, and lastly, oppositional behaviours like kicking, screaming and throwing tantrums.

Often, the impacts of separation anxiety extend from the school environment to the home relations as well. Frustration from the child's behaviour can frequently lead to spousal disharmony, with the increased risk of conflict and neglect within the marital relationship. This can usually be tracked to the intertwinement of the mother-child bond in an effort to soothe the child's distress, resulting in the father becoming isolated.

In light of the literature presented on the difficulties experienced by both parent and child during the transition to preschool, it seemed essential to link this with the individual that

receives and takes responsibility for the child, i.e. the teacher. As distressing as the separation situation may present itself, the reality remains that the parent needs to leave the school premises and the child needs to adapt to the institutions of the social world. "By leaving children with the teacher, the parent explicitly or implicitly tells the child that the teacher is to be his or her main person until the parent returns" (Howes & Hamilton, 1992, p. 860). This notion is supported by Pianta et al. (1997) who postulates that the teacher can become a source of nurturing and modelling for the child in the absence of the primary caregiver. Thus "the teacher-child relationship may serve important support functions for young children in their attempts to adjust to the school environment" (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 61).

The teacher may also present as the first adult of authority other than the child's parents and therefore has the potential to be the most significant adult figure within the school environment. This role enables teachers to provide a rich and invaluable source of information about the child within the school context (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Furthermore Miller et al. (2003, p. 694) maintains the idea of their indispensable position, especially during the time of transition, as they "are able to reflect on their observations with the child as they unfold in the naturalistic classroom context over time". Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) also noted that many of the developmental tasks for achievement at the preschool age was linked to and influenced by the quality of this relationship, and in this way the teacher-child relationship both contributes to and signals school adjustment. The significant role of the teacher was further confirmed in a study by Kalin and Steh (2010) regarding teacher-parent relations. The results revealed that parents rate a child's relationship with a teacher as most important, surpassing concerns for positive child-peer relations and learning achievement.

In respect of the above mentioned literature concerning early childhood separation anxiety and the toll it takes on parents, children and teachers, developments have been made to assist concerned parties in coping with and preventing its occurrence. Winnicott (1971) hypothesised that transitional objects serve as a symbolic representation of the mother. These unique objects share an intimate relationship with the child and assist in soothing them in the absence of the mother. A child who has such an object is better able to cope with the distress of separation, because of the symbolic representation it holds. Other strategies of coping include talking to the child about preschool and what could be

expected, avoiding prolonged goodbyes and rather adopting and maintaining a set ritual for departures, as well as verbally and explicitly informing the child of the parents return or even more formally, creating a transitional programme including all parties involved from both the old and new contexts (Gelfer & McCarthy, 1994; Hirshfeld-Becker & Biederman, 2002). Ehrenreich et al. (2008) also proposed more long term solutions for more serious cases, such as cognitive behavioural therapy to address irrational thoughts and dysfunctional behaviours in both parent and child. This was often simultaneously approached with promoting the mother-child bond and enhancing a more secure attachment style that promoted confidence and a sense of safety in the child, even when the parent was not present for brief periods of time. It appears that the research containing preventative and coping mechanisms are creative and practical, however the down-fall is that not everyone has access to these strategies and not all strategies are fool proof.

In conclusion, the study returns to Pianta (1997) who noted the wealth of research that supported the mother's role in the development of her child's competence, as well as the influence that the teacher relationship can have on a child's school adjustment and social relationships. "Thus, relationships between children and caregiving adults-parents and teachers, warrant considerable attention from professionals and researchers in early childhood" (Pianta, 1997, p. 18). Thus when separation anxiety does occur, such as in the transition to preschool, it seems necessary and beneficial to explore how the key adult within the school arena (the teacher) makes sense of the separation anxiety, arrives at conclusions about themselves and their role, engages with the child and the parent, and develops working approaches in their field. These critical aspects have been approached and addressed in this study and add to the current body of literature from a teacher's perspective on early childhood separation anxiety, by shifting from the more common teacher scaled reports, to one that offers more qualitative and rich information on the matter of concern.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Thus far, the study has been presented in light of its rationale, aims and theoretical and conceptual framework. This chapter intends to clarify the methodological framework by which the study was executed, highlighting aspects such as the studies design, desired sample, data procedures, self reflexivity and ethical considerations.

3.2. Research Design

The research project was conducted from a qualitative and interpretive perspective. The qualitative aspect of the study entailed that the researcher develops meaningful results on the phenomenon of interest, sourced from information provided by the participants interviewed (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999). Adhering to this point, the researcher was able to collect a rich pool of data, comprised of various unique and personal perceptions about early childhood separation anxiety during the transition to preschool. Moreover, the rich data yielded by the qualitative angle, also created an opportunity to tap into topics that perhaps would not have been accessible from a quantitative perspective. The study was also categorised as an exploratory study which according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) is an investigation of a less researched part of social life. The interpretive paradigm supported the exploratory nature of the study as it also sought the discovery of subjective encounters which have resulted in specific viewpoints and experiences. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 17) note that “researchers working from interpretive traditions value experience and perspective as important sources of knowledge”. Thus the overarching research design highly endorsed the aims of the study, as it was not a quantifiable conclusion that was sought after, but rather an exclusive experience and understanding of preschool teachers to a public phenomenon.

3.3. Measures

The conduction of more structured interviews generally articulates a uniform set of questions to each and every participant (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this way there is minimal deviation from the topic, as the interviewer will frequently guide the conversation back to a focus whenever it strays. This study however, adopted a less structured approach to interviewing and rather conducted semi-structured interviews (Appendix D). According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) these are similar to structured interviews in that they rely on particular questions to steer the discussion, however this is done in a less rigid fashion. Rather, participants were asked a series of questions from a pre-prepared interview schedule and were additionally given the space to talk about areas that they thought were significant or interesting to them (Kelly, 2006). Adhering to these points, the study was able to explore and gather the views and opinions of the teachers guided by the interview schedule, as well as allowed for participants to include any knowledge or experience that they deemed important with regard to the topic of research. Furthermore, the semi-structured style of interviewing allowed for a degree of diversity across interviews, whereby some interviews with a particular participant would encompass discussions or questions that were not common to other interviews or the collection of interviews as a whole (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Diversity of data was beneficial to this qualitative type of research as it exposed the researcher to areas that were not covered or operationalised by the researcher and in such instances the semi-structured format also allowed 'unplanned' discussions to be carried out in a more naturalistic manner (Barriball & While, 1994; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

The interview schedule used in the study was specifically designed for the purpose of collecting data from preschool teachers on matters of early childhood separation anxiety. More precisely, the schedule explored teachers' general understanding of separation anxiety, with regard to factors they consider salient to the generation and maintenance of separation anxiety and the manner in which they address it. It also endeavoured to highlight any meanings, attitudes and perceptions held by teachers that were attached to their occupationally related encounters. The interview schedule consisted of fifteen items, three of which also had sub-questions. These questions guided the participant's responses in an

effort to access their perceptions about the arrangements and presentations of separation anxiety during the transition to the preschool environment.

The interview schedule was a qualitatively inspired adaptation of an existing quantitative scale called the 'School Anxiety Scale-Teachers Report' (Lyneham, Street, Abbott & Rapee, 2007). The 'School Anxiety Scale-Teachers Report' was designed for the child's class teacher to assess levels of anxiety in the child as they present within the school context. The scale statements were clustered and categorised according to prominent themes. This was carried out with the intention to form open ended questions that tap into the original behaviours identified in the scales, while still allowing for open responses, occupational experiences and interpretations from the participants.

The teacher's interview schedule centred on their experiences, understandings and encounters with separation anxiety and included categories that call for their perceptions on areas such as:

- Current knowledge held and means of attainment
- Identifying and distinguishing factors for separation anxiety and separation anxiety disorder
- Behavioural observations
- Appropriate responses to difficult separation situations and aftermath
- Making sense of a child and their symptomatic behaviour
- Significance held to contextual factors (e.g. home)
- Mother-child interactions
- School Impacts
- Perceptions about prognosis

The above mentioned categories aimed to gather perceptual and therefore subjective data from the participants. Thus, the perceptual approach to questioning supported the study which did not serve to investigate separation anxiety, but rather aimed to understand teachers' subjective experiences, understandings and encounters with separation anxiety during the specific transition to preschool.

3.4. Participants

Marks (1987, as cited in Poulton et al., 2001) postulated that separation anxiety ought to be researched at an age which is regarded as no longer normative, beyond an approximate thirty months of age. This proposed an interesting dynamic, as existing literature in the field has hypothesised that certain developmental transitions such as the entry into preschool does arouse normative separation anxiety in this age group (Cicirelli, 1991; Laishley, 1983). It was this element of discrepancy that motivated the study's location of its participants in the preschool arena, as the teachers' personal experiences would shed light on how they have come to make sense of separation anxiety in early childhood in light of existing literature.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) convenience sampling methods entails particular elements for consideration, such as the potential participant's availability, their expert knowledge of the area for research and their voluntary desire to participate in the study. In consideration of this definition, non-probable convenience sampling was thought to be most suitable for the study and was utilised to gain access to the desired sample. Four private preschools within the Johannesburg region were approached and informed about the study. After consideration of the parameters of the project and an agreement to participate, each school principal then provided a permission letter (Appendix F) for research to be conducted within their schools and for the employed teachers to be approached. A desired sample of ten was considered by the researcher, however due to the enthusiasm of responses, thirteen teachers chose to take part in the research. Participant information letters (Appendix A) were handed over to the principal for distribution to all teachers responsible for teaching the three years and older age group classes. A detachable interview consent form (Appendix B) also accompanied each information letter and completion of this form confirmed a teacher's voluntary participation in the study. The interview consent form was to be completed and placed in a sealed, confidential box provided by the researcher, which was located in the main office at the school. Approximately one week later this box was collected and all teachers who had returned signed interview consent forms were then contacted to negotiate and schedule interviews. The overall interview programme developed in a manner where all teachers from a respective school mutually agreed to conduct all their interviews on one day. Thus, the total

number of interviews was conducted over three days. The audio-recording consent forms (Appendix C) were given and signed by each participant before their interview was conducted.

Current research on early childhood separation anxiety has centred largely on international participants. The current research explored teacher understandings of separation anxiety from a South African context, however it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current research design. Due to the nature of the modest and specific sample group, the findings of this study are not generalisable to the larger population and are rather limited to the Johannesburg area. For the project a modest sample was suitable, given the exploratory nature of the study. Durrheim (2006) highlighted the importance of the actual participants that make up the sample and thereby affecting the sample size. He stated that exploratory research benefited from the interviewing of the key informants, thus influencing the quality of the sample as opposed to the quantity required. Moreover, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) found that small qualitative samples allow for the gathering of fuller and richer data, such as processes of coping and the meanings held by individuals which motivate personal attitudes and perspectives. Thus, because the study does not aim to produce statistical findings, the small sample of key informants (preschool teachers teaching in a preschool) provide ample rich data to produce meaningful results. Furthermore, the study utilised thematic content analysis which according to Braun and Clarke (2006) requires rigorous and intense phases for analysis and is therefore best corresponded with smaller sample groups to enhance the richness and quality of the data collected.

The final sample consisted of thirteen teachers who were employed by three of the four schools approached. None of the teachers at the fourth school volunteered to participate in the research. The participants' occupational positions ranged from teaching three year olds to six year olds. All participants were female and had a minimum of two years teaching experience within the preschool field. Milgram and Sciarra (1974) express that the male preschool teacher is very rare and highly sought after. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this study, however the literature does note that preschool teachers are predominantly female, which supports the female-only sample acquired. Furthermore, for descriptive purposes only, it was noted that of the thirteen teachers, nine were White, three were Indian and one was Black.

3.5. Data Collection

Following the confirmation of voluntary participation by each teacher and the attainment of interview consent forms, meetings for face-to-face interviews were scheduled. While the option to meet off the school premises to maximise confidentiality was offered, each participant chose to have their interview conducted on the school premises, in an unoccupied classroom arranged by the school principal. Participating teachers within a respective school further opted to have all their interviews conducted on the same day, in an attempt to cause minimal disruption to the schools daily programme. The teachers meeting preferences were respected and this consideration was supported by Britten (1995), who stated that interviews should be conducted at the interviewees' availability and convenience, as successful negotiation of interview time and setting can have an influence on the content offered by the participant. Each teacher was also given a brief introduction to the aims of the research, as well as the nature of the semi-structured interview. It was also mentioned that with the use of a semi-structured interview there would be questions to guide the interview, but at the same time they were free to relay anything they felt was significant to them or any experiences or perspectives they held that they felt would best illustrate their encounters and understandings of separation anxiety. Time was also allocated for any questions before beginning the interview. The teacher interviews were initially proposed to last for the duration of approximately fifteen to twenty minutes, however due to the variations in personality, openness to share and occupational experience, the interview times varied and ranged from approximately twenty minutes to one hour. Interview sessions were also audio-recorded to enhance the accuracy of the raw data collected for the analysis that followed (Kelly, 2006). Information concerning the use of audio-recording equipment, as well as the destruction of data collected was explicitly stated in the information letter given to each participant prior to their confirmation of participation in the study. The information letter specified the aspects of consent required to carry out interviews and for the use of audio-recording equipment. Furthermore, the letters stated that the raw data collected will be kept in a double locked cabinet in the research supervisor's office for a period of two years if publications occur from the study or for a period of six years if no publications arise, and then only will it be destroyed. Time was also allocated for addressing any questions or concerns; however no participant had any

questions, comments or objections concerning critical matters of consent or the study in general, before, during or after their interview.

3.6. Data Analytic Procedures

Once the data was collected in the form of audio-recordings it was transcribed and analysed by the researcher. A thematic analysis technique was used to maximise the researcher's ability to capture the major recurrent themes and meanings communicated by the teachers in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Franzosi, 2004). The selection of thematic analysis was further supported by its ability to potentially present an account of the text which is not only rich and comprehensive, but also complex (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thus allowing for the construction of both individual teacher perceptions, as well as perceptions that may link to a form of shared teacher experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a six step process for the conduction of thematic analysis which has been succinctly presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Phases of thematic analysis performed by the researcher (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87; Goldberg, 2010, p. 41)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising oneself with one's data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data. Immersing oneself in one's data and becoming familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Distinguishing between main themes, sub-themes and those that need to be discarded.

4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. It is important that by the end of this phase one can clearly define what one's themes are and what they are not. Names need to be concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

The process of analysis assisted in applying a degree of structure to the findings, allowing for a composite and insightful report of patterns and salient views, ideas and opinions surrounding the topic area, as well as the topic in relation to the participants, i.e. about themselves, the concerned phenomenon as well as their role as a teacher. The information yielded by the approach supported the notion that the study was not aiming to gather factual objective data, but the subjective experiences, understandings and encounters of each unique individual relative to their occupational experience. With this data, the core aspects experienced during the occurrence were able to be identified, highlighted and

interpreted in the context of relationships and functionality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly it is borne in mind that when interviews are conducted in qualitative studies, there is a regular interaction between the researcher and the participant. Thus, the researcher can influence the research process at various instances such as in the analysis of the data, its interpretation or in other more general areas of the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Thus it was important for the researcher to engage in a continuous process of reflexivity in an effort to preserve a critical and systematic stance during analysis with regard to the emergence of interesting and significant themes, but also to the study in its entirety.

3.7. Self Reflexivity

“Reflexivity is the process through which researchers recognise, examine, and understand how their own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 120). The researcher chose to approach teachers as they were the key informants to the topic of research; however it seemed that the teachers also shared an awareness of their pivotal position. It is possible that the researcher was seen as a fellow professional outside of their field, which in turn may have influenced them to want to come across as competent and in control of the challenges they encountered as effective teachers. In this way, the teachers who were interviewed may have felt that the interview was in part about how they perceived separation anxiety, but also in part a sort of evaluation of them as teachers. From this sense the teachers were observed to come across as slightly territorial of their area of expertise and were noticeably loyal and cheering of their respective school. This meant that there was little room for discussion of the more ‘negative talk’ about their teaching and their school, but rather this ‘negative talk’ was largely shifted onto the parents of the children or ‘other’ schools. This impacted on the study in that perhaps there was a lack of information gathered on the one extreme of the continuum, which would have supported a more critical stance of teachers; however at the same time it is important to recognise the contextual factors of the study. The sample consisted of three private schools and it may be the composition of a private school, which offers more resources or better working environments that aided the teachers and helped them to build their confidence about their effectiveness as teachers. In a study by Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000), it was also noted that teacher efficacy is mediated by the

respective teacher's perceptions about their professional identity. This statement would support the observed role related confidence in the teachers, as each possibly wanted to come across as an effective teacher to the researcher.

Moreover, although there did not seem to be any discrepancies in the difference in age between the researcher and participants or the commonality of gender, race did seem to have some influence. For those teachers who did mention race as a factor for consideration in their perceptions of separation anxiety, race difference or commonality did not appear to influence their capacity to disclose their thoughts and experiences. However, it was noted that when they spoke, teachers of a different race to the researcher, tried to be politically correct and non judgemental, whereas the teachers of the same race to the researcher appeared more comfortable in their frankness and judgement, and perhaps felt race similarity permitted an allowance for colluding.

It was also mentioned in the participant information letter that the researcher is a psychology student. This information did not seem to influence the teachers to disclose information the researcher may want to hear, rather than what they felt was important. However it did seem to allow a sense of comfort for the teachers to venture into their own psychological language, where they relayed theories and concepts which they assumed the researcher could understand as a psychology student. Perhaps this links to a sense of identification and possibly wanting to 'win' the researcher over, or even further to impress the researcher about the depth of their understandings and of knowing best. In light of these possibilities, this observation once again spoke to the desired portrayal of efficacy of the teacher.

Lastly, the 'negative talk' about other schools and the childrens' parents was highlighted. Even though this talk was usually stated as unintentional, this did place the respective school and the teacher in a better light. It was possible that there was an element of seeing the study as a form of marketing of their school. However, due to this consistent presentation across schools, this again may be linked to their professional identity and was therefore an important factor for consideration when making meaning of their gathered perceptions.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of preschool teachers and the ways in which they made sense of and responded to separation anxiety during a child's transition to preschool. Ethical clearance was attained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (School of Human and Community Development) and an ethics clearance certificate (Appendix E) was provided. The protocol number is MCLIN/11/005 IH. Thereafter, permission was attained from the respective schools as discussed in the 'participants' section.

The venue for the interviews was mutually agreed upon. All the teachers from a respective school opted to have their interviews at their school. This did pose an ethical concern with regard to anonymity; however the teachers felt that the school premises was convenient and promoted minimal disruption to their working day. Thus it seemed that confidentiality of information was considered important, however confidentiality of identity with regard to their choice of participation was dispensable.

In addition to the information letters, separate consent forms were signed for consent to be interviewed and to be audio-recorded. Details of the use of direct quotations; anonymity of participants in the final report and data destruction was noted in both the respective information letters and consent forms. The participants were also informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that there were no risks or benefits as to whether they participated or not. Also, because the participants were all adults, they were able to consent for themselves.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1. Introduction

A thematic content analysis was performed in order to ascertain both prominent and sub-themes within the data collected from the thirteen participants. This was with the intent to construct an overview of the experiences and perspectives held by teachers around the phenomenon of early childhood separation anxiety during the transition to preschool. The analysis was conducted from an essentialist/realist perspective and used semantic thematic analysis in order to allow for a greater understanding of the meanings held, motivations formed and occupational experiences accumulated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This chapter put forward the results of the study in relation to the two prominent themes identified; namely 'challenges encountered' and 'helpful qualities in the caregiver role'. These two overarching themes were further analysed and include a number of sub-themes. 'Challenges encountered' included sub-themes: 'the anxious child', 'the difficult mother', and 'change and the strange'. 'Helpful qualities in the caregiver role' included sub-themes: 'knowledge', 'coping through creativity and distraction', 'calm and patient', and 'love and security'. Both prominent themes formed an integrated understanding and career-orientated position with regard to the ways in which teachers' approached separation anxiety within the school context. It was also apparent that many of the sub-themes raised in this study were in keeping with other current research in the field. However, amongst these familiar findings are a few which provided new insight to the larger body of literature within a qualitative and South African context.

4.2. Challenges Encountered

In analysing the work related experiences and perspectives of teachers with regard to separation anxiety during the transition to preschool, there emerged an array of challenges in the encounter. These challenges appeared to filter through emotional, mental, physical, social and relational realms for not only the child, but the parent and teacher as well. In this way, separation anxiety was described as having a range of forms and impacts across different contexts. Teachers reported that the challenges encountered with an anxious child

were possibly intensified by secondary factors, which in turn were described to produce additional challenges to the already difficult transition process. However, despite the difficulty associated with an anxious child, this state was unanimously regarded as transient and only rarely encountered as a problem which warranted professional assistance. The transient nature of separation anxiety in the preschool arena did however seem to vary from case to case and therefore also influenced the spectrum of challenges experienced by teachers. A common conception held by all the teachers was that even though there was no recipe to predict a child's risk for experiencing separation anxiety, they reported that children, who are transitioning from home to preschool with no previous engagement with other child care institutions, generally have a greater risk of undergoing separation anxiety when entering into their respective preschools.

Extract 1: Participant 9:

I think it's the first time they go to school. The very... very first time, if it's a two year old or six year old, I think if you've never been in a school before and you go for the very... very first time I think that's the worst.

In addition to the child's individual predisposing factors, the information collected also seemed to imply that the dissipation of anxiety (however it may vary from case to case) was influenced by the ceaseless efforts of the teacher to overcome the challenges they were presented with. Such efforts are captured and discussed in the second major theme. To begin however, the sub-themes identified from the teachers' reports regarding the challenges encountered are discussed.

4.2.1. The anxious child

According to the participants, challenges encountered with the anxious child (as a result of separation) tend to change during the course of the day. Bearing the transient nature of separation anxiety in mind, this also means that not all children experiencing separation anxiety present in the same way, for the same duration or the same intensity. The descriptions offered by teachers can be categorised into three phases. According to the teachers' observations, this typically begins with the morning phase, where the child has left

home for school and is then passed from mother to teacher. This is commonly said to be where the first indications of separation anxiety manifest. This primarily consists of acts of distress and perhaps in desperate aggression from the child, toward the mother, the teacher or the self, in protest of separation. Acts of distress were described by the participants as the child not wanting to get ready in the morning, crying, sometimes to an almost hysterical intensity, screaming and clinging to the mother's body or to the car seat. Whereas in the case of aggression, the anxious child protests separation from the mother by spitting, kicking or even removing clothes. In each of the mentioned categories, the child may exhibit one, or a collection of acts, producing tantrum like behaviour.

Extract 2: Participant 1:

I'd say about 90% of children do cry, irrespective of their age, irrespective of circumstances at home, do cry on their first day of school. And most definitely on their third day, in fact the child actually knows that when they wake up in the morning and they get dressed and they're now ready to go off in the car, the child knows where he's going and will start crying already from home and he'll cry all the way to school.

Extract 3: Participant 8:

They...they cry a lot. Then it's always kicking and maybe slapping and pinching the teacher, mmm that's how they, like they're having a...like a tantrum.

Extract 4: Participant 10:

...kicking, screaming, spitting, biting, sometimes the shoes and the clothes are out...

In light of the illustrations of protest in the above extracts, according to the participants, the child often becomes a challenge to manage and on occasion, even the teachers get caught in the cross fire. However in an effort to fulfil their role, most teachers reported that they then remove the child from the parent's proximity and sight in order to preserve the child from further anguish and devastation.

Many of the teachers reported that they then try to engage the anxious child in a variety of exciting stimuli to distract them from thoughts of separation and the associated distress.

This begins the second phase where the child either adjusts to the exciting offerings of the school or continues to struggle with thoughts of separation. In the former, the fun activities of the day, together with the largely transient nature of separation anxiety, allows the child to accept the teacher as a safe and secure figure, as well as the school as a place for fun and excitement. In these cases the child can be said to only have experienced very brief separation anxiety mostly at the point of separation. However in the latter, where separation anxiety persists into the school day, its manifestation transforms, elucidating a new set of impacts and challenges for the teacher and the child. During the school day this type of anxious child dwells on the 'loss' of their mother. Thus the preschool programme, which is mainly characterised by a variety of creative and energetic expressional activities, seems remote to the child who is still mourning the loss of their parent. In this phase the anxious child was described by most participants as having a low mood, a loss of appetite and being seemingly distracted and disengaged from the environment. The child was also hypothesised by the teachers to be daydreaming about the loss and therefore could not concentrate on what was required of them in the class. In addition, the participants relayed awareness that this type of child may have difficulty feeling emotionally and socially secure in the school and become withdrawn and not participate in scheduled activities or interact with peers. It was a lone account from one teacher who mentioned regressive behaviours as also a symptom of separation anxiety, with particular mention of urinary incontinence.

Extract 5: Participant 2:

Mmm totally, totally it... it disrupts everything they do at this age because they've got to be emotionally secure, then they've got to be socially secure then they've got to be academically secure. If they're not emotionally secure you can't go up to social and you can't go straight up to academics, you've got to get that emotional right.

Extract 6: Participant 13:

Ja, there is definitely some of them that don't want to interact, they don't want to play with friends, they don't want to take part, they rather sit and cry all day.

Extract 7: Participant 4:

Yes, they will cry the whole day, they will decide not to talk to you. If a child is even potty trained, he will decide okay today is my day to shower myself. Err they will refuse to eat, they will fight with others to try and take out all this anger and you know, ja things like that.

In addition to the above mentioned presentations, some children tend to express more anxious behaviours such as the perpetual enquiry regarding their parents return.

Extract 8: Participant 12:

...they'll ask you certain question, what time is my mommy going to come? What time is my daddy going to come?

Extract 9: Participant 9:

During the day, um they will come to us and ask me, 'teacher is my mommy coming back? Teacher when is mommy coming back? Teacher what time is', even though they can't read time, they don't know about time, but they'll still ask, 'teacher what time is my mommy coming to fetch me? Teacher will my mommy come and fetch me, teacher is my mommy here yet, teacher can you phone my mommy to see if she still coming' that's what I find, most of them do... do that on the first day even if they come from a different school, they still tend to do that. 'Teacher please phone my mommy and ask her when is she coming, what time is she coming, if she's coming she must promise me she's coming back'...

Two teachers also expressed encounters with somatic complaints, which held no physiological grounding.

Extract 10: Participant 6:

Yes, ja, ja. You know they can really test you, now how far are you going to go um because they will ask you maybe when they're sick, when they tell you 'oh no I'm sick I want to go home', then you take their temperature and oh no they're fine. They trying to test you; are you going to phone my mommy or not...

Extract 11: Participant 9:

...they tend to tell me, 'teacher please my mommy, tell her she must come and fetch me, because I feel sick I want to be with her', so even then they still do it.

Thus teachers describe an array of symptomatic behaviour, each of which brings new challenges and consequences within the school environment. This calls for the teacher to remain attentive to the child in an effort to bring the child out of such disconnected states and interact with peers and in activities. In success of the further attempts by the teacher, the child will adjust and the day will proceed as scheduled, but in the case where the child remains fixed in a state of despair, it requires constant monitoring of the child and experimental approaches to connect with the child.

Lastly, teachers spoke about the reunion phase which marked the end of separation between mother and child at the end of the school day. The participants described the reunion as a very ambivalent time for both mother and child. Teachers explained that the anxious children exhibit feelings of happiness and relief, which they have observed to typically manifest as excitement and crying. For most teachers, they are not sure how the mixture of feelings can be explained, but few postulate ideas such as the child's relief to be reunited and not abandoned by the parent; or seeing the parent reminds and re-awakens feelings of the prior traumatic separation; or pent up emotion of the day is released. In some cases, teachers take the child's response personally and see the reaction as perhaps something they have missed in dealing with the child.

Extract 12: Participant 12:

...so long he was so fine with me and playing and he was so happy and they, you seen just the mother and he just wants to run to the mother and cry like, 'mommy' and then you'll feel what went wrong, where did we miss it, what did we miss that...why is he just running, maybe it was inside him but he didn't want it to show that he's experiencing, still he's missing his mother and you just blow it out...

Some teachers saw this time as an opportunity to show the mothers how they have assisted their child to adjust and therefore are disappointed when the child cries during reunion. They explained that this was because the child's reaction either contradicted their efforts to

settle them successfully or it prompted worry in the mother that their child remained in an emotional state the entire day.

Extract 13: Participant 1:

Yeah brings it all back, this is my mommy, my mommy didn't desert me, um ja and then the mother sometimes finds it very difficult to believe that her child actually did manage to play during the course of the day because she left her child crying and now she comes to fetch her little one and the little one is now crying again, as she sets eyes on her mom so ja, the whole thing.

Extract 14: Participant 9:

Yes okay some of them if they are the ones that start for the first day, they will, if they will cry in the mornings, they'll have a big tantrum in the morning, they'll be fine during the day. As soon as they see mommy, they burst out in tears again, then you're like, what's wrong, then I can get into a stress, I'm like 'what's wrong you've been fine the whole day' and I'm like 'mommy I promise you she was not crying the whole day' then all of a sudden that child will just breakdown and cry. Then the mother will think, 'what's been happening the whole day, has my child been crying the whole day, has she been, what's been happening that this child is crying now when I get here'.

It appears that even in the last phase of reunion, the teacher was challenged by the anxious child and their somewhat contradictory behaviours. This not only made it difficult for the teacher to ascertain the child's level of adjustment, but it also seemed to create a degree of anxiety in the teacher. This anxiety seemed to link to concern about how the mother may perceive them and their efficacy in their role. It was also apparent from the participants' accounts, that the attentiveness required by the teacher for a child experiencing separation anxiety was quite an exhausting process, as it required a robust engagement of the teacher to meet the challenges produced by the anxious child, as well as help the anxious child out of their own challenges.

4.2.2. The difficult mother

The teachers identified the mother as a key figure in developing an understanding regarding the occurrence of separation anxiety during the transition to preschool. All the teachers disclosed that they were able to empathise with mothers of anxious children, but often this empathetic position was coupled with a level of frustration. This frustration was linked to particular acts on the mother's part, which teachers thought to contribute to the child's distress upon separation. As in the sub-theme of the anxious child, challenges encountered with the difficult mother are not limited to a single meeting, but rather vary over time and context, and similarly differ from case to case. To elaborate on this sub-theme it is important to mention that teachers found parents, notably mothers, to be just as challenging to manage as the anxious child, as often mothers themselves are very anxious and become quite emotional and uncontained. Largely the mother's anxiety stems from a reluctance to separate from their child and the concerns they hold about their child's well being. However the trauma and possible guilt aroused in the mother whilst watching her child in distress, is also fundamental to her emotional state. Thus, a somewhat recursive pattern is created between mother and child.

In the extracts below, the teachers put forward their experiences and thoughts of what mothers may be concerned about and what may contribute to their anxious state. These concerns seem to centre on the child's well being, such as the child's emotional state (especially in light of a child who is very distressed in the morning), the child's adjustment to school, and the interactions with teachers and peers.

Extract 15: Participant 3:

I think always you know if they will get fed properly, if they will be okay without mom and dad, because obviously they've been with mom and dad for the first say, a year or two of their life um, how they'll be? With their children, um will they bite or whatever, will they wrestle.

Extract 16: Participant 11:

...how's the teacher going to cope with them, is this teacher good or she's bad, because if you leave your child whole day to school, you don't know how the teacher is...

Extract 17: Participant 9:

Of moms, mostly they will ask you about how you discipline a child, because most of them I think are scared we're going to beat the life out of their children so I think that's the most, the worst thing that they think and then they will like um will my child eat during that day, will she have enough water, will she, will he or she be clean enough when I get, come to fetch them. And cos they tend to phone and tell us please take my child's jersey off, like we don't know what we're doing you see they'll like, 'teacher just take his jersey off, because I'm feeling a bit hot so I think they feeling hot', so just take their jersey off for me and like half an hour later they'll phone you, 'just put his jacket back on because I'm feeling cold so I think their cold, so just put the jacket back on', so they tend to do that a lot with us.

All the participants seemed aware of the concerns held by mothers and through the extracts the multiple areas for parental concern were highlighted. Moreover, most of the teachers seemed aware that parental concern around the quality of the child care is an expected feature of the mother's anxiety. However the challenge arises when the mother is anxious and the separation is too overwhelming for her and her child. At this point of emotional intensity, it reportedly becomes more challenging for the teacher to calm both parent and child, while still meeting the rest of her role associated duties. This anxious and emotionally overwhelmed mother was described as both a source of empathy and frustration which was earlier discussed. Teachers express that they have empathy for the mother and the difficult process she is involved in. However all the participants felt that when the mother's emotional state serves as a trigger to upset a stable child or perpetuates responses of an anxious child, feelings of frustration grow, as the mother's state only serves to intensify and complicate the situation. Despite the frustrations encountered, teachers remain true to respecting the mother and her choice of response and accommodating for the fact that it is her child.

Extract 18: Participant 4:

...you know these little ones, they are small but they think fast than us. You know that, they think fast than us, so if your child see, 'okay mommy is also not comfortable with me being here, so I'm also not comfortable' so you see, but if you show your child that I need you to be here because of this and that, your child is going to adjust more fast, yes.

Extract 19: Participant 1:

...sometimes you have children who... who actually want to mother their parents, who want to nurture their parents because they know that their parent is upset, so they actually don't want to leave their parent, because they know that that parent is very very upset.

Extract 20: Participant 13:

Then you got to accommodate them, you got to accommodate them, it is, it is their child so work with them. Let them work with you... you and you be patient. And that can get frustrating but, it is their child so you got to work with them...

Teachers further postulate other reasons for the mother's anxious state, such as an inexperienced or single mother, whom they empathise with more.

Extract 21: Participant 5:

Sometimes I feel parents are maybe a bit, I don't know, maybe they don't realise what separation anxiety does to the children um and they don't know how to handle it, I think that's, its just at not knowing, the unknown ja. Especially if it's your first child you know.

Extract 22: Participant 9:

...because tend to find that with the younger mothers, they tend to really cry even worse than the child and I, I have to be like just stop it, because if you don't stop they won't stop. Or, turn around and walk away, ja then they will see okay fine, mommy is

fine so I will be fine. And then you have to now be stern with the mommy and with the child.

In addition, many of the teachers observed that first-time mothers had a tendency to spoil their child, to encourage and maintain a close and somewhat enmeshed bond between mother and child. This made it difficult for both of them to separate when transitioning to preschool. Similarly, mothers who had a tendency to 'baby' their child were also seen as a contributing factor to an anxious child, as they do not promote independence in their child. For a few of the teachers, preschool was a place for the child to establish such a level of independence, and thus 'babied' children become anxious at the suggestion of separation from their mother.

Extract 23: Participant 13:

Instead of letting the child just, mmm you know experience new things and start, you know there's some parents who tend to baby the children too much, they are big already, but they still you know, instead of you know, just let them start doing things for themselves. Make them more responsible.

Extract 24: Participant 2:

A lot of parents don't like the independence. You know they like to be, like to be wanted and needed all the time and the child never gets independence.

Mothers were also observed to sometimes be reluctant to separate from their child and the teachers postulate that this may be associated with social or occupational commitments that are beyond the mother's control.

Extract 25: Participant 1:

...depends on um, is she being forced to go back to work, does she want to go back to work, um is she willing to give up her child to come to school, it depends on the mother, her frame of mind...

Participants also reported that mothers had a tendency to hover around their child and the school with the intention to settle the child before she leaves. This idea was very strongly

opposed by eleven of the teachers and moderately opposed by the remaining two teachers. The common understanding held by all the participants was that the mother's presence only served to perpetuate the child's need to want to stay in proximity of her, and as a result heightened separation anxiety behaviours when the bond was later threatened.

Extract 26: Participant 6:

They want to stay on you know, they want to settle the little one, things like that, but the longer they stay at school, the more upsetting it is for the little one. You know then they start feeling, 'okay, no mommy is going to stay, okay mommy is staying longer and longer', but eventually when she needs to go, then it starts all over again, so what I find, the quicker mommy leaves the little one, I know it's difficult for mommy, so I would rather, I normally tell them okay let me take them, I will settle them down and phone me during the day.

Extract 27: Participant 3:

Ja cos the longer the mother stays watching the kid, the more the kids going to get upset, so walk your child in, say mommy's coming back later, have a nice day and ja cos they'll just go and get more and more upset if mom just stands there, 'okay bye okay bye' so ja...

Extract 28: Participant 1:

A child whose parent will stay here at school on the first day, um never really settles within the school environment because they always wanting mommy to follow them, and mommy has to push them on the swing, and mommy has to take them for walks and the teacher then cannot get involved because the child doesn't want the teacher there at all, so that becomes a bit of a problem. And the longer the mom stays here, the longer the child expects the mom to, to stay, so when mommy does go, the child is really really really very bad.

In contrast to the very attentive and emotional mother, some teachers also identified parents who are more punitive and punish the child for their distress, or seem uninterested and dismissive toward their child, while their focus remains on getting to work on time.

Extract 29: Participant 11:

...you know some parents you get don't worry about the children, just dump their children and leave them, maybe come five o'clock and pick them up...

Extract 30: Participant 10:

...shocked, I'm totally shocked. Like it's, some of them really don't have much much of that motherly you know bonding instinct thingy's going on with them. It's like, just go to school, I'm going to work, bye.

Extract 31: Participant 4:

...the tone of your voice is also very important. You can't tell your child, 'I'm late for work, I, you can't, I can't start my day like this', because that is just negative, negative comments and do you really think your child is going to feel better. Your... you must leave your child in a better state of mind I think, um again it's about security, it's about, your child must know that you are his love and where you are letting, leaving him, that that also...

In such cases, teachers reported awareness of the child's fear of abandonment and how it may possibly reinforce and negatively influence the child's potential to be settled. Additionally, some of the participants identified that parents, notably the mother who was very career orientated and spent little time with her child, or encouraged the watching of television rather than engaging in bonding activities that would enhance the development of a secure and fulfilling relationship, was recognised as a factor that may impact on a child's reluctance to separate from the mother.

Extract 32: Participant 6:

I think it can be a mommy that doesn't give enough loving care at home, you know the child wants to see or mommy must play with me or mommy basically maybe a hard working lady that's got a career you know, then you know like I said the most of the day they're here, so they only going home in the evening again and the little ones are starting to get tired and mommy's maybe not there to take care of them during

the day, that can also, okay mommy's bringing me, let me try hard holding onto her during the day, she's not there in the evenings for me...

Extract 33: Participant 11:

I think parents just work, work, work. Half of the time the nanny is taking care of them you see. Give them more I think love, after they come from school, sit down with them and ask them what did you do in school. Some of the parents don't even do that you know, it's just maybe the child finish school and they gone to watch TV or bath and then sleep. The next day the child is at school.

In consideration of the above mentioned points regarding the difficulties that mother's present, which directly or indirectly aggravate the anxious child, one can envisage the significant challenges posed to the teacher. Thus, all the teachers held an awareness of the importance of remaining attentive to possible triggering and perpetuating behaviours of the mother, comforting and guiding her toward the exhibition of more positive modelling behaviours.

4.2.3. Change and the strange

In the change and the strange sub-theme the focus of challenges slightly shifted. Teachers began to identify and acknowledge particular challenges that the child may encounter, which in their experience, has had the potential to influence the mother-child bond, thereby heightening the experience of separation anxiety. Teachers first make note of the value of routine in a child's life, especially at the preschool age and add, that in the preschool arena, routine is a means of communicating safety, security and stability to the child through predictability. Teachers reported that children who were not accustomed to routine found the structure of preschool strange, constricting and threatening, and protested separation from the mother who rather offered a less structured environment that was more familiar to the child. Moreover, many of the teachers reported that routine was a factor for consideration for children who only attended preschool on certain days of the week, with long breaks away from school adversely affecting their overall adjustment to the transition.

This in turn delays their ability to recognise the school as a central feature in their life, due to the unstable and inconsistent relationship they develop with the school.

Extract 34: Participant 1:

A child who comes to school twice a week, a child comes to school Monday and Tuesday, he's now got Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday at home and then comes back to school again on Monday, it takes weeks for that child to settle because he's only, he's had such a long break...

To further elaborate on the notion of change and the strange, some teachers mentioned that when the child is dropped off at school, the child feels intimidated by the strange environment and unfamiliar settings and people. This bombardment of new stimuli is confusing to the first-time preschooler, who struggles with the concept of school. Some teachers postulated that children who experience separation anxiety have difficulty grasping the nature of the separation, seeing it in the context of finality as opposed to a long term repetition of brief separations. Thus, their level of understanding may insinuate separation as a rejection or abandonment from the parent, resulting in further worry and anxiety regarding the possibility of their parents' return.

Extract 35: Participant 12:

...for them it's like my mommy is gone, they just left me here, they not going to come back...

Extract 36: Participant 10:

...child wants to feel that the parent is not just dumping the child. You know he's going to come back and he's, he is in a safe place.

Change in the household, such as the birth of a sibling was also seen as a challenge for the child to negotiate. The belief held by the participants was that with the introduction of a new baby, the concerned child senses the shift of the mother's affection and attention and therefore becomes concerned about the bond shared between them. The perceived strain or compromise of the bond was said to be counteracted by the child's intense need to restore the bond through physical proximity to the mother.

Extract 37: Participant 9:

Mommy has a baby especially at their age now, err that's a big adjustment at home now as well. Moving into their own room now and being separated again now from mommy at home, I have to go to school, baby stays at home with mommy, why do I have to go to school, but the baby can stay with MY mommy. Because with them now it's a question of it's my mommy, now I have to share my mommy with you, you see so it's a big thing for them.

Some of the teachers reported that conflict between parent and child also aroused anxiety in the child. In this discussion, the teachers expressed that when the mother and child argue, especially before school, the child is left sitting with a compromised bond with the parent and therefore may feel distrustful of the parent's commitment to later fetch them from school. In such cases, the teachers observed that the child had a tendency to dwell and worry about the perceived abandonment and rejection, heightening protest during separation. Furthermore in the category of conflict, divorce and parental conflict was mentioned by all teachers as contributing factors to separation anxiety, and in so doing it highlighted the considerable challenges it posed for the child. In this way divorce and parental conflict were linked to the child feeling insecure about the strength of attachment to their parent, as well as a resistance to the loss of one parent over another, which may both lend to a desire to remain in proximity to the parent.

Extract 38: Participant 10:

Um ja like err...some err...some weekends some parents, the divorced ones, the father gets the child one weekend and the mother gets the child on the others, then obviously the father is only getting the child on a weekend, but the mother gets the child um for the five days and the weekend you know, alternate, so it's seven there. So when the father brings the child, then the child will scream more because they're going to miss the father, it's not that she doesn't want to be here, but she doesn't spend much time with the father...

Teachers also expressed that the children of divorced or conflicting parents often disclose information to them regarding the poor home environment and conflicted parental

relationship. In this way, a few of the participants seemed aware that sometimes the anxious child protests separation out of concern for the parent and their well-being whilst the child is away and at school. In other cases, teachers raised single mothers as a factor for consideration. The teachers seemed to have insight into aspects of the single mother's life and how this type of lifestyle might influence the mother's approach to meeting her parenting responsibilities, as well as the potential predisposition it held for separation anxiety because of the perceived stressors the lifestyle holds.

Extract 39: Participant 7:

You see, let's say I'm a single mother, I'm trying to date somebody out and here I am late in the morning, I have to leave her, my child so quickly and drop my child at school and I wasn't with my child last night, I was maybe out, that also makes the child have you know, 'my mom, I wasn't with her yesterday and now she's gone again. Where's my mommy', you know what I mean, ja that's also contribute.

Lastly, the child's upbringing in relation to their exposure to the social world was associated with three possible challenges a child may encounter through change and the strange. First, was the aspect of race, where three teachers had observed that a child who had only been exposed to members of their own race found difficulty in forming relationships with teachers of a different race, as the unfamiliar becomes a threatening factor which heightens reasons for attachment.

Extract 40: Participant 12:

...but he was experiencing that too much South African around him and everything so he couldn't handle it, he was scared. It was something new for him...

Extract 41: Participant 1:

...um we sometimes have problems with um with children as well when they do come to school, they've never been with a nanny before, so they really don't take well to, to any of the, of the other staff. Um they battle and that takes quite a while for them to get used to um some of our assistants, where they will not go to them at all, they don't know any other, they only know that their mommy is of a different colour and

that also goes for some of the Indian children, some of the Black children where they've never ever been, especially some of the farm, from, when they come from the farm and they've never been with a white teacher before they really don't want to know anything about us at all and they will go for the assistants.

The second challenge for negotiation was rooted in the child's degree of exposure to family and friends. It was hypothesised by some of the participants that with appropriate socialisation, a child is able to develop greater trust in whom the parents allow them to interact with, and thus the idea of forming new relationships with others does not threaten or compromise the bond between parent and child to such a maladaptive state.

Extract 42: Participant 1:

It also de... it also depends on their environment that they were brought up in. Um, if they only knew mommy and daddy and maybe a granny and didn't really have much to do with many other people, they are going to be um not happy about going off with strangers, but if, I... I feel that if say they are taken out and about and they are used to be taken off by uncles and aunts, and whoever then they quite easy with going to other people. It's when they in a very small environment and they don't know anyone else

Extract 43: Participant 10:

I think cos most of them stay with their mommy's from birth and then all of a sudden it's a new environment, new faces, different faces, different types of people that you get that they need to get used to...

Last was the aspect of language, comparable in some ways to race as an influencing factor. With regard to language, teachers mentioned that children who did not speak or understand the English language, were not able to fully engage and feel understood by the teacher, which not only compromised the vital transition from parent to teacher, but also the child's engagement in school and with their peers.

Extract 44: Participant 12:

Like some of the parents they only talk in their language and then coming like, then it's hard for them, what are we doing in school...

4.3. Helpful Qualities in the Caregiver Role

The second prominent theme encapsulated the characteristics that the participants identified, as the salient features that the caregiver should ideally hold. From the teachers experiences and understandings, they have found that these recognised qualities help a caregiver to assist a child experiencing, or at risk for experiencing separation anxiety, to transition from home to school, and from the parent to the teacher.

4.3.1. Knowledge

The sub-theme of knowledge touches on a variety of important aspects related to helping and caring for the anxious child. In essence the theme discusses the ways in which teachers construct and make sense of their occupational knowledge and how it has guided some of their reported interventions to help the child adjust.

Amongst the thirteen teachers interviewed, the level of formal education and childcare experience varied, sometimes drastically. However, there was a common belief held by all participants which noted that experiential learning was valued more than formal education. More specifically, all the teachers reported that their occupational knowledge was constructed in part from formal education, which provided insight from a more theoretical standpoint on the occurrence of early childhood separation anxiety and its possible impacts. However with regard to the methods of coping and assisting a child, this was largely accounted for by their practical experience, where the teacher was actually engaging with children and evaluating their most suited style of easing separation anxiety.

Extract 45: Participant 4:

Oh I think it, jus it's a little bit of both um, obviously you also do what the text books say but in the end, it, you handle that um the way that experience has taught you...

Extract 46: Participant 5:

Ja I think day to day situations you know sometimes you learn something but, or you are taught something and then when it comes to the practical, they say that is how it should be done, but when it comes to the practical you realise what you have been taught cannot be applied in a practical situation, because every situation differs, every child differs.

Extract 47: Participant 1:

It's through experience, err it's what works. Sometimes things in books don't (laughs), the guidelines in books tell you what to do and what not to do and it doesn't always work. It's just really through experience, actually working with children and working with, dealing with parents, dealing with anxious parents and what actually works for them and what works for the child and what works for the teacher.

Teachers further relayed that their method of working with separation anxiety was an approach developed and suited for them. None of the respective schools held a protocol to adhere to, but rather teachers are left to their own device to manage the child in consideration of the knowledge they hold and as part of their duties as a teacher. In addition, some teachers within a respective school did share an understanding of the usefulness and effectiveness of certain approaches, but this still remained an individual decision of the teachers, rather than a fixed protocol imposed by the school.

Extract 48: Participant 12:

...actually all well experienced, they all well experienced so mmm they don't, as long as we are looking after the child and the child is not going on and on having fits or something like that, so it's good they don't interfere with the teachers as long as we doing our job what we have to do.

Extract 49: Participant 9:

Ja they leave us to our own and see, they just tell us, 'you deal with it the way you think is best', so we don't have a certain way of, everyone doing it the same way, each teacher I think has their own way of dealing with it.

Following the awareness held by teachers regarding the role of knowledge to both the teacher and the preschool, teachers also offer that they have come to define separation anxiety during the transition to preschool as a transient process. Thus, during this difficult time for child, parent and teacher, the remaining qualities identified in this theme should be exercised as best as possible. Furthermore, teachers reported that through their accumulated knowledge, a time period for the child's adjustment must be considered. This ranged from one week to six weeks, with most teachers suggesting a two week adjustment period. In most of the participants' opinion, this seemed to be a suitable allowance in light of all the challenges a child may be faced with, as well as the child's developmental capacity to grapple with those challenges.

Extract 50: Participant 6:

You normally give it around about a week or two, you know after two weeks one can say 'I don't know this one is really not settling in, everyday he or she is crying', then I think one needs to start looking into, that's when I feel 'no something is not right', you know two weeks are quite a long period, but when there's days in between that they are fine, you can see okay now, it's going over two weeks but there is days when he or she was fine so give it another week or so.

However, some teachers also added that in the rare case where separation anxiety does not subside, the parent must be consulted and alternative approaches to dealing with the anxious child should be discussed. In these more serious cases, it was proposed that as last resorts, professional help should be considered or perhaps the parents should reconsider the child's entry into preschool and delay it for another year. For the remaining teachers, separation anxiety during the transition to preschool was seen only as a transient process and therefore never escalated to an intensity which warranted such last resorts, as those mentioned above. Furthermore, the more flexible approaches mentioned by many of the

teachers were seen as either an intervention before the classified last resorts or as enough of an approach to ease separation anxiety in this context. These more flexible options were regarded as useful to the teachers, such as bringing the child to the initial parent interview when the child is being enrolled. From this exposure, the teachers postulated that the child was able to visually grasp what the school looks like, what it would require from them and who they would be interacting with. Many of the participants also found that this awareness to the school may aid the parent to talk to their child about school, as prior to actually visiting the school, the child may not have known what the concept of school encompassed.

Extract 51: Participant 8:

...they enrol their child, I'll bring them and then just see the environment they're going to be in, what it looks like, what they're expecting, the... the class mates, even when they come for interview they just leave the child maybe, you know five minutes for teacher to see.

Another flexible and helpful approach supported by the teacher's knowledge was gradually exposing the child to school. Teachers explained this process as the child coming to preschool for only a few hours and then, as the days passed and the child was able to see the school as a safe and comfortable environment; parents could increase the time the child spent at school, until the full duration required for day care was reached.

Extract 52: Participant 13:

Maybe she should just, if it's a difficult child I would just say bring him in for an hour or two, leave him you know for an hour or two at school and then come fetch him. Gradually ease him into school if it's going to be a difficult child.

Extract 53: Participant 3:

Mmm we generally tell the parents like the first, say a week or two they come... we say the first week they can bring them in like seven, half past seven and then they must come after sleep time, like half a day or even after lunch at twelve. And half a day for the first week or so, so then they know couple of hours they're going to be away from their mom. And then the next week we will make it a little bit longer and a

little bit longer if they have to be full day, but we won't shove them full day right from the beginning because that will be far too long for the little kid.

However, those teachers who mentioned this option were also clear that this process of exposure must follow a constant and manageable graduation, with regard to the increase of time and should not be taken as the child having days in and days out of school. According to teachers, the latter was disruptive, as it challenged the idea that preschool is a routine element in the child's life.

Another noteworthy aspect observed by the participants was that the initial few Mondays of the school term were difficult for the child. Even if the child was able to reach some level of adjustment to their schooling life, a weekend with their parent may induce a reluctance to separate from them on the Monday morning. From their occupational knowledge, the teachers guided that all parties concerned should be considerate of the child and their process, and understand that some children may spend more of their time at school than at home with their parents. Thus time spent with the parent may be highly valued, because of a strained parent-child bond.

Extract 54: Participant 10:

Because they, so spending more time with their mother because most of the children they hardly see their parent because their parents come and fetch them half past five, six o'clock, they go home, bath eat, sleep. It's work the next day, so when their parents are on leave or something then they with their kids and then they spend that time with their parents and then they don't want to come back to school. So when they do come back, they cry and whatever, but it's normally just for that Monday

In addition, there also seemed to be a discrepancy amongst the teachers' knowledge concerning the identification of the most anxiety provoking day for the child. Some teachers saw the first day of preschool as the most difficult, because of the bombardment of new and strange stimuli, while others saw the third day as the worst.

Extract 55: Participant 1:

The third day is the worst day for them. Their first day they've got over the shock they don't, didn't know what hit them, the second day, sort of sussing us out, not sure, the third day they now know for a fact that they going to be left here at school and without their mother, without their parent, a parent. And they know that they are going to stay here with us and that's when they put up a bit of a fight. So the third day is always the worst day for us and for the child.

The need to have mentioned such distinction perhaps can be linked with the same reason to have noted the difficulties that have come with 'Monday's'. The knowledge held by teachers about such phenomenon, can be passed on to parents, which then allows the concerned parties to prepare themselves and be considerate of the child's individual process of dealing with separation anxiety. More specifically, such information can be considered useful as it informs the parent that these initial few days are a difficult transition for the child and thus both teacher and parent need to be attentive to the child and their individual experience of the transition and their adjustment to separation and individualisation. This knowledge reiterates that separation anxiety, although a transient process, differs in its transient nature from one child to the next, and thus both parents and teachers need to be patient with the specific child and remain understanding of their responses to separation.

Extract 56: Participant 9:

So I'll just try and tell them, be and in that I mean it does pass, with some of them it do pass, and some, with some it's two day thing, with some it a week, with some it's a month, but just be patient, be patient with your child over that period...

The teachers offered these options and advice in light of their understanding and knowledge about separation anxiety and the reported reality that there is no one recipe that can be applied to all children and which also suits all parents and teachers. Rather the value was identified in the teachers' wealth of knowledge, in that it allowed them the capacity to provide the parent and child with alternative options and perspectives that they have accumulated and have come to consider as being in the best interest of a specific child.

4.3.2. Coping through creativity and distraction

Creativity and distraction were principal to the approaches teachers utilised to help both parent and child during the transitional period. In particular, many of the teachers reported that creativity and distraction was aimed at the preschooler in an effort to create an understanding that school was an enjoyable time, which did not aspire to impinge, threaten or replace the mother-child bond. These efforts were conveyed by all the teachers as exhausting; however teachers also noted their passion for working with children that motivates them to work creatively. To delve into the more concrete ways of applying creativity within this context, ideas of creativity were offered by teachers to assist mothers in playing their part in the process. Firstly it was suggested that mothers should try to be creative when introducing the idea of preschool to their child. A mother, who exudes confidence in her decision regarding their child's enrolment to school, was considered as a positive influence to the transition, as she was in a position to convey enthusiasm and encouragement toward the child about school, without hesitance sourced in her own fears and anxieties.

Extract 57: Participant 3:

...you have to like prepare the kid, you can't just sommer be like, here we go, this is your new school okay bye. You got to talk the kid into school and say this and this and you go meet some friends and play with your friends and do this and do that and they definitely have to you know, get their kids, encourage their kids and ja...

Teachers further recommended that the mother support the above mentioned enthusiasm and encouragement with the provision of a new piece of stationery or a surprise in the child's lunchbox. In this way, the mother not only conveys her excitement and support in expression, but also creatively conveys it in a more tangible form which the child can easily appreciate.

Extract 58: Participant 6:

Ja I think when mommy also talks about the school, that that teacher and that teacher is nice, you gonna do that at school today, so interaction between mommy and daddy also talking about the school, 'oh what did you do today at school?' and

'yus tomorrow you gonna enjoy that again'. So I think talking between mommy and child is very important and lunch box as well can be make a big difference, 'there's a sweetie for me when I got lunch at school today', so I think that interaction, talking about the school, talking about the teachers and things help quite a lot.

Extract 59: Participant 4:

...when the parents come to look at the school, and then we'll usually tell them what they have to bring um what the parents can do is go, go buy them a special um suitcase or a school bag and just motivate them in two weeks, maybe like two weeks before they actually starting school and tell them , 'ah look this is your school bag and look ooh these crayons that you are going to use', um just make them very um interested and... and you know excited for the... the class and 'look this is your lunch box and ja, I think then your child would be very excited to go to school.

From the extracts, it can be understood that it was the mutual excitement shared by mother and child which cultivated the concept of school as a safe place, which the mother approved of and wanted for her child. In this way the idea of school as a form of punishment was not born, as school was introduced as part of the mother-child interaction, rather than a threat to it. In addition, teachers also mentioned that it was sometimes helpful when the mother allowed the child to bring a 'comfort' object to school, which the child could hold onto during the course of the day. However, the idea of bringing comfort objects was firmly thought of in light of adjustment during difficult times, rather than something that the child should become dependent on.

Extract 60: Participant 8:

If they've got something like a blanket or maybe a teddy bear, I'll ask parents just to bring them with then because some of the children just feel sometimes that they need mommy, they need that other comforter like a blanky, just to send it with them and I'll take it from there and see how they react after that.

Extract 61: Participant 7:

Learn them, what they want, what they need, what they like and you will know and then when the time comes for you to take them to school you will know, 'okay today she'll want to go with this toy so that she can feel safe', just give your child, it's fine....if you as a mother know that, just give your child and you'll be helping your child.

Extract 62: Participant 3:

I think also, like I said the blanky and the bottle, if they used to having it at home they going to have to come into school with it. And obviously we don't agree with it, but we going to have to slowly gradually take it away so, but also if something happens at the home, then they gonna wanna you know want that blanky back or something, so it all it takes time hey.

In a shift toward the approaches of creativity and distraction utilised by the teacher, it was fitting to return to the three phases identified in the anxious child sub-theme, in order to better understand the process the teacher engaged in. During the school morning, the primary goal of the teacher was to separate the child from the mother.

Extract 63: Participant 11:

Um I think when the mother leaves the child at our, at our door, at our classroom, it's our duty to start helping them, showing them, loving them...

The duty articulated in this extract was expressed by a few of the teachers as a driving force behind their efforts to cope with separation anxious children. The 'challenges encountered' with the phenomenon, as discussed earlier, was a prominent theme in the findings and thus both themes although addressing very different aspects of early childhood separation anxiety; also complement each other quite well. In the proceeding extracts, teachers share some of their creative strategies to not only separate an anxious child from their mother, but also distract the child toward thoughts of fun and school.

Extract 64: Participant 1:

The teacher then does whatever, what...do whatever it takes to actually calm that child down and it normally does work. Um sometimes children are a bit more highly strung than others, um it takes a lot of coercing, playing on the equipment, looking at books, looking at the sky, looking at the birds, looking at anything to try and distract them. And that's how you get through, that's how you get through a morning, and that's how you gain the trust of a child, that you are prepared to spend time with them and they get to know you a lot better that way.

Extract 65: Participant 4:

Okay what we'll usually do is we'll take the child from the parent I mean um and then try to shift their, their concentration away from their mommy or daddy. We'll usually take out the child to the puzzles or you know just take their... their concentration and focus it in something that's nice, ja colouring in or a puzzle or something that makes a noise or something like that.

Extract 66: Participant 5:

...if there's real separation anxiety and the child clings to the parent and the parents holding the child, I actually physically go and take the child from the parent and hold the child and say okay come let's go see the birds outside, or and try and you know just derail them and take, tell the parents okay go, you can go it's fine, we are going to look at the pictures or the book or what, what type of thing. You know whatever you can get to distract them from that physical seeing my mother or my father disappearing into the door you know, they don't you know, some of them don't think beyond the door, there's something else. You know doors where, the door swallows my mommy or my daddy...

Two of the teachers also made note of the traumatic experience that may come from forcefully parting a child from their mother, particularly when they tightly cling to the mother. In the extract below an alternative approach to ease this situation was reported.

Extract 67: Participant 1:

I always suggest to mommy, 'if the child is doing that, is on the first day, second day or third day, is to actually turn them around so they are facing the teacher, it's easier for me to take', otherwise it becomes a battle where I'm now trying to take the child from mommy, the child's clinging onto mommy, mommy's now getting upset so I always suggest, turn the child around, even if the child's crying and then just hand her to me. And then walk away, um but the grabbing the child from mother, nooo, no no no, not at all, that's very traumatic...

Once the teacher has the child in their care, all the teachers agreed that the mother must say her goodbyes and leave. Any attempts of the mother to hover around the child after the child has been physically separated from her, was mutually seen by the teachers as unhelpful to the situation. However, there was a technical discrepancy in this mutual agreement where some teachers felt that the mother should leave much sooner than others. Thus where some teachers valued the mother's prompt departure, others placed importance on a comforting goodbye before the departure.

Extract 68: Participant 10:

...if a parent leaves the child and goes away crying then the child will continue crying because the child wants to feel that the parent is not just dumping the child. You know he's going to come back and he's, he is in a safe place.

Extract 69: Participant 9:

...what also helps with them if you take the child and the mommy kisses and leaves, just the sooner she stays and fuffs and she stands there crying and very emotional the child tends to stay emotional for longer. If they just drop their child and leave and let us handle the child, they tend to adjust quicker and just they settle down quicker as where mommy will stay for a half an hour, the more she cries the more the child cries, the more the child cries the more the mommy cries so we do get the very attached mommy's.

Three of the teachers reported that they offered the child confectionery as an incentive and to distract the child from the separation. Furthermore, this method of distraction was described to potentially create and reinforce an association of the teacher and school with good and nice things.

Extract 70: Participant 1:

Go and find a whole bowel of chips in the kitchen, um when things get really bad and sit them down and then they'll eat that and once they've eaten that they sort of forgotten why they were crying.

The illustrative methods discussed above, vary in creativity and distraction, but all still fulfil the underlying purpose of managing separation anxiety successfully, thus emphasising its influence on the efficacy of the caregiving role. However, as with the sub-theme of the anxious child, not all children adjusted. Some children still struggled and their difficulties persisted further into the day. In linking to the innovations of the teacher, the participants also reported that there was a need for teachers to be well organised and to have their day planned in advance. This was described to not only entail being prepared for each activity, but also being prepared for the following activity before the prior one ended. In this way, teachers have observed that the creative tasks planned for the day keeps the child appropriately stimulated and distracted, thus the child is never given time to be bored or to begin thinking about their mother again.

Extract 71: Participant 12:

...we do the pottery here, then we do art, they we, there is no time for them to think about their parents...

Extract 72: Participant 3:

Try and talk to them, give them the things that they like, what you see they like and don't let like one activity take the whole day, you know, you've got to keep them, their brains occupied all the time so that they can at least try and forget things you know. They can at least focus on what they are doing that time and forget about home or a while, ja that's what I do.

One teacher also found that story telling was a useful technique, whereby a story was created and aimed to reflect to the child their own experience of separation related to the distress of entering school followed by the comfort of the later parent-child reunion.

Extract 73: Participant 7:

...try and give them stories that will, okay will relate with their reality so that they can learn like, if you tell them about the children who are taken to school and their parents are working, that makes them see themselves, 'okay this is me, I'm left at school, my mommy's at work', things like that ja, it will help them.

Additionally, two other teachers found that role play games offered creative assistance in helping children to adjust. In particular, they spoke about 'work-work', where the child was guided to develop a greater understanding of the way the world works and the commitments their parents held.

Extract 74: Participant 2:

A child understands routine, the routine is you hand them over, you go your way. We'll explain to them that you've gone to work, we often play 'work work', we go to you know shops and we... we... we play act and we say this is what mommy does at work and this is why you can't got to work. So you teach them.

While one teacher found it helpful to give the concerned child duties to feel responsible and busy, another teacher disagreed, reporting that she preferred not to single the child out, and rather involve them in group orientated activities.

Extract 75: Participant 3:

...also tend to like obviously, at... at lunch time, for them to hand out, and if you see someone sitting by themselves, you just say, 'hey come hand out here', you know, talk to your mates and stuff. And then... then they feel special like, 'ah sweet teacher let me handout' so ja.

Extract 76: Participant 13:

I just put them and let them do what everybody in the class does. When we play play-dough, we will give him or her play-dough. Make them feel part of the class, don't treat them different, treat the... the same...

A number of teachers mentioned the positive influence of peer relationships, with one report of improved school adjustment in coupling confident children with shyer ones.

Extract 77: Participant 3:

Um normally, normally then we will hook up like a shy child with one of the loud spoken ones, just to like you know we can even them out, but we won't have two shy one's sitting together at a table. We will mix and match them.

Another coping mechanism practised, is to listen to the child's concerns, particularly with regard to the time of return of parents, and respond appropriately. For example, mapping out a simple schedule of activities, using key activities to mark the time of day, and orientating the child to their collection time from the outset.

Extract 78: Participant 11:

I think to be more loving, caring and err just listen to them. Sometimes as teachers we do not listen to them, because we get so frustrated and say you know what 'oh just go and sit, we don't want to hear'....

Extract 79: Participant 4:

...tell the child the... the routine of that day. Tell them okay we quickly going to. We having playtime and afterwards we gonna have lunch then we gonna have a little bit of a nap time and you know what, after nap time um mommy and daddy he will come and then usually they know what to expect...

Lastly, teachers emphasised the importance of the child being passed from the teacher to the mother, during the reunion phase. This enactment links the teacher and the mother as one, in the care of the child. This is in contrast to the child running to the mother, suddenly becoming overwhelmed in the unsafe space between them.

4.3.3. Calm and patient

It was regularly mentioned that children have the capacity to pick up on the emotional states of the parent and the teacher, looking to them for the cues to guide their own emotion. It is thus vital that both parties remain calm and patient with the child. To ease an anxious mother, it was reported common practice for the teacher to invite her to call the school during the course of the day, affording the mother regular updates on her child's emotional state as opposed to her hovering anxiously and waiting for her child to settle. Although some teachers expressed empathy toward the mother's difficulty in separating, they reported it as their instinctive duty as a teacher to be the example of calmness and patience, for the sake of the child and perhaps even for the parent.

Extract 80: Participant 13:

Ja, you must, you must be in control. You got to be firm and you got to be in control so they can sense, if you going to start getting emotional and getting you know um stressed, they going to pick it up immediately so best to stay calm...

Extract 81: Participant 4:

...even if the child doesn't want to, you know, still stay calm um, your tone of your voice, your body language, that that's a lot, that says a lot. And um and then just give a kiss and let them go as, you know and if you're really worried phone in two hours time or forty minutes time and ask the teacher, 'is she okay?'...

Extract 82: Participant 2:

...win respect from the child. Don't, do not discipline the child, do not punish the child, do not anything that will make the child fear you or worry about you or feel that they don't want to be there. It must be secure, so you've got to stay calm, I know it's very... very difficult, very difficult, but you've got to stay calm, um with the child all the time.

Remaining calm and patient extended to teachers taking the time to talk to a child, if old enough, about the events of the day. The important information relayed in such cases

should concern reasons the child needs to attend school, why the parent has to leave, and perhaps even an explicit indication about the mothers return.

Extract 83: Participant 10:

Ja well they take the time to sit the child down and say, 'you know what, don't cry, you at school now, you going to be with your friends, you playing, mommy put this in your bag and whatever and I will come and fetch you', you know the parents that talk nice to the children are the ones that adjust nicely.

To conclude this sub-theme it was observed by some of the more experienced teachers that they are best suited to deal with the more severe cases of separation anxiety compared to newer teachers (classified by their minimal years of experience), who lack the patience and reservoir of experience required to deal with the needs of the anxious, distressed child.

Extract 84: Participant 1:

...the younger teachers do watch and they try and work it out, but being younger and less experienced they don't always have the patience to work through with the child so normally the more experienced teachers will deal with the new ones...

4.3.4. Love and security

During the necessary hand-over of the child from mother to teacher, many teachers view their roles as somewhat mothering or nurturing. While knowing they can never replace the mother of the child, teachers argued that the considerable amount of time the child spends in their care lends their role to be perceived as a 'second mother'.

Extract 85: Participant 12:

...we take the role model of the parents when the parents are not around. It's like we the second mother of the children, so what they get from their mother, basically, mother they get them in the evening, they see their mother in the evening, they leave them, they get them in the evening, but we the teachers stay more with them than their parents.

Furthermore, many of the teachers linked the mothering, caregiving role as one which primarily provided the qualities of love and security, ingredients thought to be essential components in developing the child's trust and comfort while in their care.

Extract 86: Participant 4:

...the child will feel safe I think when they are in a secure relationship and in a secure environment, if your... your environment at home is secure and you are leaving the child into a safe environment, secure environment, the child will feel that as well.

Extract 87: Participant 5:

I think once a child realises that like I said, it's fine, you know I'm actually safe, nothings bad is going to happen to me even though my mommy's not here. They they tend really to get over it quite quickly, they really do.

According to the teachers, this love and security can be conveyed in various ways, some of which are shared in the extracts below. To begin, a simple hug was expressed as a powerful communication of comfort and security, which was thought to be effective for the separation anxious child who perceives the possibility of rejection and abandonment.

Extract 88: Participant 4:

...you know sometimes um there's a lot of policies of physical you know touch, but I think really um a child at this age you know do really need a hug and they find comfort again, in that again the security issue...

One teacher reported an approach where she placed the child on her lap and rubbed their hands. The teacher explained that by passing the sensation of warmth through touch, she was simultaneously able to convey her psychological and emotional warmth to the child, thereby increasing the child's feeling of security and comfort with her as the teacher.

Extract 89: participant 8:

...what I've learnt, you must always rub a child's hand, open their hands and just touch you know so they can feel that you're a warm, a warm person not a cold person. Then afterwards you'll see they'll be fine...

Moreover, teachers reported that in an effort to develop a sense of security in the child, teachers needed to cultivate a sense of independence in the child. In some of the participants experience, a child who was 'babied' or too dependent on the mother struggled to separate. Such independence was therefore said to be achieved by increasing the child's confidence levels through developmental and school related praise and rewards. This task appeared to primarily assist with separation related behaviours, such as the dependence on 'comfort' objects and the more withdrawn behaviours.

Extract 90: Participant 2:

...my teachers are told that they cannot carry them around all the time, they need the security of the teacher being there, but the teacher must be in the sandpit with them, be on the swing with them, but not holding them. And so they go down and they learn that independence. And then they can also venture off on their own

Extract 91: Participant 13:

If I see they do something nice I'll praise them. Um if it was a child that was crying and the next day he comes in and he doesn't cry I will tell him 'Gee, you are a big boy now' you know, build that.

Lastly, all thirteen teachers emphasised the value in the parent-teacher relationship, which was characterised by firm boundaries and clear communication. This was said to promote not only the child's adjustment, but also the parent's adjustment.

Extract 92: Participant 2:

...there must always be 100% communication between the teacher and their parent at anxiety times. Um because you need to relax both, you need to be able to inform the parent that you're in control and that you do understand and you have got empathy about how they're feeling, but there is a boundary as to how much they must involve themselves in their handing over of their child.

Through communication, the mother remains aware of her child within the school context and the teacher is aware of the child within the home context. Participants observed that the mother's anxiety is modified by information and feedback on her child's progress, while

communication also allows teachers insight into the child's home situation, for example conflict, in relation to their anxious behaviour. This information can be used in a complementary manner, rather than a competitive one, to guide both parent and teacher on the time period needed for adjustment and the sensitivity required toward the child.

4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings accumulated from the participants, suggest that teachers perceive themselves as sufficiently prepared for the manifestation of separation anxiety. In their discussions, they conveyed a level of confidence and thoughtfulness about their perspectives and responses regarding early childhood separation anxiety, as well as their adequate capacity to meet the associated expectations in their occupational role. From the findings, it appeared that the teachers perceived separation anxiety during the transitional period as a 'challenging encounter', not only for themselves, but for the mother and child as well. In this way, the participants were able to communicate some of their understanding and perceived difficulties associated with the manifestation of separation anxiety, as well as its postulated causal and maintaining factors. Furthermore these challenges, although difficult, were portrayed by the teachers as manageable, especially in light of some of the identified 'helpful qualities in the caregiver role', which teachers have come to regard as a potential buffer to the intensity and adjustment of separation anxiety. Overall it appeared that amongst the teachers, a vast reservoir of information existed, concerning separation anxiety in the preschool context.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

This study aimed to qualitatively explore the personal experiences and perspectives of preschool teachers, in an attempt to research how they make sense of, understand and respond to separation anxiety in children during the transition into preschool. This chapter will discuss the findings of this exploration in relation to current knowledge held on the phenomenon, as previously discussed in the literature review, as well as the theoretical and practical implications of the results.

5.2. Discussion

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the study highlighted two predominant themes and numerous sub-themes, all of which encapsulates the multiple facets concerning the experiences and perspectives of preschool teachers. Furthermore the overarching themes can be said to align themselves comfortably with the respective research questions posed at the beginning of the study.

5.2.1. Challenges encountered

In an attempt to address the first research question regarding teachers' experiences and understandings of separation anxiety, it seems fitting to discuss the theme of 'challenges encountered' as it captures the teachers' experiences and perspectives of separation anxiety through their occupational experiences. As noted previously, these challenges appear to filter through emotional, mental, physical, social and relational realms for not only the child, but the parent and teacher as well. To discuss the 'challenges encountered' it is necessary to analyse this theme as a whole, but also in light of its finer components or sub-themes.

In the sub-theme titled 'the anxious child', the information elicited captured the way in which teachers perceived and identified separation anxiety during the transitional process.

The idea that separation anxiety is developmentally normative and transient was highlighted in this theme. It seemed that despite the intense encounters described by the teachers, there was also a shared perception that only very rarely, if at all, does separation anxiety manifest in such severe forms that would warrant professional assistance. Thus it can be said that the majority of teacher-related experiences of separation anxiety, have been a challenging and critical, but also largely transient period. Furthermore, the teachers' perspectives about the challenges encountered during this time, highlight behaviours that are located within the normative spectrum of separation anxious behaviours. It was also noted that the behaviour and affect intensity, as well as the adjustment period differs from child to child. Laishley (1983) concurred with this information, supported by her own work which acknowledged the multi-dimensional etiology that may influence the occurrence and presentation of separation anxiety. In light of the transient nature of separation anxiety during this time, teachers relayed a sense of hope and confidence in assisting the child to adjust to the transition. They remain confident that their accumulated occupational experience and resources are adequate to meet the predicament and effectively assist the child and sometimes even the parent, in the majority of concerned cases. Such coping tools lend to the second research question and the second prominent theme. The second theme potentially buffers the possible grave outcomes associated with separation anxiety in childhood (Ehrenreich et al., 2008; Hirshfeld-Becker & Biederman, 2002), however this will be discussed later in relation to the second research question.

The varying manifestations of separation anxiety were described in terms of the course of the day. The Findings chapter highlighted the varying behaviour presentations by categorising the day into three phases, i.e. the morning, the school day and reunion. In analysing the information provided by the teachers, it seems that the behaviours of distress and aggression during these three phases link to the literature put forward by Bowlby (1973). In his work, Bowlby (1973) observed multiple aspects related to attachment and its mediation between the mother and her child. The behaviours described by the teachers during the morning phase, directly corresponded with the protest behaviours observed by Bowlby (1973), which he understood as being activated when the child perceives a threat of separation. The protest behaviours observed by both Bowlby and the teachers are researched and understood as proximity maintaining efforts to the attachment figure. From

an alternate and possibly complementary developmental position, Laishley (1983) further supports the occurrence of a child's protest, by noting that young children may communicate their emotions through physical reactions, as they may only have a limited capacity to express themselves verbally.

In the second phase, teachers relayed that the child either adjusts to the exciting offerings of the school or continues to struggle with ruminations of the separation. Bowlby (1973) identified this as feelings of despair, when the child shifts from the more volatile behaviours to more depressive and withdrawn states. This seems quite typical of mourning behaviour and can perhaps be understood in terms of the child mourning the loss of the mother. Furthermore, at the preschool age, if a child has not yet been exposed to parent-child separation, the saying, 'out of sight, out of mind' seems fitting. The child does not know of the concept and workings of the institution of school and thus 'out of sight' means 'out of mind' literally, whereby the mother's very existence is threatened. This channel of thinking appears to link with the teacher's sense regarding the child's possible feelings of rejection and abandonment by the parent. This notion can be supported by the idea that preschool aged children are likely to have limited future insight and poor concept of time, which may thereby compromise their trust that their attachment figure will return for them and might abandon them in an unfamiliar surrounding (Laishley, 1983; McIntyre & Wolf, 1973; Miller et al., 2003). Both protest and despair were reported by the teachers, however it is interesting to note that Bowlby's third phase of detachment was not mentioned. This could possibly be understood through the brief yet persistent nature of separations in the preschool context, which perhaps does not create the intensity for manifestations of detachment to be observed by the teachers in their occupational experience. Alternatively, teachers regarded the reunion of mother and child as the last phase.

Bowlby (1973) described reunion period as a notably ambivalent meeting for both mother and child, which is congruent with the information provided by the teachers. However, the teachers added that this period also arouses a sense of ambivalence for them, regarding their role and efficacy. The ambivalence experienced by all three parties could perhaps be understood, as the day's collection of overwhelming feelings and difficult roles, culminating into an emotionally charged meeting.

Moving from the anxious child to the difficult mother, teachers seemed very open and equipped with perspectives and understandings regarding the pivotal role of the mother and the difficulties experienced when engaging with her. At times the teachers were observed to be quite critical of the mother and the possible contributing factors that may have influenced the quality of her mothering, such as marital and occupational status. In retrospect, teachers did have a tendency to lean toward a more negative portrayal of the mothers, which was also found in the work of Shpancer (1998) where professional caregivers expressed negativity toward the parents of the children under their care. Over and above the observed sense of criticism, teachers were able to display some level of empathy for the mother. They also showed evidence of mentalisation. Mentalisation is one's capacity to think about mental states concerning oneself as well as another (Fonagy, Gyorgy, Jurist & Target, 2004). The teachers were able to imagine and think about some of the concerns the mothers possibly felt, as well as the factors that made it a difficult for them to separate as well. In a study by Bretherton, Biringen and Ridgeway (1991), mothers' experiences during separations were explored. From the study, the mothers' pertinent concerns about separation were identified and described. Mothers were reportedly concerned about "whether the child would be missing them or feeling bad, and whether the child was safe and well cared for" (p. 13). These findings correspond appropriately with the teachers ideas of what parents may be concerned about, providing a sense that the teachers are in touch with what mothers may be struggling with. This can be further understood by Bretherton et al. (1991, p. 2) as an extension to what Bowlby postulated as the "parental side of attachment" whereby the parent also becomes anxious and distressed upon separation, which further links to the parents' concerns when the children are not in their company and the sense of relief when they are reunified with their child at the end of the school day.

With the potential for both mother and child to respond in a state of distress to the transition, teachers also find it challenging to keep both parent and child calm, while still remaining calm themselves and meeting the rest of their role associated duties. This aspect is supported by Hess, Dickson, Price and Leong (1979) who discuss that teachers moderate their emotional closeness and involvement when in their teacher role, in order to deal and engage with the large quantity of children under their care. This emotional distance is

effective due to the absence of potential affective ties that may have developed. This can be challenging and adaptive process for the teacher. It requires them to remain calm amongst the distress and encourage calmness in the mother and child so that the teacher can maintain their role associated duties. Furthermore current literature supports the value of trying to calm the anxious child's mother, as a study by Cobham and Dadds (1999, p. 230) discusses that "parental anxiety places anxious children at increased risk of having their anxiety maintained by the negative expectations their parents hold for them". Thus the teacher's sense to want to remove the anxious mother from the child's sight or calm her down, seems well motivated in light of its potential power to act as a maintaining factor with regard to the child's anxiety.

In keeping with the sub-theme of the difficult mother, teachers identified first-time mothers as a contributing factor to the challenging encounter. First-time mothers posed the problem of being somewhat enmeshed, with regard to their interactions with their child, as well as displayed a reluctance to separate from their child. This observation is in keeping with a study by Hsu and Sung (2008) that investigated separation anxiety experienced by first-time mothers. The study concluded that upon separation, mothers expressed feeling a heightened sense of anxiety due to feelings such as guilt and worry concerning their inability to offer care and comfort to their child. Furthermore Hsu and Sung (2008, p. 299) put forward that "when first-time mothers' appraisal indicates that they are inefficacious in meeting the demands of parenting, they may view separation from child as a threat to the fulfilment of their caregiving responsibilities" and thereby possibly contaminate the child's anxieties with their own. In general, mothers were described as often having a tendency to hover around the child and the school, reluctant to leave as there is an intention to settle the child before she leaves the school. However this idea was very strongly opposed by teachers and was identified to only perpetuate the child's need to stay with the parent and heighten separation anxiety behaviours when the bond was threatened. This difference of opinion noted between the parent and the teachers with regard to the parent remaining or leaving was similarly presented in a study by Xu (2006) and seems an area which requires further negotiation and communication between parents and teachers.

In contrast to the very attentive and emotional mother discussed above, teachers also identify parents who are more punitive and punish the child for their distress, or seem

uninterested and dismissive toward their child, while their focus remains on getting to work on time. In such cases, teachers hypothesise that the child's fear of abandonment is reinforced by the parents' disinterest and negatively influences the child's potential to be settled. Teachers also made reference to the very career orientated mother. They postulate that by virtue of her availability to her work, she is less available to her child, which compromises the overall quality of interaction between the parent and the child. This theory is understood by the mother's lack of emotional and physical availability both at home and when separating at preschool, and the teacher's sense is that this unavailability, potentially leaves the child with feelings of insecurity within the relationship. Xu (2006) lends support to this hypothesis by stating that the quantity and quality of interaction between a parent and their child is vital, as it holds major influence for the child's overall development, such as adjusting to major developmental milestones.

With either 'type' of mother, each presents their own difficulties and are both unable to appropriately attend to their child. Ahnert and Lamb (2003, p. 1046) state that when a mother is not able to meet a young child's distress effectively, the child's need for reassurance is exacerbated and through "repeated daily experiences of this sort may constrain the development and elaboration of coping capacities as well as other socially competent behaviours" thereby creating a challenging encounter for the teacher to then attempt to mediate in compensation of the mothers ineffectiveness.

With regard to the teacher's sense of 'change and the strange' as an influencing factor in their understanding of separation anxiety, Cicirelli (1991) noted that changes in life such as a mother who works or the single mother, who the teachers perceive has a lifestyle which may hold other significant interests, may also have the potential to disturb or weaken her child's attachment. Divorce was unanimously mentioned as one of the major perceived factors for consideration with regard to the manifestation of separation anxiety behaviours with preschoolers. The noteworthy mention of divorce in this study's findings was supported by literature which identifies preschool aged children as the age group with the highest risk for experiencing distress following parental divorce (Nair & Murray, 2005; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Moreover current literature in the field expands on the impacts of divorce by highlighting the strenuous inter-relations that may occur during negotiations of divorce. Ahnert and Lamb (2003, p. 1048) considered such strenuous inter-relations and

concluded that the “poor quality relationships at home magnify the adverse effects of the high stress levels associated with child care”, such as the transition to preschool which has been identified as a potentially difficult time, particularly for the preschooler.

Teachers also make note of other changes in the household which may disrupt the young child’s sense of stability and security, such as the birth of a sibling. The belief held by the teachers, is that with the introduction of a new baby, the concerned child may feel a division of the mother’s affection and attention and hence become uncertain about the security of the bond once shared between them. Dunn (1991, p. 114) also notes that “children are attentive to the relationships between their siblings and their parents, that they are prompt to compare themselves with their siblings, that the relationships between parent and each sibling differ”. Thus, the findings and literature suggest that young children are very aware of changes and differences that come with new siblings. Moreover the teachers observed that the young child’s perceived strain or threat of the mother-child bond was met by the child’s intense need to resist disruption and weakening of the bond, manifested through intense efforts to maintain physical proximity to their mother. This perspective is sound as Thompson and Lamb (1986, as cited in Cicirelli, 1991, p. 27), also mention that attachment is not static or fixed once formed, but rather the attachment or perception of attachment is sensitive to varying changes concerning the parent-child relationship, which in turn may strain or threaten the existing quality of the attachment. This notion appears to extend to the teachers mention of the occurrence of conflict between parent and child.

Teachers expressed that when the mother and child argue, especially before school, the child is left ruminating about the compromised bond and their position of security in the relationship. Additionally, teachers observed that when there is conflict within the family, the child may also become anxious and protest separation as they are concerned for the parent and their well-being. Cicirelli (1991) makes sense of this perception by highlighting literature based on the work of Bowlby, “once attachment is established in the child, a complementary system of protective behaviour develops in which the child desires to protect the attachment figure from loss or harm” (p. 33).

With regard to ‘the strange’, preschool presents the young child with numerous new stimuli to engage with, thus it is very likely that such a bombardment of strange inputs can be

perceived as quite an anxiety provoking encounter (Krapp & Fink, 1992). The interviewed teachers regarded the introduction of routine and structure in the child's life as one such necessary, yet unfamiliar change that children often struggle with and resist. Although the teachers describe this adjustment as a difficult encounter, their persistence to help the child is supported by Menaghan and Parcel (1991) who note the value of stability and predictability in childrens' environments, and the necessity of the transition despite its associated difficulties. The child's resistance and distress was perceived to amplify when the structure of the preschool environment was more than what the child had been exposed to and had become accustomed to at home. In an attempt to understand the significance of identifying and easing a child into a sense of routine, Gelfer and Mccarthy (1994, p. 79) postulate that "when children enter settings which are very different from previous settings, they apply previously learned skills and behaviours to the new situation. If there is a mismatch between these skills and what is expected of children in the new setting, they are at risk of failure". For a preschooler, failure may pertain to areas such as adjusting to the school rules and structures as well as fulfilling their role with parents, peers and teachers (Gelfer & Mccarthy, 1994).

Lastly teachers noted three specific 'change and the strange' challenges which related to the child's upbringing, particularly with regard to their exposure to the social world and thereby possibly hampering their capacity to transition. With regard to the findings which suggested aspects of race and language, Hirschfeld (1995) states that children have the capacity to distinguish race as categories and in that line of thinking, a factor of difference between people. Trueba (1989, as cited in Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 23) stated that "cultural adjustment for culturally different students is a complex process, and in the less successful cases, maladjustment creates obstacles to childrens' success in school". Literature in this area propose that teachers may be in a position to help children adjust and add value to their new found awareness of the multiple aspects associated with diversity (Fishbein & Imai, 1993). The third challenge associated with 'change and the strange' was rooted in the child's degree of exposure to family and friends. Literature in this area suggested that a child who has developed a secure attachment with their primary caregiver was able to be more explorative of their environment and more able to socially engage with unfamiliar people (Bretherton et al., 1991). Teachers reports linked appropriately with this statement and they

hypothesised that through attentive parenting that allowed for moderated and appropriate socialisation, the child would have developed a greater sense of trust in other parent approved adult interactions, as well as the sense that forming such new relationships with other adults does not compromise the bond between parent and child. Additionally, Menaghan and Parcel (1991, p. 238) put forward that “both low quality interaction with socialising adults and unstable, unpredictable social contexts compromise childrens’ attachment and security, with attendant negative effects in learning.”

5.2.2. Helpful qualities in the caregiver role

The second major theme that arose from the analysis was ‘helpful qualities in the caregiver’. This theme highlighted aspects that had proven useful to the teachers when they engaged with a child who experienced separation anxiety during the transition to preschool. The accumulated experiences and perspectives provided insight into the value of certain approaches for both mother and teacher, and in this way directly spoke to the second research question, which enquired on the ways in which teachers respond to separation anxiety. The manner in which the interviewed teachers responded lent to an intention to offer information that would assist in the child’s adjustment to the transition.

The first sub-theme discussed was ‘knowledge’ held by the teachers. From the teachers that were interviewed, there was a noted difference with regard to the level of training in the early childhood educational development arena. Amongst the thirteen teachers interviewed, the level of formal education and child care experience varied, in some cases drastically. However there was a common belief held by all, which described experiential learning as more valuable than formal education. When this view was considered in light of current literature, it appeared that there were opposing views concerning this perspective. Howes et al. (1992) endeavored to research what classified an effective teacher, which led to a debate on the value of formal qualifications as opposed to experiential education. The research concluded that there was no positive correlation between one’s years of experience in child care and effective teaching, and appropriate teaching behaviour. Instead they found that “for preschool teachers, it seems a bachelor’s degree in any subject or specialised training at the college level is an effective route to competent teaching” (p. 413).

This conclusion was motivated by the understanding that “there may be more good models of appropriate caregiving or teacher behaviour for preschool teachers in the general culture than there are for infant and toddler teachers” (p. 413). This conclusion may however be criticised as not generalisable, as it may be based on the specific challenges posed in the researched country’s educational system. The alternate position identified in the literature was presented by Calderhead (1996, as cited in Beijaard et al., 2000) who noted the value of experience as it potentially provides the context for teachers to attain “rich, well-organised knowledge bases that enable them to draw readily on their past experiences” (p. 753). Despite the contrasting research on this issue, it appears that the teachers in this study perceived experiential learning as more valuable in making sense of how to respond to preschoolers during the transitional period.

Teachers also mentioned a spectrum of approaches they viewed useful. This included the parent bringing the child to the initial enrolment interview, to visually grasp what school looks like, what it requires from them and who they will be interacting with. This was found to aid the parent when they introduced the concept of school to the child. Furthermore Rauh, Ziegenhain, Muller and Wijnroks (2000) reported that the manner in which a child is introduced to child care institutions is a key factor for consideration, as an abrupt familiarisation can evoke distress in the child and thereby have strenuous impacts on the quality of the attachment between parent and child. It was also reported that when the mother was able to expose the child and mediate the transition in a more gradual and manageable form, adjustment was notably easier. This research corresponded well with the teachers’ mention of gradual exposure to the school in assisting the anxious child in transitioning. However, teachers added that with regard to time, the process of gradual exposure must follow a constant and manageable graduation. Consistency and routine were reiterated as key components for a child’s development. In a similar sense, teachers also offered insight into the difficulties posed by ‘Mondays’ and the possible contributing and exacerbating factors. Overall, this sub-theme proposed that the teacher role places the teacher in a position which allows them to observe patterns of behaviour and create preventative measures through their accumulated knowledge. This knowledge can be communicated to parents and other teachers to prepare them for the child’s transition. More specifically, this information is helpful, as it informs the parent that the initial few days

are a difficult transition for the child and thus both teacher and parent need to be attentive to the child and their individual experience of the transition and their adjustment to separation and individualisation.

This discussion once again highlights that separation anxiety, although a transient process differs in its transient nature from one child to the next, and thus both parents and teachers need to be patient with the specific child and remain understanding of their responses to separation (Margetts, 2002). Hence teachers offer these options and advice in light of the knowledge they hold about separation anxiety and the reality that there is no one recipe that can be applied to all children, parents and teachers. Rather it is the wealth of knowledge held by the teacher that allows them the capacity to provide the parent and child with various options and perspectives, which they have accumulated. Hess et al. (1979, p. 314) stated that “teaching in a preschool, dealing with groups of children, administering a child care program, and interacting with parents, takes experience and skill” and in this light, the teachers accumulated knowledge can be seen as a valuable resource in child care.

In the discussions concerning ‘coping through creativity and distraction’, the teachers were observed to be quite confident of their respective methods. Beijaard et al. (2000, p. 750) provided a possible explanation for this confidence and postulated that “teachers’ perceptions of their own professional identity affect their efficacy and professional development as well as their ability and willingness to cope with educational change and to implement innovations in their own teaching practice”. In addition to understanding the possible functionality of exuded confidence, it seemed necessary to analyse the proposed methods of coping they have confidence in, in terms of existing literature. The teachers put forward a wide variety of creative approaches and distractions, however many of them were unique and tailored to individual work ethic, rendering them not generalisable enough to locate in the larger body of literature. Despite the lack of supporting literature, it is acknowledged that teachers perceived the offered collection of ideas as their successful responses to dealing with preschoolers who were experiencing difficulty adjusting to the transition. Hence, it seems that the usefulness of these unique approaches is more subjective and thereby holds value to those directly affected by them. Research in the field does however comment on the categories these creative methods seem to touch on, such

as rewards, praise and encouragement. It is worth noting that there are valuable yet distinguishing factors amongst the three techniques.

Laishley (1983) explains that rewards are often most useful in difficult situations, where the child is struggling or in a state of distress. Such overwhelming emotion can cloud their ability to see the necessity or benefits of the situation, thus a reward in such cases can be used to motivate the child. The teachers did not appear to use the items mentioned (such as confectionery) as rewards per se, but rather it seems they were used as a means of distraction. Laishley further mentions that praise can be seen as a verbal reward and this was evident when the teachers acknowledged the child for parting with a comfort object, for example. It is important to note that the difference between praise and encouragement, is that praise brings attention to the child, whereas encouragement brings attention to what the child is doing (Laishley, 1983). Thus, although both are useful techniques, the lack of emphasis on the end result characteristic of encouragement, places greater attention on the child's efforts, despite the result and thereby also encourages perseverance and avoids a level of judgement (Laishley, 1983).

Despite the persistent efforts of the teacher however, some children still struggle and their difficulties continue further into the day. In making sense of the value of the teacher's methods in light of their non-scientifically proven efficacy, Laishley (1983) notes that distraction may not always be the most effective means, however it is a valuable option in light of passively waiting for the child to calm down while the child engages in self destructive acts. With regards to the innovations of the teacher, there was mention of the need for teachers to be well organised and to have their day planned in advance. In this way the creative tasks planned for the day keeps the child stimulated and distracted, thus the child is never given time to be bored or to begin thinking about their mother again.

In addition, teachers also mentioned that it was sometimes helpful when the mother allowed the child to bring a 'comfort' object to school, which the child could hold onto during the course of the day. "Non-social attachment objects can and do play an important role in the lives of young children. Understanding how blankets, teddy bears, bottles or other security items contribute to preschoolers' lives can help parents and teachers nurture

the emotional development of young children” (Jalongo, 1987, para. 28). While teachers were able to understand the idea of bringing such comfort objects during the adjustment period, they also expressed an eagerness to separate it from the child. Jalongo (1987, para. 25) also noted that “attachment objects should be handled with the same sensitivity as a child’s fears. In fact, these objects sometimes appear to be young children’s way of dealing with their most fundamental fear – the fear of abandonment by their parents”. This notion of comfort or attachment objects is what Winnicott (1971) conceptualised as a transitional object, which acted as “a defence against anxiety” (p. 4). Winnicott noted that the transitional object may symbolically represent the mother and help the child transition from merger to separation with the mother. From the literature, comfort/transitional objects clearly have a significant function with regard to the child’s adjustment and perhaps in light of this information, schools need to be more respectful and accepting of them, perhaps encouraging the idea to parents with separation anxious children.

It was also regularly mentioned that children have the capacity to pick up on the emotional state of the parent and the teacher. In light of the fact that children often look toward the caregiver for cues to guide their own emotion, it is vital that both parties remain calm and patient with the child. Remaining calm and patient also extend to both mother and teacher, taking the time to talk to their child about the events of the day. Teachers noted that if the child is old enough, it was important to talk and reason with them. “By 4 years of age the ability to negotiate plans regarding maternal departures is sufficiently well developed to have a significant influence on the child’s behaviour” (Marvin & Greenberg, 1982, as cited in Bretherton et al., 1991, p. 3), thus each can begin to see the perspective of the other and work toward negotiating a joint goal - Bowlby’s goal corrected partnership between parent and child. The significant information to be discussed with the child included the reasons the child needs to attend school, why the parent has to leave, and perhaps even explicit indication about when the mother will return.

In the last identified sub-theme, teachers appeared to be slightly contradictory in nature. They previously criticised mothers for ‘babying’ their child, however the teachers themselves conveyed a desire to nurture the anxious child in a somewhat ‘babying’ way. This discrepancy may again speak to the entitled position taken by caregivers over parents, as previously discussed. The findings of this sub-theme suggest that it is within the role of

the teacher to be attentive and responsive to the physical and emotional needs of the child when the parent is not present (Howes et al., 1992). Also the sub-theme indicates that there is a sense of protectiveness on the part of the teacher toward the child, particularly as part of their duty as the caregiver whilst the child is at school and away from their parent. In addition to this, teachers also argued that they can potentially be seen as the 'second mother' to the child, especially in consideration of the amount of time the child spends in their care, as compared to the mothers care. However this is in contrast to findings of Ahnert and Lamb (2003, p. 1044) which concluded that "mothers of children in out-of-homecare compensated for the time they spent away from their children by interacting at increased intensity when they were with their children in the early morning and evening hours". This discrepancy cannot be formally proven, as the mothers of separation anxious children were not interviewed. However the teachers' perceptions can be noted as possibly sample specific perceptions. Over and above this discrepancy, the essence of what is being expressed is supported by Ahnert and Lamb (2003, p. 1045) who argued that young children "need sensitive support from their mothers to re-equilibrate emotionally. Lengthy periods spent in child care settings surely exacerbate these needs, making it harder for parents to respond appropriately and threatening the supportive quality of parent-child relationships". The love, attentiveness and responsiveness are fundamental features in developing a sense of security and self-esteem in the child, and the possibility of this love and attention being threatened due to an unavailable parent was acknowledged by teachers.

In linking with the mention of developing a sense of security in the child, teachers note the importance of cultivating independence in the child. Such independence is said to be achieved by increasing their confidence levels through developmental and school related praise and rewards. Laishley (1983, p. 155) notes that a child may become close to one trusted adult and thus it is the duty of that adult to help build their "confidence in other adults and to mix with children" which appears pertinent in the school environment where it is necessary for the child to engage with a number of teachers and children. Jalongo (1987) also noted that as a child is able to develop competence and self-assurance, the comfort object will begin to decline in importance.

Lastly, all teachers emphasised the value in the parent-teacher relationship, which was characterised by firm boundaries and clear communication. This was said to not only promote the child's adjustment, but also the parent's adjustment. Laishley (1983) concurred with this value particularly in child care institutions where it is important for both parties to support each other and negotiate common goals that further promote stability and consistency in the child's life. This understanding appears pivotal as literature suggests that the home environment is just as critical to the school environment with regard to a child's learning, and thus both institutions need to work collaboratively to assist and enhance a child's development and adjustment to significant developmental transitions (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

5.3. Directions for Future Research

This research has been exploratory in nature and has thereby sought to make a contribution to the larger body of literature regarding early childhood separation anxiety. It is suggested that future research focus on areas highlighted by the study. Firstly, separation anxiety during this transitional period followed a similar presentation as the types of behaviours identified in the existing literature. However, in a country like South Africa, which is rich in diversity, it would be novel to investigate how parents of different cultures manage the transition and the associated behaviours. This would entail exploring how the child's behaviour is made sense of, and how discipline is approached in light of culturally influenced values, beliefs and norms.

In addition, the study consisted of female participants only. It seems future research is warranted as to why male preschool teachers are such a rare commodity. Furthermore, current literature does associate attachment as developing through attentiveness and nurturance, which society associates with female figures. Thus it would be interesting to explore the perceptions and role identity of male preschool teachers.

It also seems worthwhile to expand on some of the 'minority' groups that were identified by the interviewed teachers, such as single mothers, the different language and racial groups. Correlation studies may provide more concrete evidence to the teachers' perceived ideas about these as predisposing factors to separation anxiety.

Lastly, the teachers discussed mothers to quite an extent, and it may be useful to explore maternal separation anxiety and mothers' experience of motherhood. In the former the study would aim to compare the occurrence of separation anxiety in first-time mothers, as compared to mothers with more than one child. The exploration would aspire to produce insights regarding the trajectory of maternal separation anxiety in relation to maternal identity. For the purposes of the study, maternal identity would encompass one's perceptions about being a first-time or a more experienced mother. The latter study would be in particular relation to mothers who have children who are experiencing emotional, physical, or mental difficulties in preschool and how their experience of the transition has been, thus adding to the body of literature on early childhood development.

5.4. Limitations of the Study

The choice of sample composition may be a limitation of the study. Three private preschools participated in the study and it was evident that this is a small number as compared to the number of preschools in the Johannesburg area. However a large sample was not necessary, as the study did not aim to generalise the findings to the greater Johannesburg population, but rather endeavoured to apply a more exploratory study. In this way, because the three schools were able to fulfil the desired sample size, it was no longer necessary for additional schools to be contacted.

With regard to the participating schools, each school varied in the number of teachers employed, thus all the teachers were provided with participation letters and only those who were interested in participating replied. In turn, it is possible that the motivations for participation differed from one participant to another. Thus it is possible that while certain teachers chose to participate because of finding separation anxiety an overwhelming encounter, others may have participated because of a sense of confidence in their level of competency. This variation may have had an influence on the nature of the data collected. At the same time, this variation may also have the potential to add to the richness of the data in this analysis.

Another limitation of the study was the decision to use individual interviews for the teachers, as opposed to a focus group. A focus group could be beneficial, in that it would

have allowed for the discussion of general understandings held about early childhood separation anxiety, without entering into specific incidences/children that are of a more sensitive nature. It is also valuable in the exploration of participant's knowledge, perspectives and experiences, thus attaining individual views as well as shared views (Kitzinger, 1995). However, Smithson (2000) speaks of the possible occurrence of a dominant voice in a focus group. This dominant voice may interfere with another's ability to voice their own opinion, guide the discussion in a biased manner, or whether in fact the information of this voice is truly a representation of the group as a whole. In consideration of the various levels of career experience and therefore confidence to speak forward on the matter over another, individual interviews appeared more respectful and beneficial to hearing the voice of each teacher.

A final limitation of the study was that many of the children start at the school from a young age and then advance through the age-specified classes within the same school, sometimes with the same teacher. In light of this occurrence, it was considered that familiarity with the school and teacher in this way may have assisted children to make the transition better within their schooling years. This is important to bear in mind as this occurrence also seemed to hinder some of the teachers' capacity to speak about recent exposure to separation anxiety and rather promoted a tendency to speak about general career experiences rather than a desired combination of both current and overarching occupational exposure to early childhood separation anxiety thereby influencing the nature of the data collected.

5.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored the ways in which teachers make sense of and understand separation anxiety, as well as explored their experiences responding to separation anxious children. From this exploration, the teacher was acknowledged as a key figure with notable influence during the critical transitional period. Moreover, a greater understanding and awareness was developed with regard to the ways in which this significant role was fulfilled. The perspectives and experiences collected and interpreted during the study, offered two predominant themes and numerous adjacent sub-themes, all of which appear to align

themselves comfortably within the respective research questions put forward at the beginning of the study. In essence, the study investigated and found that separation anxiety during the transition from home to preschool was a 'challenging encounter'. It was discovered that there were many difficulties for the child, mother and teacher during this time. However through the use of the identified 'helpful qualities in the caregiver role', the difficult process was seen as transient, as the child was able to feel a sense of safety and security through the combined efforts of the mother and the teacher. These findings offered additional and supportive knowledge to the larger body of literature in the field. In a more practical sense the concluding knowledge, ideas and support can be used by those who may be inexperienced in the child care field or who may be struggling with the identified difficulties during this time.

Also, with regard to parents, the study provided mothers with a sense of awareness of some of their contributions to the challenging encounter, as well as insights into assisting their child to adjust. It also encouraged mothers to utilise the advice offered by teachers and make careful decisions regarding their child's care. Often the beliefs, values and attitudes of parents, influence their choices about schooling and this study empowers parents in their decisions. For example, the option to request a more experienced teacher to manage their separation anxious child; or knowing the option of gradual exposure to the preschool; or empowering the mother to set boundaries with the teacher about some of the creative and distractive coping approaches that may not be in keeping with the parent's child raising philosophy (such as offering confectionery to distract).

Moreover, the value of having investigated this particular transitional period from a teacher's perspective, allowed for a greater understanding of a developmentally normative life transition, which evokes developmentally normative separation anxiety. The significance of the teachers' perceptions sheds light on the mediating role they play in this difficult period and how there is potential for maladjustment if the child is not met with appropriate attentiveness and responsiveness. Furthermore, the manner in which this transition is negotiated is often a predictor of how future life transitions will be met. Thus, as teachers fulfill their duties to help children adjust to the preschool setting, the significance of their role is once again highlighted in light of the child's overall development.

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Appendices: A-F

Note:

The Participant Information letter (Appendix A) mentioned this study's interest to explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers and first-time mothers. Literature has suggested that these two adult figures play significant roles in the child's development. However it appeared that the nature of the information required from each figure for such an exploration differed in complexity and sensitivity and would therefore warrant independent research, particularly at an exploratory level. Therefore the examination of both these perspectives was operationalised as part of a broader study exploring separation anxiety in preschoolers.

Moreover, by noting the different teacher and mother perspectives in the participant information letter, emphasis was placed on the nature of information required from teachers. In this way it was clarified that this study aimed to explore their perspective from a personal career orientated position and not from their own experiences of separation anxiety as a child or with their child. In conclusion, this study investigated teachers' experiences and perspectives and it is hoped that future research in the field of early childhood development, as well as separation anxiety explores the experiences and perspectives of mothers as well. Literature in the field supports mother-child interactions as an important area for further research. In support of this, the present study has also made a recommendation for further analysis with regard to motherhood in the 'directions for future research' section.

Appendix A: Participant Information Letter (Teacher)



School of Human and Community Development
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel: (011) 717-4500 Fax: (011) 717-4559

Good day,

My name is Delysia Pillay and I am a student in the MA Clinical Psychology programme at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am currently working on research in partial fulfillment for my degree and I would like to invite you to participate in my research project.

The study explores the ways in which teachers and first-time mothers experience, understand and manage a child's reluctance to separate, especially during the transition into preschool. I am interested in gaining the occupational perception held by teachers on this matter, as well as a more personal view from mothers. From the viewpoint of teachers, I aspire to gather information about how you make sense of separation anxiety, your experiences with it at the school, as well as your ideas about what you have found helpful in managing it.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the greater body of research that informs current interventions for children with varying degrees of anxiety during separation from their mothers. Thus in part, this research aims to explore the perspectives and experiences of teachers, as they have come to understand separation anxiety in their career.

If you choose to participate in this project you will be asked to part take in an interview which will be scheduled at a convenient and mutually agreed upon time and place. The interview will run for approximately 15-20 minutes and consist of questions that explore your experiences and understandings of early childhood separation anxiety during the transition into preschool. Your participation in the research process is entirely voluntary; you may withdraw your participation at any time. Participation will have no risks and no benefits to any person who chooses to participate or not to participate. With your permission, the interviews will be voice recorded to increase the accuracy of the data collected when being analysed. The consent form for voice

recording will be signed at the beginning of your interview. The interview material (recordings and transcripts) will not be seen or heard by any person in this organisation at any time, and will only be processed by myself. In addition, my supervisor will only see the transcribed interviews once all the themes have been pulled out and written up as general trends. Once the interviews have been transcribed, transcripts and recordings will be kept in a double locked cabinet in the research supervisor's office. The raw data collected will be kept for a period of 2 years if publications occur from the study or for a period of 6 years if no publications arise, and then only will it be destroyed.

While you will be asked questions about your personal career experiences, your response information will be treated in a completely confidential manner, and will not be made available to the school. Results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific journals, but not in any way that will reveal any specifics of any individual. General trends will be reported in the research report and your confidentiality will be maintained, although select quotes may be used at times to illustrate some of the general themes that emerge from all the interviews.

If you consent to participate, please sign and add your contact details to the consent form attached, and put it in the sealed, confidential box located in the main office at the school. Thereafter I will contact you to confirm your participation and to set up an interview.

Finally, if you are interested in the outcome of the research project, you may email me on the email address below, after April 2012 and a one-page summary of the research results will be sent to you. Feel free to contact either myself or my supervisor if you have any further questions.

Kind Regards

Ms. Delysia Pillay (Researcher)

Dr. Esther Price (Supervisor)

083 778 9067

083 570 2016

Delysia.Pillay@students.wits.ac.za

Esther.Price@wits.ac.za

Appendix B: Consent Form (Interview)



UNIVERSITY
OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

School of Human and Community Development
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel: (011) 717-4500 Fax: (011) 717-4559

I _____ consent to being interviewed by Delysia Pillay for the purposes of her research, exploring the ways in which teachers understand and have encountered early childhood separation anxiety in children. I understand that:

- Participation in the research process is voluntary; and I may withdraw my participation at any time.
- I may refuse to answer any questions that I prefer not to.
- Participation will have no risks and no benefits to any person who chooses to participate or not to participate.
- The tapes and transcripts will not be seen or heard by any person in this organisation at any time, and will only be processed by the researcher.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Email: _____

Phone #: _____

Appendix C: Consent Form (Recording)



**UNIVERSITY
OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG**

School of Human and Community Development
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel: (011) 717-4300 Fax: (011) 717-4559

I _____ consent to the audio recording of my interview with Delysia Pillay exploring the ways in which teachers understand and have encountered early childhood separation anxiety in children. I understand that:

- Participation in the research process is voluntary; and I may withdraw my participation at any time.
- Participation will have no risks and no benefits to any person who chooses to participate or not to participate.
- The tapes and transcripts will not be seen or heard by any person in this organisation at any time, and will only be processed by the researcher.
- Raw data collected will be kept in a double locked cabinet in the research supervisor's office for a period of 2 years if publications occur from the study or for a period of 6 years if no publications arise, and then only will it be destroyed.
- Direct quotes may be used in the write-up of the report and in any publications that may arise from the study; however these will not be linked to any identifying information and will be used along with other quotes.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule for Teachers

Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet with you and talk a little about separation anxiety in children. We will talk a little about your experiences with separation anxiety, how you make sense of it, as well as your opinions about the causes. Some of the questions may overlap, but that's okay, just do your best to answer as honestly and thoughtfully as you can.

1. Perhaps we can start off talking about how you have come to understand and make sense of separation anxiety. How would you define it?
2. How have you come to acquire your existing knowledge base on separation anxiety? (training versus experience)
3. When the time comes to drop a child off on their first day...
 - a. What are some of the responses you have observed from children who struggle to separate from their parents? (Proximity/teachers)
 - b. According to your observations, how did the mothers of those children react? What is your opinion of their reactions?
 - c. How do you tend to respond to these reactions?
 - d. How do you feel about the first day of school? As a teacher, are there any preparations for the day?
4. What separation anxiety behaviours have you observed during school?
5. How do you identify a child with separation anxiety?
 - a. Is there a particular protocol you follow in dealing with a child with separation anxiety?
 - b. How do you respond to children with separation anxiety?
 - c. Is there ever a point that you decide to talk to the parents about their child's difficulty separating? What cues or factors guide your decision to do so?

6. What factors, do you feel contribute to the development of separation anxiety in children?
 - a. Are there any things, if any, that you have noticed as characterising of
 - i. Mothers with children struggling with separation anxiety?
 - ii. Mothers with children who separate easily and are more independent?
 - iii. Stressors within the child's life? (Educational, social, familial)
7. What have you observed during the reunion of mother and child? What are your thoughts about what you saw?
8. What have you come to observe as helpful practices of the mother for children experiencing separation anxiety? How do you prepare a child?
9. In your opinion, what are some of the impacts of separation anxiety for a child?
(School performance; interaction)
10. What have you come to observe as common concerns and fears of mothers when their child is left at school in this state?
11. In your opinion, what factors do you think help children to settle more into his/her role as a preschool child? (schools role/parents role)
12. What factors, in your opinion, contribute to unsettling a child during the transition to preschool?
13. What do you think about the parent-teacher relationship during this time?
(contributing/challenging)
14. What advice would you offer to other teachers and parents who may find that their children are, perhaps struggling to separate from them when they are dropped off at school?
15. Any concluding comments or questions?

Appendix E: Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (SCHOOL OF HUMAN & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: MCLIN/11/005 IH

PROJECT TITLE:

Early Childhood Separation Anxiety: An Explorative Study on the Experiences and Perspectives of Teachers and First-time Mothers.

INVESTIGATORS

Pillay Delysia

DEPARTMENT

Psychology

DATE CONSIDERED

23/03/11

DECISION OF COMMITTEE*

Approved

This ethical clearance is valid for 2 years and may be renewed upon application

DATE: 19 May 2011

CHAIRPERSON 
(Professor M. Lucas)

cc Supervisor:

Dr E. Price
Psychology

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR (S)

To be completed in duplicate and **one copy** returned to the Secretary, Room 100015, 10th floor, Senate House, University.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure, as approved, I/we undertake to submit a revised protocol to the Committee.

This ethical clearance will expire on 31 December 2013

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix F: School Permission Letters



To Whom It May Concern

This letter serves to confirm that Delysia Pillay a masters student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand has been granted permission to interview parents and teachers at Auckland Park Nursery School And Baby Care Centre to assist her with her research project.

Layla Omarjee (Principal)

(011) 7266709

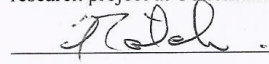
AUCKLAND PARK NURSERY
SCHOOL & BABY CARE CENTRE
41 DITTON AVENUE, AUCKLAND PARK
TEL: (011) 726-6709

Cottontails Nursery School

99 Willar Drive Northcliff 2195 Johannesburg
Tel: 011 678 5569 Fax 086 646 3032 Cell: 076 319 5804
Email cottontails@mweb.co.za

To whom it may concern

This letter serves confirm that Delysia Pillay, a MA Clinical Psychology student at the University of the Witwatersrand, has been granted permission to interview parents and Teachers for the purpose of her research project at Cottontails Nursery School.



T. Malek (Mrs.)

PRINCIPAL

HOUGHTON NURSERY SCHOOL

Association Incorporated – Not for Gain
Certificate of Incorporation No. 21/51/9

47 Wolfgang Avenue, Cor Ivy Road, Norwood, 2192
Telephone and Fax: 011 728 3657

8th March 2011

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This letter serves to confirm that permission has been granted to Delysia Pillay, a Master student in Psychology, to come to observe at Houghton Nursery School, and interview parents and children who will help her with her thesis.

We look forward to assisting her in any way.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jenifer Soicher".

JENIFER SOICHER
Principal

CHICO DAYCARE

CK 2000/050720/23

011-482-4980

10 October 2011

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN



This letter serves to confirm that DELYSIA PILLAY, a masters student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand has been granted permission to interview parents and teachers at CHICO DAYCARE to assist her with her research project.



VENETA CARPENTER

Principal/owner