

AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LATCHKEY CHILDREN

by

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## DECLARATION

I declare that AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LATCHKEY CHILDREN is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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M E RAMBAU

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DATE

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## **SUMMARY**

### **AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LATCHKEY CHILDREN**

**By**

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**DEGREE: MEd with specialization in Guidance and Counselling**

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The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the latchkey situation on children's relationships. A literature study on the concept 'latchkey' children was conducted and it was established that there are only a few studies conducted on the phenomenon. However, most of the literature consulted established that self-care has a negative and positive impact on children's relationships with the self, their parents, siblings, peers and educators. To confirm the findings from the literature study an empirical study was conducted by means of collecting data from three 'latchkey' children, three educators and four parents. The empirical research confirmed the findings of the literature study that a latchkey situation has indeed a negative impact on children's relationships with the self and others. The empirical study did, however, not confirm the positive impact of a latchkey situation on children's relationships with the self, parents, siblings, peers and educators.

#### **KEY CONCEPTS**

Latchkey children, self-care, unsupervised children, relational theory, relationships, intrapsychic process, interpsychic process
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTORY ORIENTATION

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND

As civilization develops, economic demands, financial pressure and social developments transform the family lifestyle into a society which results in the need for parents to work until late at night. Consequently, the traditional ways of living have been affected adversely. Children growing up in these changing situations are forced to spend their afternoons after school alone without adult supervision. This state of affairs has huge implications for the upbringing of these children. It is important to do thorough research to be able to understand this changing social milieu.

Some parents hire someone to take care of their children after school hours while they are at work. Literature indicates that there is evidence of work-from-home initiatives for parents who want to provide for their families whilst still taking care of their children (Mol 2004). Nevertheless, nationwide statistics indicate a significant increase in the number of children who are not supervised after school (Arrighetti 2001:65). According to Berk (2007:587) self-care children are those children who look after themselves while their parents are at work; they are labelled 'latchkey' children. The term 'latchkey' is used to describe unsupervised children who take care of themselves or spend the after-school hours without adult supervision (Dowd 1991:4).

The phenomenon of 'latchkey' children originated in the West during World War II. Powers & Anderson (1991:49) add that the term 'latchkey' came into widespread use during the war to describe the children left without adult supervision before and after school hours. The issue of 'latchkey' children became very prominent in 1943. The plight of 'door key' or 'latchkey' children was a central theme of the annual meeting of the American Association of School Administrators (Dowd 1991:4). The author thus maintains that the phenomenon is not new - it probably existed for as long as the family

and the school have been recognised as social units. Eberstadt (2001:14) reported that what was once called the plight of latchkey children is now, in fact, a major problem. At the same time, the number of latchkey children is expected to increase due to social and economic growth, as well as to the rise of future demands worldwide.

The situation of latchkey children is a Eurocentric phenomenon, since it originated in the West (countries such as Britain, America and Australia). However, due to globalisation, other countries are also experiencing the effect of the phenomenon. Factors such as divorce, single parenting and careerism have an enormous influence on most families globally (Eberstadt 2001:6). Codrington (1989) mentions that in South Africa both urban and rural areas are affected by the issue of latchkey children. Berk (2006:585) maintains that the increasing number of working parents could be one of the factors that more children are left alone at home after school. As a result these children have to care for themselves for many hours in a day or week until an adult arrives home.

In South Africa the situation of latchkey children in rural areas is not so critical due to the availability of extended families. The presence of non-parental adults, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives reduces the number of unsupervised children in rural areas. In urban areas the problem of latchkey children is more serious due to fewer adults or friends who could serve as caregivers to latchkey children. There is an increased need for parents to work long hours to maintain a reasonable lifestyle and to be able to provide for themselves (Belle 1999:2). The increased numbers of caregivers seems to be the answer to adult supervision for latchkey children preferred by working parents. Employment tends to be the primary means of survival for most families; therefore it is seen as a priority for a parent or both parents to work. Conger & Galambos (1997:137) found that latchkey children are more at risk of experiencing the negative effects of being in self-care than supervised children.

Self-care is an option of parents who are in need of child-care arrangements and do not have any alternative. Researchers such as Robinson (1986:4) and Belle (1999:2) indicate

that self-care is practised by many employed mothers in both rural and urban areas. Self-care is not an unusual choice of care-arrangements nor is it used exclusively by low income or single-parent families (Belle 1999:2). Dual-income parents from low, middle and upper class, living in suburban or rural areas, all choose to make use of self-care arrangements (Conger & Galambos 1997:137).

According to Boots (2005), the financial demand on parents is increasing at an unprecedented rate. Unfortunately, it is not these workers who pay the high price, but their children. This scenario has led to the disruption of the traditional family lifestyle, leaving many children unsupervised. 'Latchkey' children are the ones who suffer the most in regard to emotional, behavioural and scholastic maladjustment. In some cases these problems result in risk factors such as suicides, depression, drug taking and educational failure (Eberstadt 2001:16). In spite of that, some studies on latchkey children cite the benefits of leaving children at home alone: self-care may be quite adequate for some children. Comparatively, lack of parental supervision tends to be more harmful to girls than to boys (Belle 1999:35). Berk (2007:350) indicates that some studies reported that self-care children often experience a low self-esteem, antisocial behaviour, poor scholastic performance and fearfulness.

Mol (2004) maintains that what an individual is today is often the result of what happened when he or she was young. The author adds that the changes that take place in children's lives are influenced by the way they were reared by their parents, which in turn affect the wellbeing of those children. Parents are faced with the challenges of leaving children at home alone. Children from different backgrounds are also faced with the prospect of going home to an empty house while their parents are at work. These children have to prepare food for themselves and their siblings, take care of younger siblings and to do the house chores. They also have to study, do their homework and house chores. Furthermore, the pressure of assuming responsibility too early seems to be damaging to some children.

## **1.2 ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM**

### **1.2.1 Awareness of the problem**

The researcher is interested in this topic on grounds of being a school teacher and also due to personal experience. The researcher worked as a life orientation educator for 11 years. Her work included teaching learners about themselves, knowing who they are, teaching them lifeskills and giving them career guidance as well as identifying learners with emotional problems and referring them for professional assistance.

In the school situation, the researcher has observed that most of the learners who have academic, emotional and behavioural problems, are those who stay at home alone. It is during those hours that children are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs. As a teacher, the researcher further observed that some of the 'latchkey' children had been involved in most of the reported cases of child abuse, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and suicidal attempts at school. According to Potgieter (2006), children with support from family, school, community and peers eventually find a meaningful place in society as young adults, having managed the transition from protected childhood to independent adulthood. Parents should be responsible and support their children in order to protect them against emotional, behavioural, and academic problems.

The researcher also became aware that learners who spend the after-school hours unsupervised tend to experience relationship problems. Most of them struggle to relate well with their teachers, peers, and even with their parents. Ralph & Eddowes (2002:109) maintain that quality interaction is a key aspect of an interactive curriculum. Therefore, reciprocal interaction is essential for the child to learn and develop his or her potential. Reciprocal interaction is defined as a mutual interaction between an individual and other people, objects and ideas (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:306). It is a known fact that children develop and learn through interaction with the self and with others.

The researcher felt motivated to investigate the phenomenon of latchkey children in order to ascertain how their relationships with their parents, siblings, peers, and educators are

affected. The study seeks to understand whether the latchkey condition has detrimental or beneficial results on the children's relationships.

### **1.2.2 Literature investigation**

The literature indicates that the phenomenon of latchkey children is a worldwide concern. Researchers are not sure of how many children take care of themselves on a regular basis. The increasing numbers of mothers in the labour force and increasing numbers of single parents (mostly mothers) who have to work in order to maintain a household indicates that the phenomenon is increasing (Boots 2005). Shellenbarger (2002) disagrees with the notion of the increment of latchkey children by stating that the old problem of leaving children alone at home after school is declining, due to the high rate of unemployment. The author argues that there might be a possibility that the problem has decreased simply because parents might be hiding the information that they leave their children at home alone out of guilt, shame or fear of legal repercussions.

There are a few reasons making it difficult to get an accurate count of the number of latchkey children in the different countries. The researcher also found it difficult to find information on the accurate number of latchkey children in South Africa because no adequate studies have been done on latchkey children. Firstly, it is difficult to trace the context to get local statistics of children in self-care. The increase in number of working parents seems to be evidence enough that the number of latchkey children is high and increasing. Codrington (1998) supports the idea by pointing out that the international phenomenon of children and youth living on the streets has become an issue of concern also in South Africa. Although some of the mentioned children are merely street children, some of the latchkey children are also roaming around the streets in the afternoons. These children are left alone to take care of themselves. The author further reports that the studies indicate that nearly a third of Johannesburg's children and nearly half of Soweto's children fall into this category.

Secondly, it appears that some parents do not disclose the fact that they leave their children at home alone. Such parents hide the information because they feel guilty or are

afraid of their children's safety (Arrighetti 2001:66). Ochiltree (1992:52) maintains that in Australia it is also difficult to estimate the number of children in self-care. Even though parents hide the fact that children are left at home alone, there has been an increase in the number of places available for out-of-school-hours arrangements or childcare. Some working parents choose to make use of these places; others make private arrangements and some have no other option but to leave their children at home alone (Ochiltree 1992:52). Such parents choose self-care because they cannot afford the cost of alternative childcare. Parents are not happy to leave children at home alone and they feel guilty for not being there when their children arrive home (Shellenbarger 2002). Therefore, parents are left with no option, but to resort to the self-care arrangements (Berk 2007:350).

Thirdly, Dowd (1991:4-5) maintains that parents are reluctant to reveal the fact that they leave their children alone without adult supervision, since it is a violation of the law in many States of America. Many States have laws which hold parents responsible for the supervision of their children. Although the law does not specify the age at which a child can legally be left alone, some say children of eight or nine years old can be left alone, others say children need supervision until the age of ten to twelve years (Shellenbarger 2002).

The literature reveals inconsistencies regarding whether the impact of the latchkey arrangement is detrimental to the children's relationships. Some studies conducted report that latchkey children suffer from low self-esteem, antisocial behaviour and fearfulness (Berk 2006:587). The controversy exists in the literature whether or not the latchkey arrangement is a problem. Most research studies conducted showed different findings; some reveal the benefits and others show detrimental outcomes. The outcomes will be discussed in chapter three.

Berk (2007:350) maintains that high quality child care is important for parents' peace of mind and children's well-being. Bezuidenhout & Joubert (2003:1) believe that children should be cherished, nurtured and protected until they can fend for themselves. This indicates that the role of parent-child relationships is very important and forms the basis

of quality relationships with other people. Sue, Sue & Sue (1994:268) found that the socioeconomic status of the family is a weak predictor for healthy relationships, whereas family factors such as poor parental supervision and involvement are good predictors of meaningful relationships with the self and with others. Parental involvement is one of the most essential factors in the development of a child.

The researcher realised that a study on this topic is essential; because not many studies have been done on latchkey children. Most studies that have been conducted are based on the Western culture and mostly in the developed world. A study of this kind needs to be conducted in the developing world context. All latchkey children, irrespective of race, gender or social class, are affected by the situation. African children, as all children worldwide, are experiencing the impact of latchkey arrangements because of the global influences on their lifestyles. Global influences include factors such as economic demands and financial pressures, as well as social developments which transform the family lifestyle into a society of parents working until late while children are at home alone. Due to economic demands as orchestrated by Western cultures, both parents find themselves having to work in order to respond to these influences. The effect of such influences is that children are left to care for themselves and even with the added responsibility of caring for younger siblings. It is important to determine whether the effect of such influences has a bearing on the child's relationship with the self and with others.

### **1.2.3 Statement of the problem**

The study attempts to answer the following primary research question:

**What is the impact of a latchkey situation on children's relationships with the self, their parents, peers and educators in terms of the relational theory?**

For the purpose of this study the following sub-questions, arising from the problem statement, should be investigated:

1. What is the meaning of 'latchkey' children?

2. What are the factors contributing to the development of latchkey children?
3. To what extent does the latchkey situation have an effect upon the child's relationships with the self, parents, peers, and the school?
4. How can parents and educators deal with the problem of latchkey children?

### **1.3 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

The aims of this study are as follows:

1. A literature study on the relationships of children with themselves and with others in terms of the relational theory.
2. A literature study on the concept 'latchkey' children, the factors affecting the phenomenon of 'latchkey' children and the impact of the latchkey situation upon the child's relationship with the self, parents, peers, teachers, God, objects and ideas.
3. An empirical study using interviews and case studies to establish whether the latchkey arrangement has an impact on the child's relationships.
4. To give guidelines and recommendations to parents and educators on how to deal with the issue of latchkey children.

### **1.4 RESEARCH METHOD**

Literature review is an important part of this research for it reveals the work done by other researchers. It provides the researcher with the knowledge of concepts, and what is available in the literature on the definition, the nature, relationships and the experiences of latchkey children.

Qualitative empirical research will be conducted using biographical questionnaires, interviews and case studies. Participation is limited to three latchkey children, their parents and their teachers and a parent who was a latchkey child herself. Empirical research will be done to examine the effects or impact of a latchkey situation on the children's relationships.

## **1.5 DEMARCATION**

The research is conducted in one of the schools in Gauteng. The researcher is motivated to conduct the research in this school because of time constraints, and she is also familiar with the children, teachers and their parents. Participation in the study is limited to a small sample of parents who are employed and their children as well as teachers who work with these children. The researcher requested educators to hand in a list of learners who spend their after-school hours at home alone. The researcher asked the children and their parents whether they were willing to participate in the study. Participants who were willing to participate were selected. The interviews were conducted at home with parents and at school with educators and learners. The respondents are school-going children, their ages ranging from six to fourteen years. The study did not consider children of fifteen years older because they are responsible enough to manage being alone for a longer period of time.

This study briefly discusses the relationships and two components of the relational theory, namely the intrapsychic and the interpsychic processes. The intrapsychic process consists of the ego, self, self-concept, identity and self-actualisation. The interpsychic process consists of the relationships with the self, parents, peers, teachers, objects and ideas. There will also be a discussion of the concept 'latchkey' children, the contributory factors to the existence of the phenomenon of latchkey children, and the impact on the relationships of these latchkey children.

## **1.6 RESEARCH PROGRAMME**

### **Chapter one: Introduction and orientation**

This chapter sets the context and gives an orientation to the study.

### **Chapter two: Relationships and the Relational theory**

Chapter two deals with a literature review on different relationships. The Relational theory will be discussed in detail.

### **Chapter three: Latchkey children**

In chapter three, the definition of the concept ‘latchkey children’ is discussed, as well as contributory factors and the impact of latchkey arrangements.

### **Chapter four: Research design**

Chapter four presents the description of the research approach, design and techniques underlying the study.

### **Chapter five: Findings of the empirical investigation**

Chapter five covers the findings and interpretations of the empirical study.

### **Chapter six: Summary**

The research concludes with the recommendations and guidelines to parents and educators on how to deal with the situation of latchkey children.

## **1.7 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS**

A clarification of the concepts will be given in this section, but also later on in other chapters.

### **Latchkey children**

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2006:805) defines a ‘latchkey’ child as a child who is alone at home after school until a parent returns from work. Mol (2004) adds that latchkey children are children who return to empty homes, while their parents work long hours to sustain the yuppie (well-paid young middle-class professional working in a city) dream. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2005), latchkey children are those who arrive home from school to an empty house, while their parents go to work, run errands, or are involved with other social engagements.

### **Relationships**

According to the *South African Oxford School Dictionary* (2004:377) the term

'relationship' refers to how people or things are related. Saari (2005:9) points out that it is through our interaction with others that we are able to create a picture of the world and of ourselves. The interaction also helps children to perceive and to be integrated into the world and have a general comprehension of those details which provide the understanding of the depth and breadth of that world (Saari 2005:9). The child forms relationships with the self and others right from birth up to old age (Mhlongo 2004:34).

### **Relational theory**

According to Johnson & Young (2002:33), relational theories provide a conceptual framework of analysis and understanding of the life experiences and needs of individuals. Cait (2005:88) maintains that relational theories are interested in what happens in relationships. Koller (1995:5) adds that an individual should be seen in totality, not as a vacuum. This means that the child is an individual and must be seen as a whole, including his personality and relationships with the self and with others. A relational theory consists of two dimensions of relationships, namely, the intrapersonal and the interpersonal relationships.

### **1.8 SUMMARY**

In this chapter the introduction and orientation were described. The analyses and formulation of the problem, aims of the research and research methods and the demarcation of the study were outlined. The next chapter will focus on the literature review on healthy relationships and the relational theory. The review will be of help to interpret the relationships between latchkey children and other people.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW: RELATIONSHIPS

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Children are born into the world of relationships which begin early in their lives and last to adulthood. It shapes their lives (Dunn 2004:2-3). Right from birth children interact with their physical environment and make meaning out of it (Zirpoli 2008:125). Relationships in toddlers and pre-scholars are in the form of sharing feelings and ideas, of mutual affection and attachment (Dunn 2004:3). As the child grows older, he or she forms relationships with the self, parents, peers, educators, siblings and other people who play a significant role in his or her life (Bergman & Surrey 2001:21).

Relationships play an important role in the life of every child, including latchkey children. It is therefore necessary to understand the child's relationships with the self, others, God, objects and ideas in order to understand him/her. Nesser (2007:56) maintains that a supporting and caring relationship in families, especially a good relationship with parents, promotes a healthy relationship with the self, siblings, peers and educators. Therefore it can be said that a parent-child relationship lays the foundation for bonding, and how a child will interact with others.

The child's relationship with the self implies that he or she experiences the world based on his or her own inner thoughts and feelings. Relationships with the self are shaped by an interaction with a web of others (Bergman & Surrey 2001:22). If the child is involved with significant others, he or she becomes aware of and accepts him or herself.

A relationship with friends and peers, like any other relationship, is voluntary. The relationship is formed willingly, is not prescribed or obligatory (Dunn 2004:2). Such voluntary relationships are important in children's lives because members are on equal levels in terms of cognitive development and social power (Zirpoli 2008:143). Choko

(2004:31) views a relationship with peers as a relationship with equals where an individual develops social skills and learns how to get along within a society. Zirpoli (2008:142) maintains that peers and friends provide a source of understanding, cooperation, mutual respect, self-validation, intimacy, security and commitment.

A relationship with God is a relationship with a Superhuman being, as having power over nature or human beings (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2006:610). A relationship with God helps an individual to obtain a sense of belonging, of security and personal worth (Choko 2004:31).

The child also forms relationships with objects and ideas, which can be referred to as the world of things. The interaction with objects and ideas enables the child to attribute meaning on a cognitive level as he or she enters into a relationship with them (Koller 1995:96). A relationship with ideas and objects is mainly a cognitive relation, since a significant attribution is only possible when there is a mental activity (Vrey 1992:112).

In this chapter the term 'relationship' is defined and discussed in depth to determine its role in the lives of children. The focus in this chapter is mainly on children's relationships with the self and others. An in-depth exploration of how these relationships are affected by the latchkey situation is done in chapter three and five. This research examined how healthy and unhealthy relationships could result from the child's interaction with the self, with others and with the world. The study further examines what literature says about the effects of a latchkey situation on the future relationships and the education of the child. The discussion of the relational theory is essential in this chapter, for it will help in exploring latchkey children's relationships. The relationship of the child with his parents, peers, teachers, God, objects and ideas will be discussed.

## **2.2 DEFINITION OF 'RELATIONSHIP'**

According to Knight (2004:85-6) relationships are viewed as the very substance of life, which defines who we are. Dunn (2004:2) defines a relationship as a connection between

two people, both affirming it. Vrey (1992:20) adds that there may be an associative connection between objects or objects and properties or between people. This indicates that relationship formation is the way in which children get on with one another. It includes a child's relationship with the self, others, things, and with God. It shows how children are directly related and how they interact with their physical environment (Zirpoli 2008:125).

Saari (2005:9) further indicates that the absence of other human beings with whom to interact could likely cause children to have poorly developed senses of both their inner and outer worlds. The author also points out that our pictures and our worlds are not created only by us as individuals, but they are co-created in relationships with others. In other words, a relationship is an interaction between two or more people, meaning that we need others and others need us. According to Mhlongo (2004:34) a relationship refers to a series of interactions between two individuals. This means that being in a relationship is an ongoing process and it happens throughout an individual's life. The ongoing process of relationship formation is both affective and cognitive and is based on mutuality (Zirpoli 2008:140-142; Dunn 2004:2; Vrey 1992:22). There are thus three facets of a relationship namely the affective aspect, cognitive aspect and mutuality that are important and will be discussed below.

### **Affective aspect**

The affective aspect of a relationship could be an indication that the relationship could be pleasant or unpleasant, friendly or unfriendly, encouraged or avoided, accepted or rejected, depending on which pole draws them together or drives them apart (Vrey 1992:22). Dunn (2004:3) maintains that pleasant relationships are exciting, caring, loving and trusting, whereas unpleasant relationships may have characteristics such as betrayal, jealousy, isolation, rejection and distrust. Both negative and positive or unpleasant and pleasant aspects are present in an individual, but it is the total effect which motivates the child to exploration and constitution of the life-world (Vrey 1992:23). Children need affection to develop a pleasant relationship and to be emotionally happy and secure (Zirpoli 2008:111). Happy self-assured children are likely to interact positively with the

self, parents, siblings, peers, and educators. As a result the child develops a good self-esteem and begins to feel good about the self and others (Zirpoli 2008:111).

### **Cognitive Aspect**

Dunn (2004:156) maintains that in studying children's relationships the focus is on the connection between children's emotional engagement and their cognitive development. The cognitive challenges of children are characterised by cognitive powers, such as senses, thinking, recall, discussions, differentiation, integration, knowing, imagination and feeling (Dunn 2004:157). Relationships have a cognitive quality as an individual *attributes* meaning to objects and ideas in his or her lifeworld. Attribution of meaning to the real world helps the child to perceive, understand and to make sense of his or her own world. Saari (2005:5) reports that children need some stability in their lives in order to create a picture of their world. The author also explains that children whose lives are full of chaos may have difficulty in constructing any reliable picture of their world.

The knowledge of the environment plays an important role in relationships, since we are never independent of our environment (Anderson 2002:15). Reddy (1995:83) adds that a relationship is initiated by involvement with the environment and assignment of meaning in the child's life-world. Through assignment of meaning, a child is able to understand and create a reliable picture of his or her own world. Positive relationships are usually dynamic and interactive (Reddy 1995:83). As a result, positive and dynamic relationships will be built between the child and his or her parents, educators, peers, objects or ideas.

### **Mutuality**

Children's interactions with others are based on mutuality. Mutuality in relationships increases a child's self-worth; a better sense of self as well as of others' feelings, thoughts and needs (Schultheiss 2003:304). According to Sanftner, Tantilillo & Seidlitz (2004:87) the chronic absence of mutuality in relationships is postulated to be a key factor in the development of psychological problems. Sanftner *et al* (2004:87) state that disconnections occur when an individual's relationships with others are characterized by interactions that leave participants with the sense of not knowing their own thoughts and

feelings. Such disconnections lead to a diminished feeling of energy and a low sense of self-worth, and a reduced desire to seek out connections with others (Sanftner *et al* 2004:87).

Mutuality in relationships is thought to provide purpose and meaning in one's life and to enhance self-esteem, while active participation in mutual relationships should be the goal of healthy psychological development (Schultheiss 2003:303). This means that the feelings of others and the awareness of one's own needs will be enhanced, as Schultheiss (2003:304) emphasised, by stating that mutuality and interdependence are conceived as being at the heart of healthy developments and functioning. As a result, relationships based on mutuality are related to healthy relationships.

The next section will explore healthy and unhealthy relationships in detail.

### **2.3 HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

According to Mhlongo (2004:26) the child forms relationships with family members and others from birth. Family members form a basic unit for emotional security (Rice 1992:103, Zirpoli 2008:78). Children form relationships with parents, siblings and later with peers, teachers, objects and ideas. These relationships are either healthy or unhealthy and could either cause emotional well-being or emotional distress.

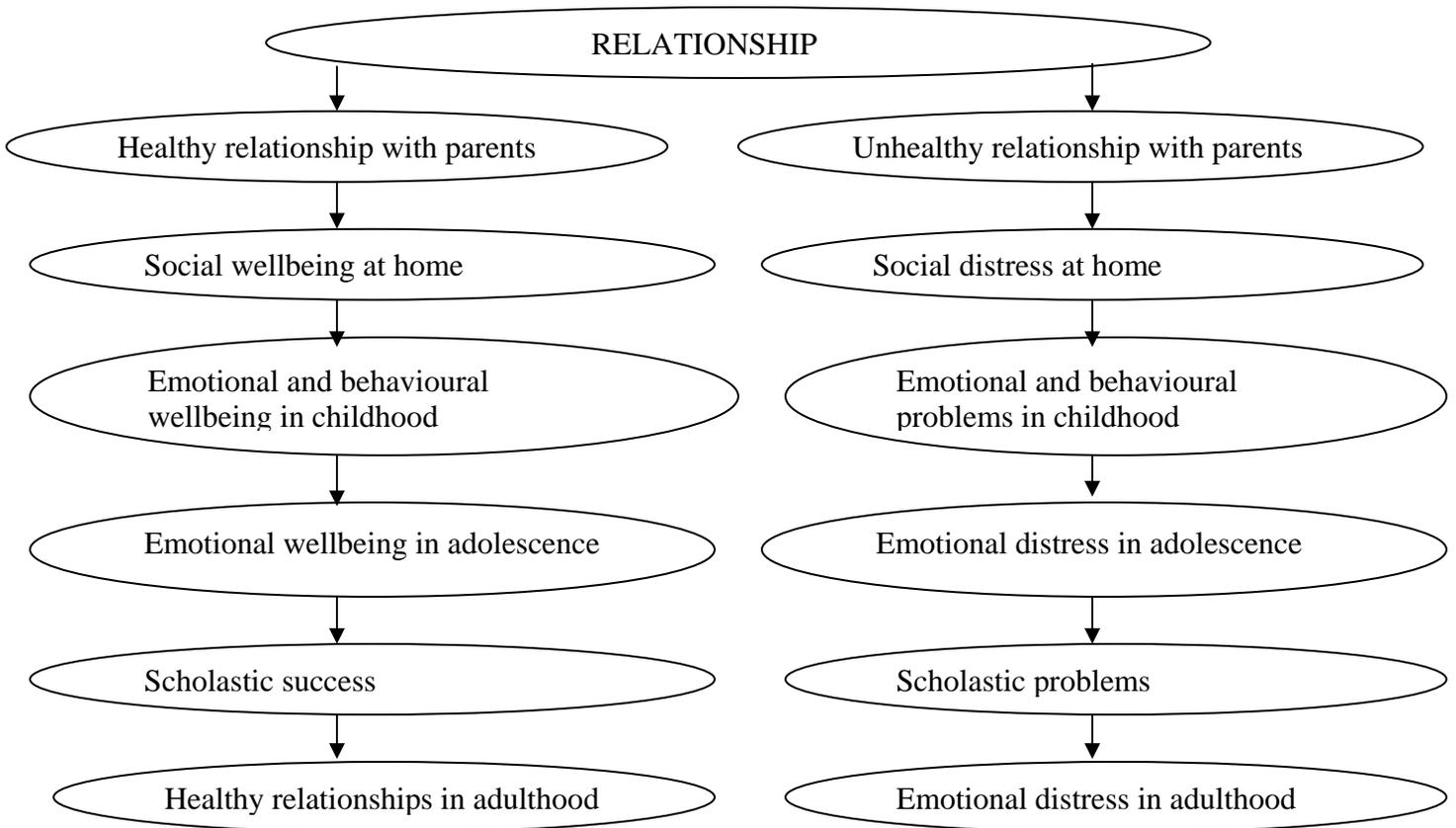
Latchkey children seem to be deprived of the basis to form healthy relationships with their parents. These children spend their after-school hours alone while parents are at work. Staying at home alone is a responsibility for the grown-up and might have cognitive, emotional and social side-effects on children (Robinson 1986:11). Latchkey children may experience behavioural, emotional and scholastic problems that could result in experiencing unhealthy relationships with the self and with others. An unhealthy relationship is related to social and emotional distress resulting in emotional distress in adulthood.

The model below in (Fig.2.1) illustrates healthy and unhealthy relationships between children and their families, especially relationships with parents. Buchanan & Hudson (2000:34-35) explain the model by stating that adult emotional well-being is the primary determinant of the quality of healthy relationships and social well-being in communities and societies. They also believe that if children are parented with respect, empathy and genuineness, they experience emotional well-being, and develop ways of relating to others that enhance their own and others well-being. Buchanan and Hudson (2000:37-38) maintain that behavioural patterns established in childhood are difficult to change. The relationships that children experience at home are therefore critically important for the prevention of possible relationship problems.

The quality of human relationships, developed from learned responses in childhood, might be an indication that problems in children developed way back with the parent-child relationship (Buchanan and Hudson 2000:37-38). This implies that if children experience unhealthy relationships with their parents at home, it leads to emotional, social and behavioural problems in childhood. Such children would also experience emotional distress as well as scholastic problems in adolescence and result in the experience of emotional distress in adulthood (Fig 2.1).

On the other hand, Fig 2.1 illustrates that healthy relationships with parents is the origin of a positive relationship that is characterised by social well-being at home, emotional and behavioural wellbeing in childhood and adolescence, as well as scholastic success. Alternatively, scholastic success, social, behavioural and emotional wellbeing in childhood results in positive relationships with the self and others. This positive relationship is an indication of healthy relationships in adulthood.

Figure 2.1 The model of healthy and unhealthy relationships



### 2.3.1 Healthy relationships

Healthy relationships start at home when the environment is conducive, the atmosphere is pleasant and parents offer support, love, comfort and security (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:61). A positive interaction is characterised by emotional wellbeing in children and social wellbeing at home. Buchanan and Hudson (2000:34-35) maintain that if children experience healthy relationships in childhood, it often results in scholastic success. Children will have positive relationships with the self and others.

Ralph & Eddowes (2002:55) maintain that feelings of wellbeing are helpful in children's relationships. When children are in a positive environment, they learn more effectively and this leads to scholastic progress. In order to achieve a well adjusted state of being healthy, children need to develop healthy relationships with parents and their life worlds

and this result in social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing in childhood. A healthy relationship develops positive outcomes such as feelings of empathy, love, security, acceptance, trust, good self-esteem and a desire to be in more healthy relationships (Silverman 2001:233). It could, therefore, be interpreted that positive outcomes result in healthy relationships in adulthood (Vrey 1992:73; Silverman 2001:233).

### **2.3.3 Unhealthy relationships**

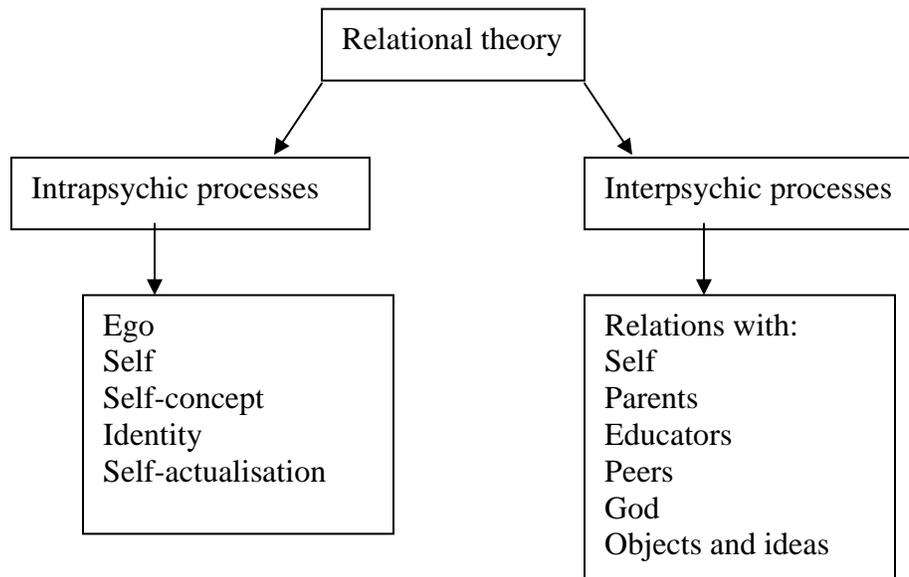
In unhealthy relationships, where children do not have a supportive environment from their parents and others, children are likely to develop negative responses to the self and others (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:55). Positive interaction is difficult and children may exhibit negative tendencies such as emotional and behavioural problems (Buchanan and Hudson 2000:36). If children experience continual feelings of failure in their relationships, they withdraw from the situation and may experience social and emotional distress. Children who experience an unhealthy relationship with their parents are negatively affected and this has a bearing on their scholastic progress, resulting in emotional distress in adulthood. Buchanan and Hudson (2000:36) explain that unhealthy relationships result in behavioural problems that are destructive and self-harming, causing anxiety, addiction, depression, self-mutilation and suicide attempts. Negative outcomes are the result of experiencing disconnections in relationships (Silverman 2001:233).

## **2.4 THE RELATIONAL THEORY**

According to Knight (2004:85) relational theories refer to the interpersonal approach which is defined by the relationships with other people. Knight (2004:86) goes on to explain that interpersonal relationships are necessary for the formation of the psychological structure of the ego or self and all the individual's relationships. Reddy (1995:20) adds that a relationship between an individual and his or her world is formed once an individual is able to understand the reality of his or her world. Relational theories include the relationships between the child and the parent, the child and the educator, the child and the child, and between the internal and external environment (Cait 2005:88).

This study focuses on the relational theory as founded at the University of South Africa under the leadership of Very (1979) and Oosthuizen and Jacobs (1982) as cited in (Strydom, Roets, Wiechers & Kruger 2002:14). The relational theory is divided into *intrapsychic* and *interpsychic* processes (Roets Inaugural lecture 2006). The intrapsychic structure is inner experiences within an individual, including the ego, self, self-concept, identity and self-actualisation. The interpsychic structure refers to external interactions with the external world; such as relationships with parents, teachers, peers, God, objects and ideas (Gill 1995:90). Fig 2.2 below is a summary of the relational theory:

Fig 2.2 Structure of the Relational theory



The focus will now be on the discussion of the intrapsychic structure of the relational theory.

## 2.4.1 Intrapsychic Process

### 2.4.1.1 The Ego

The ego is defined as a part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and the unconscious that is responsible for reality testing and a sense of identity testing (Concise Oxford Dictionary 2006:458). The term 'ego' comes from the Freudian theory. It is the

part of the personality that mediates instinctual urges (the id) and the environmental demands (the superego) and attempts to satisfy the person's needs in a socially acceptable manner. Rice (1992:75) defines the ego as the evaluative, reasoning power of the individual. The ego is seen as the manager, 'the executive' that governs the person's personality and is a source of energy for all psychological activities (Corey 2005:57). Reis (2005:86); Meyer, Moore & Viljoen (2003:45) maintain that the ego is not the master of its own house, because it is mostly directed by irrational thoughts of the id. It is through exploration of the ego that we are able to estimate a person's inner resources, the capacity to bear distress and disturbing events and the capacity to cope with mental pain (Anderson 2002:21).

Anderson (2002:21) examines the child's individual capacity to struggle and to cope in the face of life's adversity, rather than to become negative and passive. In Freudian terms, the id threatens the ego with tension, discomfort and pain, and the super-ego threatens the ego with punishment and guilt if specific needs are not met (Meyer *et al* 2003:60). "The needs of the ego include regard, recognition, respect as an individual, prestige and status and the need to feel worthy and important" (Roets Inaugural lecture 2006). If needs are met, it results in ego strength, resulting in self-confidence, self empowerment, high self-esteem and a good self-concept. If the person's needs are ignored, it results in feelings of inferiority, helplessness and poor self-concept and this may lead to ego-disintegration (Roets Inaugural lecture 2006).

According to Anderson (2002:21), the ego has a repertoire of defence mechanisms in the face of trauma, which might be external or in the form of some overwhelming bodily need or emotion. The ego employs various defence mechanisms to defend itself against conflict between the forbidden drives (id) and moral codes (super-ego) (Meyer *et al* 2003:62). If development is satisfactory, reliance on these defence mechanisms gradually decreases, so that the child slowly comes into contact with reality. The ego resources of children need to be evaluated in order to gauge the child's capacity to bear distress and cope with mental pain (Anderson 2002:20-21).

In working with latchkey children, the exploration of the ego resources is necessary in order to assess a latchkey child's vulnerability, frustration, anxieties and the ability to cope with the stresses and strains of being at home alone during the after-school hours.



#### 2.4.1.2 **The self**

Raath and Jacobs (1993:8) define the 'self' as the core of a person's life, this means all that we call our own as we perceive and see or experience it. According to Meyer *et al* (2003:104) the self is the centre of the personality (whole circumference) which embraces both the conscious and the unconscious. Raath and Jacobs (1993:9) add that the self is seen to be the functional centre of personality through which the person expresses his or her personality. According to Strydom *et al* (2002:17) the self develops early in the lives of children when they discover their own bodies and become aware of their own needs. Therefore it might be interpreted that the self is present from birth even though attainment of self-hood emerges only during middle childhood (Meyer *et al* 2003:104). A child comes to understand the needs of the self and develop the capacity to move and see the possibility of relationships with other people. Cait (2005:89) maintains that our relationships are influenced by our subjective sense of self, how we experience others and our expectations of these interactions. Bergman and Surrey (2001:21) state that the relational model emphasises the importance of the awareness of the self and others in a relationship. It is an indication that the self is seen as alive and well in the relational theory (Reis 2005:93).

Reis (2005:86) believes that the self is something that is a stable, reliable, integrative entity that has access to our inner states and outer reality, at least to a limited degree. As a result, the concept of the self continues to occupy the central role within the relational theory. Roets (Inaugural lecture 2006) compared the self to a house which is built up of experiences that are both positive and negative, and such experiences are also subjective in nature. It may be concluded that the self houses the child's ideas, values, attitudes, and beliefs including everything that is the object of a person's consciousness (Roets,

Inaugural lecture 2006). The exploration of a latchkey child's relationship with the self is important in this study. It enables the researcher to answer the research question on the impact of the latchkey situation on these children's relationships. Knowledge of the self is important for latchkey children for it enables them to understand and express their personality.

### 2.4.1.3 **ID** Identity

Identity is defined as a process in which a child takes on the attitudes of those upon whom he or she depends as if it were his or her own (Stern 2002:724). Self-identity is an ongoing process of self-reflection and change as one moves throughout life (Rice 1992:260). Identification probably starts at birth or early in children's lives when the child begins to distinguish between himself and his environment (Stern 2002:724). The child starts to become aware of his own personal feelings and will continuously ask questions such as 'Who am I as a child? In this way the child is searching for self-identity (Strydom *et al* 2002:25). It is through the concept of identity that people are able to answer the question "Who am I?"(Strydom *et al* 2002:25). In answering this question the child has developed self-identity, such as I as a child, I as a boy or girl, I as a learner, or as a peer, including categories such as I am clever, attractive, ugly, naughty, and responsible (Vrey 1990:45).

According to Saari (2005:9) identity is not something that fundamentally exists inside an isolated individual waiting to be uncovered or formed. Personal identity is something that is constantly being modified, created and recreated in negotiations with interactive people (Saari 2005:9, Stern 2002:724). Identity involves knowing who and what one is and the knowledge that one is distinguishable from all others. Reddy (1995:123) maintains that children who explore their identity and understand it are able to say "I can or I cannot".

Self-identity can be either positive or negative (Stern 2002:724). If self-identity is formed when the child is positively involved in his lifeworld, positive experiences develop. Negative involvement produces negative results in the sense that the child becomes

confused, insecure, unsure and unrealistic about what he can, wants to and ought to become (Reddy 1995:123). A child with a positive identity, unlike the one with a negative identity is able to actualise his defined self and able to adapt, negotiate and compromise (Strydom *et al* 2002:27).

Identity in latchkey children helps in the exploration of knowing who, what and how unique they are. Latchkey children with positive identities will be able to adapt and compromise with their latchkey situation. A negative identity will leave a latchkey child with confusion, insecurity, uncertainty, anxieties and unrealistic goals.

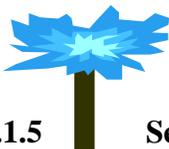
#### 2.4.1.4 Self-concept

According to Ralph & Eddowes (2002:14) self-concept is simply defined as how we think about ourselves. In other words, it is an individual's assessment of his or her own value and worth (Sue, Sue & Sue 1994:58). Self-concept refers to the picture that we have of ourselves and the values we attach to ourselves (Meyer *et al* 2003:366). In supporting the above definition, Berk (2006:446) defines self-concept as a set of attributes, abilities, attitudes and values. Rice (1992:245-6) defines self-concept as a conscious, cognitive perception and evaluation by individuals of themselves. It includes how one sees oneself, what and how we judge ourselves in terms of appearance, personality, ability, talents, motives, goals, ideas and social interactions (Meyer *et al* 2003:366).

Choko (2004:6) defines self-concept as a person's private mental image of himself or herself, that is, a collection of beliefs about the kind of person he or she is. Therefore, the self-concept is described as the core of the personality, and meaningful to an individual (Vrey 1990:47). Strydom *et al* (2002:15) add that the self-concept is a normative concept based on the evaluation of the self in terms of good and bad, pretty and ugly, clever or stupid.

The child's self-concept is characterised by the way the child sees, perceives and accepts himself or herself and this has an influence on all children including latchkey children. Self-concept and achievement are interactive reciprocal forces and each affects the other in a positive or negative way (Choko 2004:6). Children with a positive self-concept are socially better adapted than children with a negative self-concept (Pienaar and Peens 2006:311). They maintain that children with a low self-concept find it difficult to meet the expectations of the peer group. A positive self-concept results in characteristics like self-confidence, self-appreciation and the ability to view him or herself realistically. A negative self-concept results in feelings of inadequacy and inferiority which is seen by lack of self-confidence and being insecure. It is important to note that the child's development of his or her self-concept (either positive or negative) is influenced by his or her interaction with parents and other family members, educators and friends.

The exploration of latchkey children's self-concept is important. It helps an individual to assess his or her value and worth. For example, primary school children, including latchkey children with a positive self-concept, are keen to achieve and spend most of their time on academic activities, whereas those with negative self-concepts will avoid academic tasks and neglect their work.



#### **2.4.1.5 Self-actualisation**

According to Strydom *et al* (2002:28) self-actualisation refers to an individual's intentional efforts to realise his latent potential including his capacities and talents, which is the achievement of success. They also quote Maslow who defines self-actualisation as a man's desire for self-fulfilment, namely the tendency for him to become actualised in what he could potentially become. Meyer *et al* (2003:336) add that an individual's final goal is realising his or her true potential. They go on to point out that with self-actualisation, all that is needed is for the individual to discover his or her potential that is already present, and to allow it to flourish.

Sue, Sue & Sue (1994:57) maintain that self-actualisation is the term popularised by Maslow, which means that people are motivated to fulfil their biological needs, to cultivate, maintain and enhance the self. Mwawenda (1995:346) defines self actualisation as the tendency of achieving more than one is capable of achieving. Louw & Louw (1998:62) conclude that self-actualisation refers to people striving to develop their abilities and achieve their ideals.

Strydom *et al* (2002:28) describe the road to self-actualisation as an ongoing process and there is no final destination. Self-actualisation can only occur when all lower needs such as food, water, sleep, oxygen *et cetera* are fulfilled, and a self-actualised person is someone who has already satisfied all the lower needs and has turned to fulfilling a higher need such as self-esteem and self-actualisation (Meyer *et al* 2003:337).

Wiechers, Prinsloo, Kokot & van Rensburg (1994:90) maintain that the self-actualisation of children differs from that of adults because their attention is occupied in exploring and developing potential and talents. Furthermore, they add that the emphasis in children is on the development of a positive self-concept, which will enable the child to achieve self-acceptance. In this way a child shows his capability of understanding and attributing meaning while he progressively orientates himself in activities of his world (Wiechers *et al* 1994:90).

Latchkey children may experience feelings of insecurity, neglect and isolation due to spending the after-school hours at home alone. This may influence the ability for self-actualisation in the future. Latchkey children need assurances of love, security, care and encouragement in order to cope with the situation of staying at home alone.

#### **2.4.2 Interpsychic process**

The interpsychic structure is the second process of the relational theory in which the relationship is formed with the self, other people, God, objects and ideas. The intrapsychic processes have to be intact for the formation of positive relationships with others (Roets, Inaugural lecture 2006). The formation of healthy relationships and a

sound educational climate are considered important in the relational theory. For a child to orientate himself or herself in the world, it is significant to form relationships with people and objects in his or her environment. It is essential to note that the way the person experiences feelings of pleasure, happiness, sadness, aggression and so on determines the quality of the relationship. Koller (1995:60) maintains that the individual tries to remain involved in relationships which are associated with positive feelings and withdraws from those which induce negative emotions.

In order to determine the impact of self-care arrangements on latchkey children's relationships, they should be asked to describe their relationships with parents, siblings, peers, and educators. Through this process of exploration, positive relational influences and any available shortcomings are revealed (Schultheiss 2003:305). It may be interpreted that having awareness of self and others in a relationship is important in working with latchkey children (Bergman and Surrey 2001:21).

In the next section the focus will be on the relationships that a child forms with the self, parents, educators, peers, God, objects and ideas.

#### **2.4.2.1 Relationship with the self.**

*"Building a relationship with yourself is a lifetime adventure"* (Ngubeni 2006:85)

A relationship with the self is an inherited potential, which means an inner pattern of growth to which one is tied to (Anderson 2002:15). Surrey and Bergman (2001:21), and Vrey (1990:112) describe a relationship with the self as an awareness of the self and an integrated structure of perceptions, ideas and attitudes which the individual has formed of the self. This involves experiences and the attribution of meaning to the self and the development of a self-image. Cait (2005:89) maintains that our relationships are influenced by our subjective sense of self, how we experience others and our expectations of these interactions.

According to Anderson (2002:20) the child, through his or her relationship with parents and others, has already learnt that he or she is either good or bad and accepted or rejected. The author also adds that children differ in their individual capacity to tolerate anxiety and to cope with the stresses and strains of life. However, such differences might be experienced positively or negatively. Eventually children may feel that others are against what they want or desire. Such feelings result in low tolerance and frustration levels which cause sadness, unhappiness, insecurity, loneliness and anxiety (Raath & Jacobs 1993:85; Anderson 2002:20). If the child receives positive feedback from significant others and is experiencing success, this will result in a positive evaluation of the self. If the feedback is negative, it will result in a negative self-concept.

Schultheiss (2003:306) maintains that a positive relationship with the self helps the child to nurture healthy and productive interactions with others. Raath and Jacobs (1993:85) maintain that children (including latchkey children) with negative feelings do not accept themselves and do not know how to handle a difficult situation. Negative feelings experienced by latchkey children involve boredom, loneliness, insecurity, rejection, and unhappiness. It may be concluded that the relationships that the children, especially latchkey children, form with their family and others play an important role in the child's intrapsychic structure.

#### **2.4.2.2 Relationship with parents**

“Parent-child interaction is the first and one of the most crucial reciprocal relations in the young child’s life” (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:111). This interaction involves both parents of the child, and the relationship can be negative or positive depending on the nature and depth of such parent-child interaction. Therefore, parental involvement is one of the most essential roles in the development of the primary school child. The mother-child relationship is very important and the quality of the relationship lays the foundation of all future relationships (Berk 2006:419). The relationship with parents forms the foundation for bonding which determines the quality of the relationships with the self and others. This bonding has positive effects on a child’s resilience to adversity, promotes healthy development and prevents behavioural problems (Nesser 2007:57).

According to Choko (2004:24) parents who have the best interest of their children at heart want to raise children who enjoy life, who think well of themselves and who form and maintain close, constructive relationships with other people. If parents are not interested in and supportive of their children, children's relationships may be negatively affected (Reddy 1995:95). It is clear that such children are likely to experience behavioural and emotional problems such as delinquency, academic failure, drug and alcohol abuse, rejection, isolation, and anxiety (Zirpoli 2008:142). Since a primary school child spends some time away from home, other relationships are formed with peers, educators and schoolwork. However, the parents of a primary school child retain the full responsibility for the welfare and educational support of their children (Vrey 1992:96).

Buchanan and Hudson (2000:37-38) maintain that behavioural patterns established in childhood are difficult to change. The quality of human relationships developed in childhood, may be an indication that problems in children developed way back in the parent-child relationship (Buchanan & Hudson 2000:37-38). It means that children who experience emotional distress in childhood are likely to experience emotional distress in adulthood. Alternatively, emotional wellbeing in childhood may result in healthy relationships in adulthood, as explained early in section (2.3).

Reddy (1995:95) maintains that the way children develop love, respect, understanding and a sense of competence and self-worth is connected to the way they are treated at home. Parents and children should love, respect, understand and know one another so well that their perception of one another would be accurate. Parent-child involvement leads to shared experiences and the possibility of empathy within fulfilled, complete relationships (Reddy 1995:95). In that way interaction with parents has an influence on the child's developmental tasks (Raath & Jacobs 1993:63).

According to Reddy (1995:96) parents should also respect children's needs, limitations and potential, and not have unrealistic expectations. In contrast, Reddy (1995:96) states that children are often expected to assume responsibilities beyond their capabilities and these results in role reversal and role strain. For example, some latchkey children are

overburdened with responsibilities of taking care of younger siblings and do the house chores. These children are expected to mature early and assume responsibility while their parents are at work. Robinson (1986:48) states that latchkey children should be prepared by adults so that they may feel successful in assuming responsibility for their own welfare. Through parents' approval, feelings such as worth, confidence and industry can be fostered in latchkey children.

#### **2.4.2.3 Relationship with peers**

In a peer group, a child finds himself or herself in the company of equals in terms of cognitive and social power, in which he or she is expected to conform to the norms and standards of the group (Zirpoli 2008:140; Vrey 1992:104). In the company of equals the child interacts with other children in a cognitive, social, emotional and physical way (Zirpoli 2008:140; Dunn 2004:4). The child starts to dress, talk and behave in a way that is acceptable to a group. The reason for the child to join a group is to obtain a sense of belonging, status, recognition, emotional support and security (Dunn 2005:70). The child also has the opportunity to practice his or her independence in the company of peers (Vrey 1992:105). Dunn (2004:126) maintains that children who are secure in their relationships with their mothers are likely to be more socially competent and seem to be getting on well with other children. Collins (1996:26) agrees that an ability to relate and communicate freely with peers adds to children's feelings of security and enables them to settle down and face challenges.

The relationship with peers can be positive or negative and be accepted or rejected by them. A negative relationship is characterised by jealousy, insecurity, rejection, loneliness, loss, teasing and bullying or victimization (Dunn 2004:8). Positive emotions are related to the affection, the excitement, and the interest that children have in their friends (Dunn 2004:5).

Reddy (1995:101) states that once children are accepted in a group, they are more able to accept themselves in a positive and realistic manner. However, children who experience unhealthy relationships due to a lack of close relationships with parents find it difficult to

be positive and realistic in a peer group. Such children feel as if they do not belong in their group. Blackbeard and Lindegger (2007:26) suggest that solutions for healthy behaviour lie in peer re-negotiation. The suggestion is supported by Zirpoli (2008:140) stating that a child who has friends who values academic progress may lead to his or her improvement of academic performance. Choko (2004:31) concludes that a relationship with peers is a relationship with equals, and it is within the peer group that an individual develops social skills and learns how to get along within society.

Latchkey children who experience unhealthy relationships with their parents may find it difficult to cope in a peer group. They may feel vulnerable to peer pressure or even experience rejection within the peer group. A relationship among latchkey children and their peers need to be explored in order to find out how they interact with their peers.

#### **2.4.2.4 Relationship with concrete objects and ideas**

According to Anderson (2002:15) the child's relationship with objects and ideas begins when he or she is born. It means that children are never independent from their environment, and will always be related to it. Rice (1992:202) explains that children's relationships with objects start at birth in the object-centred world, as the senses of vision, touch, taste, hearing and smell bring them into contact with things. According to Vrey (1992:107) language plays a major role in the child's relationship with objects and ideas. Hence, the child has to know and understand the language in order to assign meaning to objects and ideas. In this way he or she will be able to have a clear picture of his lifeworld. The experiential world, therefore, consists of meaningful relationships with objects and ideas, other people and the self.

Reddy (1995:105) maintains that the primary school period is related to Piaget's stage of concrete operations (ages seven to twelve years), whereby children are able to apply logical ways of thinking to concrete problems. However, the child is still incapable of solving hypothetical problems that are totally verbal (Vrey 1992:107). This entails that he or she has not yet attained the capacity of abstract reasoning. According to the author, logical operations are internalised cognitive activities that enable the child to reach

logical conclusions. This is a cognitive activity that helps the child to assign meaning to objects and ideas, through involvement and experiences. The child's relationship with objects and ideas may be positive if he or she has a high self-esteem, self-confidence and a healthy self-concept (Reddy 1995:105). As a result the relationship with objects and ideas will be affected and will eventually affect the child's relations with other people and his world.

Latchkey children's relationships with objects and ideas will not be explored in this study.

#### **2.4.2.5 Relationship with educators**

Nesser (2007:57) maintains that the school plays an important role in that it can prohibit antisocial behaviour and promote prosocial development among learners. The most important single factor in determining the nature of the child's experience at school is the educator. The child's relationships with educators promote academic motivation among learners (Nesser 2007:56). The educator-learner relationship is the most significant factor which affects the child's academic progress and adjustment at school. It is *inter alia*, the educator's responsibility to guide and support the child to perceive, understand and make sense of the world (Vrey 1992:215). However, the educator's expectations can strongly influence both the cognitive and affective development of the child, either positively or negatively.

Buchanan and Hudson (2000:161) maintain that children spend most of their lives at school, and the school may have a profound impact on many areas of a child's development, besides academic attainment. They also point out that the impact may be positive or negative; for some children the school is a place where they are stimulated, valued, and encouraged to achieve their full potential, while for others **it** is a place of fear, failure and alienation. Reddy (1995:104) sees the school as a significant vehicle of cognitive and affective experience which widens the child's network of relations.

Koller (1995:100) maintains that once a child enters the classroom, his or her relationship with the teacher becomes important for building a healthy self-concept. Teachers are

faced with many challenges within the diverse group of learners in their classes, such as poverty, stress, depression, abuse, and other problems that affect the learning process (Koller 1995:100). School children need a sense of stability and security in their lives because when feelings of well-being are absent, stress occurs (Ralph and Eddowes 2002:55). They also stress that children still need the educator's support and understanding even if they come from a secure home. Vrey (1992:117) concludes that the more positive a child's perception of the teacher's attitudes, the higher the scholastic achievement.

When educators are aware, interested and involved in the lives of latchkey children and provide support, they may feel safer within their latchkey situation. If latchkey children do not have a supportive environment at school, they are likely to develop negative responses such as thinking that the teacher hates them, therefore withdrawing from learning activities or they may become depressed.

#### **2.4.2.6 Relationship with God**

A relationship with God refers to the spiritual relationship between man and a Divine Power (Choko 2004:31). A spiritual dimension is related to good mental health in an individual's life. This belief or disbelief has an important influence on the child's perception of and actions in every situation. In the case of a primary school child, the possibility of believing in God is closely related to the quality of the parent's religion (Vrey 1992:119).

The child gets to know the scriptures, although he cannot give meaning to it on his own. He or She learns to do what his or her parents are doing and saying, and may imitate them or identify with them. As a result the child's attribution of meaning may be affected in a positive or negative manner. Vrey (1992:120) states that without guidance the child finds it difficult to give meaning to spiritual truth.

The relationship between latchkey children and God will not be explored in this study.

### **2.3 SUMMARY**

In this chapter a definition of the concept 'relationship' was provided referring to various sources. For the purpose of this study the researcher opted to define a relationship as an interaction between two or more persons, objects or ideas. Furthermore, three facets of a relationship namely the affective aspect, cognitive aspect and mutuality were discussed, as well as the core concepts of the Relational Theory, namely the intrapsychic and interpsychic processes.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW: LATCHKEY CHILDREN

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

According to a study conducted by the City of Phoenix (2003) about one third of all school-age children, an estimated five million between the ages of five and thirteen, are so-called 'latchkey' children. Heins (n.d) states that millions of children are at home alone after school. This is an indication that the 'latchkey children' phenomenon is large and growing (Berk 2007:587). Your Family Health (2000) further stresses that currently, with an increasing number of parents working; there are more children who are at home alone. This makes one wonder whether the latchkey child's situation is a problem or not.

An overview of this chapter on latchkey children is indicated below in figure 3.1

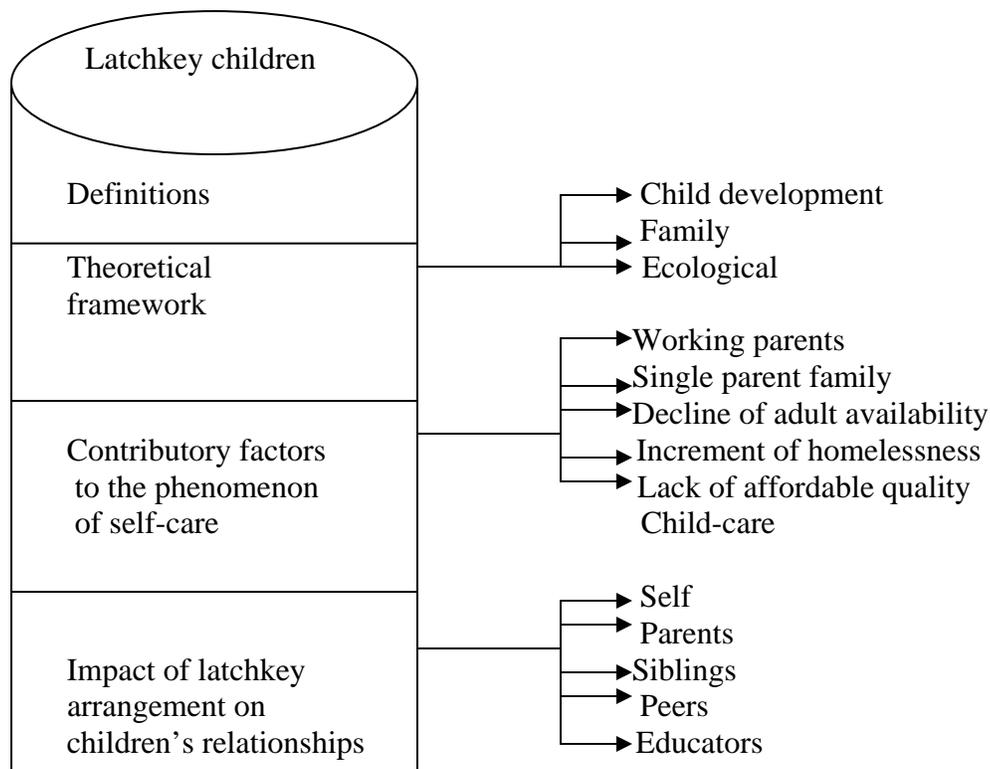


Figure 3.1 An overview of chapter three: Latchkey children

Chapter three will review how researchers define the concept ‘latchkey children’, and determine the contributory factors to the phenomenon of ‘latchkey’ children and the impact (both positive and negative) of the latchkey situation on children’s relationships. The theoretical framework guiding this research focus on child development and family theories as well as the ecological perspectives. The discussion of these theoretical frameworks is essential in this chapter for it provides the rationale and the framework for the study.

### **3.2 DEFINITION OF THE TERM ‘LATCHKEY’ CHILDREN**

The Oxford School Dictionary (2004:255) defines the word ‘latch’ as a small bar fastening a door or gate, lifted by a lever or spring. According to researchers (Dowd 1991:4; Belle 1997:8; Robinson 1986:2) the term "latchkey" is an American word, which refers to children who care for themselves after school, while their parents are at work. Dowd (1991:4) further describes children in self-care as those who take care of themselves or younger siblings on a regular basis during the out of school hours. According to Belle (1997:4) latchkey children are also called unsupervised or ‘home alone’ children, who take care of themselves while their parents are at work. In addition to the above definitions, Berk (2007:587) maintains that these are children who are regularly left unattended during after-school hours.

Codrington (1998) uses the term generation X to define “latchkey children” in South Africa. The author states that this is the generation that arrives home to an empty house, with both parents working, or in a single parent home where the remaining parent has to work to survive. Rathus (2006:447) adds that generation X is characterised by children from families where parents have to work in order to maintain their children.

According to Belle (1999:29), the term ‘latchkey’ is controversial. Some researchers object to the term ‘latchkey children’ because it implies that unsupervised children stay at home, lonely and neglected. The preferred term is ‘self-care’ and is referred to as an up-to-date term. The term ‘latchkey’ indicates that children are easily identified by the key

hanging from a string around their necks (Robinson 1986:3). The author also indicates that a key tied around the neck is a symbol of cold meals, child neglect and deprivation of a mother's love, care and affection.

Dowd (1991:3) agrees with Robinson (1986:3) that the term latchkey has a negative connotation, and the designated term self-care may be considered. The use of 'self-care' rather than latchkey has a positive connotation and encourages a more objective viewpoint. Robinson (1986:3) concludes that the term 'latchkey' is used interchangeably with 'self-care', since the majority of children care for themselves during the after-school hours. In this study the term 'self-care' and 'latchkey' will be used to refer to children who take care of themselves during the after-school hours while their parents are at work.

Dowd (1991:5) maintains that there is some difficulty in defining the term 'latchkey' or 'self-care' because there is no clear definition. The author identified five variables that make it difficult to define the term 'latchkey children' namely the age of the children, the employment status of the parents, the time the children are at home, the presence of a sibling and the amount of time the children spend alone. Dowd (1991:5) further indicates that these variables cause problems in estimating latchkey numbers.

Briefly, the term 'latchkey children' may be defined as unsupervised children between the ages of six and sixteen, who spend hours alone or with younger siblings after or before school, evenings, weekends, and during school holidays while their parents or guardians are at work. The definition is supported by Haley (2004) who maintains that it is between the ages of twelve and seventeen that children actually need their parents' presence. The definition covers the above-mentioned list of five variables that make it difficult to define latchkey arrangements as reported by Dowd (1991:5).

### 3.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE STUDY OF ‘LATCHKEY’ CHILDREN

Robinson (1986:125) identifies the theories illustrated below (Table 3.1) stating that the theories represent some rationales for guiding latchkey research. This research considers child development and family theories, including an ecological perspective to study the phenomena. An ecological perspective assists with the exploration of the place where latchkey children live. According to Robinson (1986:125) theories of Piaget and Erikson as well as family and ecological perspectives need to be considered in the study of latchkey children. The theories are illustrated below (Table 3.1).

*Table 3.1 Theoretical frameworks for guiding latchkey research*

<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR GUIDING ‘LATCHKEY’ RESEARCH</b>		
<i>Child development theories 6-12</i>	<i>Family theories</i>	<i>Ecological systems</i>
Piaget	Structural approach	Microsystem
Erikson	Social exchange	Mesosystem
		Exosystem
		Macrosystem
		Chronosystem

#### 3.3.1 Child development theories

This study will focus on Piaget’s and Erikson’s child development theories as indicated by Robinson (1986:125). Furthermore, only one stage from Piaget and one from Erickson will be discussed, since most of the latchkey children fall under primary school going age (Childhood phase : 6-12 years of age).

**Piaget's** theory describes a cognitive growth from birth throughout adulthood. This explains how the child understands and interprets his environment. Piaget explains cognitive functioning in terms of the interaction of individuals with their environment.

“Piaget tied together concepts such as schemes, adaptation, assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration to describe and explain cognitive development” (Rathus 2006:19). Piaget further identified four major stages of cognitive development namely the sensory motor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational phases (Berk 2006:219).

This study focuses on the concrete operational stage because the respondents are primary school-going children.

**Concrete operational stage (7 to 11 or 12 years).** Mwawenda (1995:95) calls this stage ‘operational’ because the child is capable of using logical reasoning on the basis of concrete evidence. As discussed in chapter two, children's thinking at this stage is still on a concrete level, not yet abstract. Children develop conservative concepts, can adopt viewpoints of others, can classify objects in series, and show comprehension of basic relational concepts (Rathus 2006:20). Although children can integrate concepts, separate experiences and draw conclusions, they are unable to think about abstract ideas and reason in terms of hypotheses (Mwawenda 1995:95, Louw & Louw 1998:80).

Robinson (1986:126) states that the presence of siblings and the amount of time spent at home alone might be associated with the cognitive gains and losses of the latchkey arrangement. The author also cites the example that children who are left at home in the care of older siblings may be good cognitive stimulators for each other through sharing communications and even through being involved in arguments. The amount of time children spend alone may increase some children’s sense of self-discovery. Lastly, a latchkey child’s cognitive development is determined by his or her socio-emotional development, which emanates from the parent-child relationship and other people closer to the child (Robinson 1986:126).

**Erikson’s** theory of psychosocial development emphasises the importance of social relationships and conscious choices throughout the eight developmental stages (Rathus 2006:10). Each developmental stage is characterised by a crisis, where the solution lies in

a synthesis of the two poles. It addresses the social-emotional aspects of the individual from birth up to old age. Erickson named the eight stages after the life crises that an individual might encounter during a particular stage (Rathus 2006:10). The individual should keep in mind that each stage indicates the positive and the negative poles of the crisis. Each crisis is brought about by a specific way of interaction between the individual and society (Louw & Louw 1998:51).

Erikson's theory indicates that we pass through a series of stages during which we must resolve certain social-emotional problems and when we are unable to cope with a socio-emotional event, our personality is adversely affected (Robinson 1986:126). When the crisis of one stage has been resolved successfully, this will lead to the solution of the next crisis. According to Rathus (2006:11), the positive resolution of an early life crisis sets the stage for the positive resolution of subsequent life crises. This indicates that an individual goes through all these stages and also deals with the different crisis of each stage.

This study will focus on the fourth stage of Erikson namely 'industry versus inferiority'. Children at this stage are mostly primary school children and latchkey children also fall within the same age group.

### **Industry versus inferiority (6 to 12 years)**

It is the fourth stage in Erikson's theory, suitable for a study on latchkey children because most primary school children are in this psychosocial stage. The main task in this stage is to become absorbed in mastering the basics of technology to become productive (Rathus 2006:10). Consequently, children at this stage need positive and constructive feedback about their work and behaviour, since achieving success is important in their lives (Robinson 1986:126).

Robinson (1986:126) maintains that the labelling of children will lead to feelings of inferiority that may be carried over into adolescence and adulthood. In order to expand our understanding of latchkey children, the author states that Erikson's theory allows the

formulation of a number of research questions such as: Do latchkey children feel a sense of inferiority due to the lack of adult attention during the after-school hours? Robinson (1986:126) further states that in some families a potential problem may arise due to confusing messages, for instance with regard to the issue of responsibility. A latchkey child is seen to be responsible enough to be left alone before and after school but that responsibility ends when parents arrive home. Similarly, the manner in which parents supervise latchkey children *in absentia*, using telephones, supervisory rules and daily lectures may affect latchkey children to develop a poor self-esteem and immature identity (Robinson 1986:126).

### **3.3.2 Family Theories**

According to Robinson (1986:127) family theories are concerned with interpersonal relations, family dynamics and growth within the family systems. The social climate of the family is very important in determining children's abilities to cope with self-care responsibilities. Robinson maintains that the structural family and social exchange theories are widely used in applied and basic family research. The use of these theories is appropriate in this study because it helps in understanding the interaction among family members. The theories also provide knowledge on how subsystems function in the case of latchkey children.

#### **Structural family approach**

According to Robinson (1986:127; Becvar and Becvar 2006:174) the family structure is a network of subsystems, in which family members interact within the family. Becvar (2006:174) quotes Minuchin who describes the structure as an invisible set of functional demands that organises the interaction within the family. Any structure or subsystem plays a role in maintaining the stability in the whole family. In this sense Corey (2005:424) explains that the family system perspective believes that individuals are best understood through assessing the relationships within the family. Becvar and Becvar (2006:175) defines the term 'subsystem' as containing various categories, namely *parental* (mother-father), *spouse* (husband-wife), *sibling* (brother-sister), and *extended*

*families* (grandparents, other relatives, the church, school and community) categories. The aim of the structural family theory is to provide understanding on how individuals function within a family and the role that any subsystem plays in maintaining the stability of the entire family (Corey 2005:424).

Latchkey children who care for their younger brothers and sisters emphasise the sibling subsystem. According to Rathus (2006:333) siblings make a unique contribution to one another's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Berk (2006:576) maintains that siblings rely on one another for companionship, emotional support and assistance especially when parents are distant or uninvolved. In most instances older siblings often assist younger siblings with their homework and peer challenges. Even though siblings' interaction contribute to the understanding of emotions and other mental states, and competence in relating to other children, they do not have the maturity of a parent to be responsible for younger siblings. Siblings also provide emotional support to one another and help with difficult tasks, even though there are lots of emotional conflicts occurring between siblings (Berk 2007:345).

The interactions between children and their parents suffer and even deteriorate due to the absence of parental supervision. In order to determine the above-mentioned statement Robinson (1986:127) came up with the following questions to be addressed in research studies:

- *What impact do latchkey arrangements have on the stability of the family systems?*
- *How do different family systems adjust their roles to maintain a stable family life when latchkey children are present?*
- *Do parents benefit more than children from a latchkey arrangement, or vice-versa?*

### **Social exchange theories**

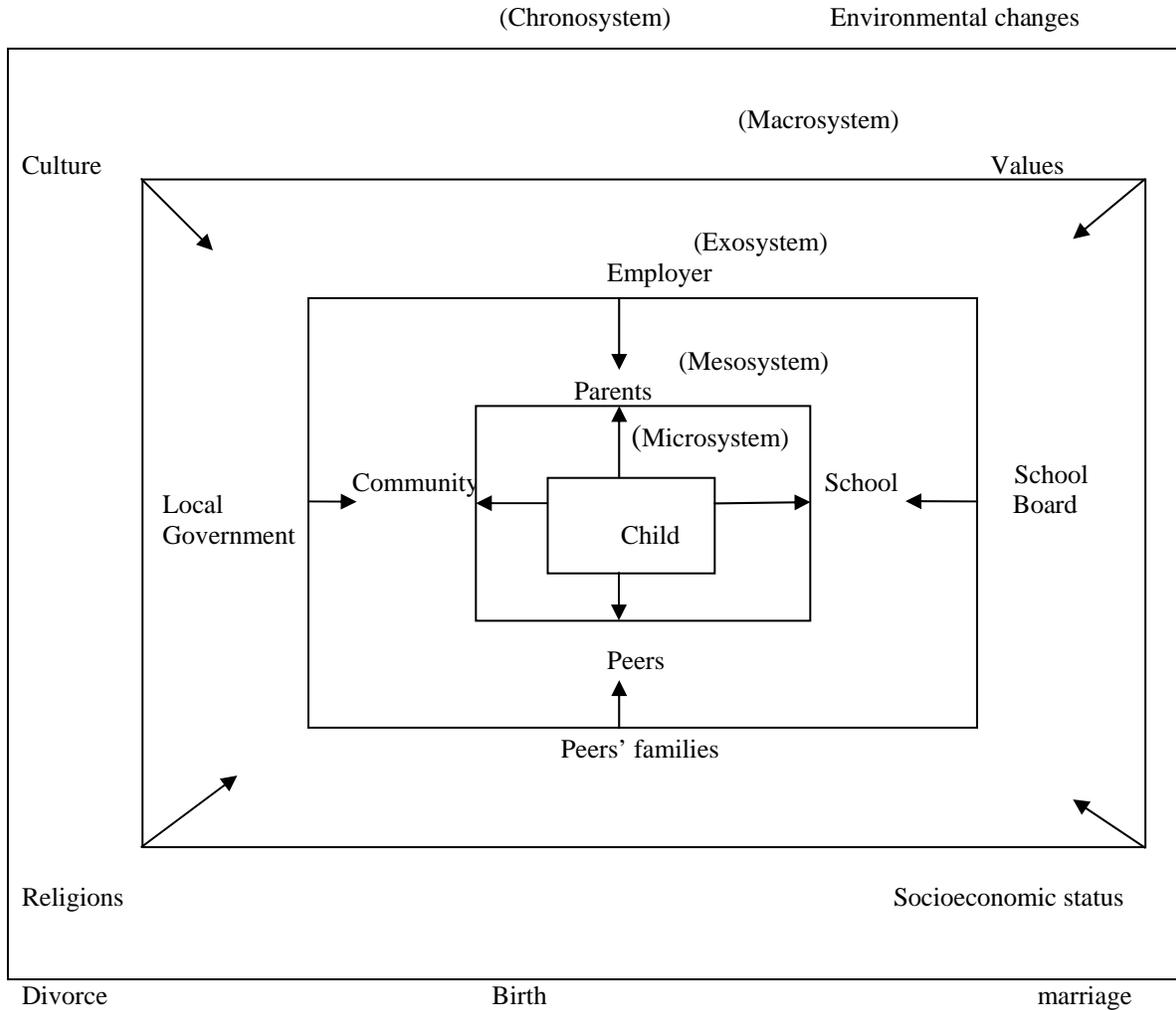
Robinson (1986:128) maintains that a basic principle followed by social exchange theorists is that relationships operate through an exchange of rewards. According to

Corey (2005:230) if a child receives a reward for certain behaviour, such behaviour is likely to occur again. In this case, children may exchange their time of being at home alone or taking care of younger siblings for special privileges or rewards. The opposite of social exchange behaviour is prosocial, meaning that it is the behaviour intended to benefit other people without the expectation of a reward (Rathus 2006:344). This implies that some children might not expect a reward for all the duties they have done while their parents are at work. Rathus (2006:344) argue that such behaviour is influenced by the kind of interaction that children have with their parents in different families.

Some parents may have problems disciplining their children, for they may demand rewards for caring for their younger siblings and doing all the house chores. Latchkey children may also use their self-care status as a bargaining chip for freedom on weekends (Robinson 1986:128). The author concludes that a potential source of family stress arises when the latchkey child uses self-care as a justification for poor school performance.

### **3.3.3 Ecological perspective**

The ecological perspective can be defined as an interaction between an individual and the environment. The ecological system theory views the child's development in terms of the reciprocal influences between children and the multiple levels of the surrounding environment (Berk 2007:24; Berk 2006:26; Rathus 2006:23). In this study an ecological approach is needed in order to address the complexity of latchkey children's relationships with the ecological environment. The environment consists of the child, family, peers, community, school, socio-economic status, religions, government and environmental changes (Swenson 2004:249; Rathus 2006:25; Robinson 1986:128). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner (in Rathus 2006:23; Berk 2007:24; Berk 2006:27) describes an ecological environment consisting of the following five nested structures (figure 3.2): Microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem.



*Figure 3.2 Ecological approaches to latchkey children*

The above structure in (figure 3.2) is an illustration of the five structures of the ecological system which may be used in studying latchkey children. Robinson (1986:129) maintains that children are affected by four structures, whereas Rathus 2006:23; Berk 2007:24; Berk 2006:27) describe five structures. The fifth structure is the chronosystem and it is very important to include it in the study of latchkey children. The environmental changes affect a latchkey child in different ways, for example when parent(s) gain employment children are left alone (Rathus 2006:23)

**Microsystem**

According to Rathus (2006:23) a microsystem is an innermost structure, which involves the interaction of the child and other people in the immediate setting, such as the home, the school, or peer group (Berk 2007:24; Berk 2006:27). This is the small setting that an individual experiences on a daily basis. Berk (2007:24) maintains that all relationships must be kept in mind as bidirectional. The quality of any two person relationship is affected by another individual. For example, if such individuals are supportive, it enhances the relationship and if not, hostile relationships are experienced by both parents and children (Berk 2007:24).

This study will focus on the interaction within the innermost structure of latchkey children, such as interaction with the immediate setting of the home consisting of self, parents, siblings, peers and educators. Robinson (1986:129) came up with the idea that a better understanding of how a child's social ecology is constricted by a self-care situation is obtained through the comparison of latchkey and supervised children. In this way, the relationship within the innermost structure such as relationships with the self, parents, siblings, peers and educators of latchkey children are explored.

**Mesosystem**

The Mesosystem comprises of the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates, such as the home, child centre, school, and neighbourhood peer group (Swenson 2004:247; Ralph & Eddowes 2002:10). Mesosystem is also said to be a relationship within microsystem. For example, a child's scholastic performance is influenced by parental involvement at home and the educators at school (Berk 2007:25).

In the case of a latchkey child, Robinson (1986:129-30) concludes that researchers may study the strengths and weaknesses of family mesosystems in relation to primary school child care programmes and how it can be strengthened. Latchkey children's scholastic progress may be affected by the home setting. For example, when the children are left

alone at home without supervision, homework is not done. As a result the relationships between latchkey children and their educators are negatively affected.

### **Exosystem**

Exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the child as an active participant, but can affect the child's immediate setting (Ralph and Eddowes 2002:10; Swenson 2004:247; Berk 2007:25). These settings have an effect on the child's life, but the child does not participate. They include school boards, the local government, parents' workplaces, and community agencies. Since there is a need to study the alternatives to self-care that might lead to a better primary school child-care solutions, a research into the use of flexi time, job sharing and employer-sponsored after-care centres is necessary (Robinson 1986:130; Berk 2007:25). The research may lead to dramatic improvements in the wellbeing of latchkey children, as well as an improvement in the work production and parental satisfaction (Robinson 1986:130; Berk 2006:29).

### **Macrosystems**

According to Berk (2007:25) the macrosystem is the outermost level of Bronfenbrenner's model, consisting of the cultural and sub-cultural values, laws, beliefs, expectations and lifestyles. Macrosystems refer to the consistencies in the other three systems (micro, meso, and exo) which could have positive implications for society as a whole, and they form the basis on which individuals and families structure their lives (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:11). This means that the laws and values of the parent's workplace might be made to be more favourable to latchkey children's immediate settings. Robinson (1986:130) suggests that research is needed to investigate the types of parental values, laws, beliefs and decisions that go into the adoption of a self-care arrangement.

### **The chronosystem.**

The chronosystem refers to the environmental changes that occur over time and have an effect on the child (Rathus 2006:23). Berk (2006:29) calls the chronosystem an ever-changing system. "This pays special attention to the dimension of time where developmental changes are triggered by life events or experiences such as the birth of a

child, entering school, marriage, divorce, gain or loss of employment, or the onset of menarche" (Swenson 2004:249). The changes modify existing relationships between children and their environment and create new ways of development.

The focus is on how the environmental changes affect a latchkey child. Rathus (2006:25) cites an example of the effects of divorce and that only a year after the event, children begin to recover. In the case of latchkey children, divorce contributes to single parent families, as a result a parent has to work and children are left alone at home without supervision. The author also indicates that divorce contributes to problems such as teenage pregnancy, child abuse, juvenile offences, including substance abuse. These problems have a connection to the latchkey arrangement because most of these behaviours happen in the homes of latchkey children while parents are at work. Rathus (2006:25) concludes that an ecological approach broadens the strategies for intervention in problems caused by environmental changes.

### **3.4 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE PHENOMENON OF ‘LATCHKEY’ CHILDREN**

According to Arrighetti (2001:66), there exist factors that contribute to the number of latchkey children, such as a high divorce rate, resulting in single-parent families, an increase in the number of homeless families and competition for limited day-care options. Eberstadt (2001:9) maintains that a significant number of women leave their children at home because of necessity. The author further indicates that the reasons for leaving children at home alone may be due to poverty, divorce, failure to marry or low educational attainment. Shellenbarger (2002) maintains that sometimes, leaving a child alone can actually be the best among several less-than-ideal options. The author also states that state laws don't specify the age at which a child may legally be left at home alone. However, in Texas, it is seen as an offence if a person intentionally leaves the child alone in any place that exposes the child to an unreasonable risk (<http://www.yourfamilyhealth.com/>).

According to Dowd (1991:7) there exist a variety of sociological, demographic, and economic contributory factors which affect latchkey children. The author identifies the following factors as contributory factors to the existence of latchkey children:

- ❖ Working parents
- ❖ Single-parent families
- ❖ Decline in the number of adults available to children.
- ❖ Lack of affordable quality child-care

### **3.4.1 Working parents**

Working parents include single parents who are employed, as well as dual-earner parents, who are usually unable to provide parental supervision for their children during the out-of-school hours (Berk 2007:350). It is usually due to economical reasons that parents have to leave their children to care for themselves for an hour or couple of hours after school (Dowd 1991:7). Parents let their children fend for themselves because of employment, and because of working for longer hours than they did a generation ago ([http://csmonitor.com/aboutus/p\\_subscribe.html](http://csmonitor.com/aboutus/p_subscribe.html)). Although most parents choose self-care for a child as a last resort, it is still important that children should be ready for the self-care experience. Shellenbarger (2002) adds that the set-ups are not easy and are not necessarily the working parent's first choice.

Boots (2005) reports that parents who work long hours and are overloaded, have less positive relationships with their children. Children with parents who work at night or during the evenings have lower reading and maths test scores, and experience more behavioural problems. Meanwhile, Eberstadt (2001:7) uses the term 'exodus of women' to refer to divorced and single women who leave their children at home and go to their workplace. The focus is on how the work of a mother affects her children, not on how parents benefit at the work place. Eberstadt (2001:10) argues by quoting David Gelernter, who maintains that the economic-necessity argument does not make sense because in the past people used to be poorer, but women were used to stay at home.

### **3.4.2 Single-parent families**

Single-parent families come as a result of death, desertion, divorce, separation and the illegitimate birth of a child. However, divorce and teenage childbearing rates are the greatest reason for the increase of single-parent female-headed families (Dowd 1991:7). According to Eberstadt (2001:7) divorce and out-of wedlock births lead to an increase of working parents. This indicates that the country is guaranteed for more absent-parent homes. As a result this leads to an increase in the number of latchkey children.

### **3.4.3 Decline in number of adults available to children**

Dowd (1991:8) points out that there is a decline in the number of adults available to children after school in their local neighbourhoods. The author explains that this decline is due to the separation between extended and nuclear family adults, and thus fewer adults or friends are available who may serve as substitute caregivers to children. Dowd (1991:8) also reports that factors such as high geographical mobility contribute to the decline of adult availability. In supporting the above statements, Arrighetti (2001:66) reports that in today's mobile society, the extended family is no longer a realistic option for child-care. However, in rural areas child-care by relatives, especially grandmothers, is still an option for most parents who work in urban areas.

### **3.4.4 Lack of affordable quality child-care**

Another potential factor why children are spending after-school hours alone is the rising cost of child-care. “ ... It appears that child-care costs are a big reason for many families to choose to leave even the five- to eight-year-olds to care for themselves a few hours a week” ([http://csmonitor.com/aboutus/p\\_subscribe.html](http://csmonitor.com/aboutus/p_subscribe.html)). Poor families are far less likely to leave their children at home alone than families who earn a better income because they live in poor neighbourhoods and are unsafe. Poor families may rather ask relatives to help or choose an affordable child-care facility. Families who earn more money, and who live in better neighbourhoods are more likely to feel comfortable to leave their children alone. Such families do so because they think that their children are safe in the neighbourhood where they live ([http://csmonitor.com/aboutus/p\\_subscribe.html](http://csmonitor.com/aboutus/p_subscribe.html)).

The lack of the affordability of high quality childcare facilities forces the lower income and single parent families to resort to relatives for help. Hence it can be hard on relatives, who are often paid little or nothing because they also need an income to earn a living. (Shellenbarger 2002). However if relatives are not available, parents have no alternative but to resort to self-care. But still, it is important for parents to prepare their children to be ready for the self-care experience (Shellenbarger 2002).

### **3.5 THE IMPACT OF SELF-CARE ON THE LIVES OF LATCHKEY CHILDREN.**

"There are conflicting opinions on the effects of leaving children on their own. Some experts advise against leaving children under the age of 12 on their own. But some children under the age of 12 may be all right on their own for several hours" (<http://www.ci.phoenix.az.us/FIRE/keykids.html>). Studies reveal that self-care has both positive and negative consequences. Researchers agree that some children develop desirable skills and abilities which might be used in the future. On the other hand, some children experience a hard time coping with the responsibility of being home alone. (<http://www.ci.phoenix.az.us/FIRE/keykids.html>)

The latchkey situation has a long-term impact on the relationships between parents and their children. Robinson, Coleman & Rowland (1986:474) are researchers focusing on the long-term effects of 'self-care' coined the term 'latchkey syndrome' to summarise the set of characteristics associated with the latchkey status. Robinson *et al* (1986:474), also identify some characteristics, including "increased fear, a heightened sense of social isolation, loneliness, boredom, lowered sense of self-worth, resentment towards parents, and a drift toward occupations that might be creative, and demand less social interaction". The author points out that parents who were latchkey children are still afraid of being home alone. Such parents suffer from the latchkey syndrome because their fears were never addressed.

Self-care is also seen to be harmful because when parents are at work children are at risk. Anderson & Powers (1991:50), Coleman & Apts (1991:36) identify some types of risks associated with children who are in self-care. The risks include:

- accidental injuries at home such as, home fires, firearms, and being sexually abused or harmed by strangers;
- committing suicide due to lack of productive activities;
- bad feelings such as anxiety, fear, rejection, boredom, loneliness;
- bad behaviour such as being a criminal and other delinquent behaviours;
- developing badly such as having inadequate social skills, low self-esteem, academic problem);
- bad treatment such as sexual victimization and sibling abuse.

Ochiltree (1992:52) maintains that for children the experience of self-care is not always a negative one, and may even be part of the experience of becoming independent. Self-care means freedom to some latchkey children, whereas to others it represents valued responsibilities or entails restrictions (Belle 1997:8). Literature reveals that although self-care is often portrayed negatively and as harmful to children, it is sometimes not harmful but beneficial to some children (Ochiltree 1992:52).

"When latchkey children are functioning well, we don't hear about them. But we do hear about the one-third of all complaints to child welfare agencies which involve latchkey children" (Alston 2005). One may wonder why little is being said about the benefits of self-care while the negative effects are mostly reported.

### **3.5.1 Relationship with the self**

Ochiltree (1992:53) maintains that self-care may be adequate in meeting the needs of some children. Studies suggest that latchkey children become more independent because of their freedom. Their early involvement in responsibilities helps them to be self-reliant and more resourceful than their peers who are not in self-care (Belle 1997:8). Other researchers suggest that because of their early responsibilities, such as running the

household and taking care of younger siblings, these children learn earlier and are able to solve problems (Belle 1997:8).

Some children seem to cope fine when left alone. These children have resilience, are able to accept their adversity of being in the latchkey situation and benefit from that situation. Resilience is an individual's capacity to recover from dysfunction and rise above the disadvantage (Sohnge 2003:108). Some latchkey children are well equipped with skills on how to cope and take care of their own physical wellbeing in contrast to children who are under an adult's or a sibling's care. Ochiltree (1992:2) further states that such children are trusted to make reasonable decisions and do perfectly fine when left at home alone.

Some latchkey children, however, seem to experience unhealthy relationships with the self. Dowd (1991:13) found that latchkey children sometimes experience a high incidence of fear, loneliness, stress, and depression. Some children are unhappy and frightened when left alone. Confirming this finding, Belle (1999:99) adds that children often experience fears when left alone. The biggest fears which young latchkey children are faced with are to be encountered by an intruder or a parent who doesn't come home on time (<http://www.ci.phoenix.az.us/FIRE/keykids.html>).

Eberstadt (2001:16) maintains that children, who show negative feelings, are crying out for more parental time and attention. The author uses the term semi-chronic problems to refer to these negative outcomes such as feelings of depression, academic failure, isolation, and hanging around with the wrong children. In other cases latchkey children might show symptoms such as withdrawal behaviour, aggression, and delinquency. Latchkey children who experience negative feelings resort to watching television. Television viewing can affect children positively or negatively. It can be seen as a means of helping children to cope with boredom, fear, and loneliness but it may influence negative behaviour and lead to scholastic problems (Eberstadt 2003).

### **3.5.2 Relationship with peers**

Peer pressure, television, and older siblings are influential factors in early sexual involvement and drug experimentation (Eberstadt 2001:15). When children are at home alone, they are likely to invite friends or go to a friend's house. The author reports that children who are at home alone are more likely to abuse alcohol, tobacco or marijuana. This behavioural problem results from peer pressure and the feelings of boredom as experienced by children during the after-school hours at home alone. Children in self-care experience not only feelings of boredom, but also other problems such as being terrified, lonely, and isolated, which are associated with an increased likelihood of early experimentation with drugs, alcohol and sex (Eberstadt 2001:15).

### **3.5.3 Relationship with parents**

The relationship between latchkey children and their parents may be unhealthy because children's safety is at risk when parents are not at home. Parents are responsible for their children's safety even if they are not present at home. They need to be aware that their children are at risk and these risks might lead to health problems and admission to hospital due to accidents, or they may even die while the parents are not at home (Powers and Anderson 1991:50; Coleman and Apts 1991:36).

Parent-child interaction is the first and one of the most crucial reciprocal relations in the young child's life (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:111). The interaction can be positive or negative. Positive interaction with parents is supportive and gives a child a sense of security and wellbeing, whereas negative interaction with parents is linked to risky behaviours such as delinquency, sexual experimentation, and experimentation with harmful substances and various forms of peer pressure (Eberstadt 2001:15). Eberstadt (2001:15) further indicates that the negative behaviour happens during the after-school hours in the 'parent-free home'. This implies that parental absence might be damaging to learners' scholastic performance and emotional wellbeing.

Parents who were in a latchkey situation, are reluctant to leave their children alone due to their experiences of being in self-care, the fear they suffered as children. Such fear was

never confronted and never resolved; as a result it influences the parent-child relationship in a negative way (Robinson *et al* 1986:474).

### **3.5.4 Relationship with siblings**

For some children, being in self-care is part of a larger responsibility for they have the duty of running the household, as well as supervising younger siblings and of preparing the family's evening meal. Such children are often called 'hurried' children because they are given too much responsibility at an early age (Haley 2004). These children spend most of their time with siblings.

Haley (2004) also maintains that children faced with such responsibilities may feel overwhelmed. In addition, Haley (2004) points out that these children are not mature enough to carry the responsibility for younger siblings. Siblings are seen to offer a rich context for learning affectionate skills, resolving conflicts and controlling hostile as well as envious feelings. Older siblings may, however, influence their younger siblings negatively or positively (Berk 2007:205). This means that younger siblings may learn bad or good behaviour from older siblings. Similarly, older siblings may be role models to their younger siblings who may imitate the behaviour of older siblings. Belle (1999:166) maintains that the experience of being in a sibling caring relationship may deepen the affection siblings feel for one another.

### **3.5.5 Relationship with educators.**

Educators and parents associate the poor school performance of their children primarily with the lack of care, support and supervision in the after-school hours (Belle 1999:8). It has been indicated that latchkey children may demonstrate more academic and social adjustment problems than children in supervised settings. Alston (2005) maintains that most teachers believe that being alone at home is the number one cause of school failure. This implies that a self-care arrangement may have a negative impact on children's scholastic difficulties. Eberstadt (2001:17) adds that latchkey children's homework is affected, because most children need help and supervision with their homework. In many homes there is nobody to provide that kind of support after school. Most children are

exhausted by the time their parents arrive home, and adults who do find themselves supervising homework after a long and busy day may be less efficient or patient with their children (Eberstadt 2001:17). The parent's absence may thus be associated with homework problems, which may result in scholastic difficulties.

Researchers found that supervised children get more support and help from their parents and other adults than unsupervised children. As a result their scholastic progress improves, while unsupervised children's progress may deteriorate. When parents are less available, children might get less support at home. Parental involvement in the school's activities helps children to behave better and be more diligent in their efforts to learn (Sohnge 2003:268). The involvement of parents with their children, such as helping them with homework at home may result in a better performance at school. Lack of support might contribute to leaving school with low educational qualifications. Latchkey children who leave school early may not qualify for good salaries or may experience unemployment (Utting 1998:2).

### **3.6 SUMMARY**

This chapter focused on the definition of the term 'latchkey' children, contributory factors to the existence of the phenomenon of latchkey children, the effects of the latchkey situation on the children's relationships and the theories guiding the research of latchkey children. Theories of child development, family system theories and ecological perspectives were also discussed. Figure 3.1 is as illustrated in section (3.1) briefly gives an overview of the entire chapter. It became apparent in this chapter that more negative effects of the latchkey situation are reported than positive effects.

In the next chapter, the research design and methodology of the study on latchkey children will be discussed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

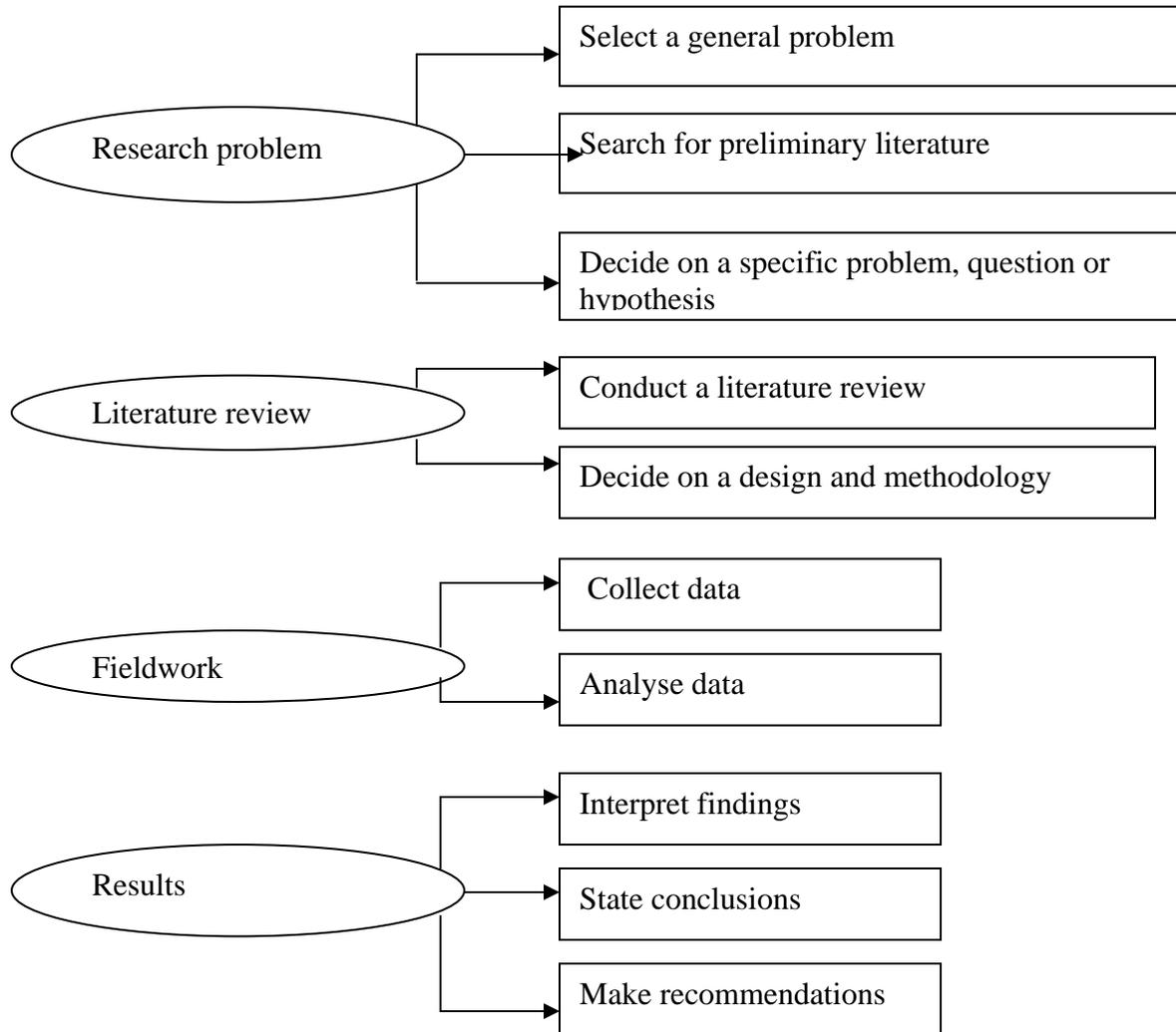
In chapter two the concept 'relationship' was defined and the theoretical framework of the relational theory explored. Chapter three examined the literature on the concept of latchkey children and how latchkey children's circumstances affect their relationships with the self and with others. The chapter further investigates whether the consequences of being in self-care are beneficial or detrimental to children's relationships. Chapter four will focus on the manner in which the empirical research is carried out to explore the relationships and experiences of latchkey children based on their relationships with the self, parents, peers and educators. The aim of this chapter is to provide a description of the empirical study to determine whether a latchkey situation has an effect on the relationships of latchkey children with the self and with others.

Specific qualitative research methods were used to collect data in order to address the problem as identified in chapter one. "Research is not just a process of gathering information as it is sometimes suggested, rather, it is about answering unanswered questions or creating that which does not currently exist" (Goddard & Melville 2001:1). McMillan & Schumacher (2001:9) define 'research' as a systematic process of collecting and logically analysing data for some purpose, and they further stress that the research process involves several stages which are not always sequential or orderly. The research would be meaningful if it is an interactive process. McMillan & Schumacher (2001:13) provide the following steps in a research process which are grouped into four stages in figure 4.1:

- Select a general problem.
- Review the literature on the problem.
- Decide on the specific research problem, question, or hypothesis.
- Determine the design and methodology.

- Collect data.
- Analyse data and present the results.
- Interpret the findings and state conclusions.

The above list could be grouped into four steps as illustrated in the schematic representation as depicted below.



*Figure 4.1 Research process (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:13)*

The research process shows the integration of stages to be followed as depicted in the structure above in figure 4.1. This approach was selected because it uses a simplistic

approach for novice researchers. It fits well with the topic and problem discussed in chapters one and two. The schematic representation depicts the elements of how this study will achieve the aims mentioned in chapter one (section 1.3). Chapter four explains the use of qualitative methods, more specifically interviews and case studies, in collecting data for the research topic. The research design will focus on the following problem statement in order to address the fundamental purpose of the study:

The problem statement as indicated in chapter one is:

**What is the impact of a latchkey situation on children's relationships with the self, their parents, peers, and educators in terms of the relational theory?**

The aims of the study as stated in chapter one (section 1.3) are repeated below to connect with the research design:

1. A literature study on the relationships of children with themselves and with others in terms of the relational theory.
2. A literature study on the concept 'latchkey' children, the factors affecting the phenomenon of 'latchkey' children and the impact of the latchkey situation upon the child's relationship with the self, parents, peers, teachers, God, objects and ideas.
3. An empirical study using interviews and case studies to establish whether the latchkey arrangement has an impact on the child's relationships.
4. To give guidelines and recommendations to parents and educators on how to deal with the issue of latchkey children.

## **4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

"Research design refers to a plan for selecting subjects, research sites, and data collection procedures to answer the research question(s). The design shows which individuals will be studied, and when, where, and under which circumstances they will be studied" (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:167).

#### 4.2.1 Research participants

Three case studies, each consisting of a latchkey child, his or her teacher and parent/s have been selected for collecting data that will try to answer the research question stated above. The participants are three learners from the same school who have been identified as latchkey children, aged nine, ten and eleven and in grades two, four and six. These learners were selected because they spend most of their after-school hours alone without adult supervision. The participants were identified by educators in the school as a response to the request circulated by the researcher. Creswell (2002:166) maintains that convenience sampling is used when the researcher selects participants because they are willing, available and accessible. The learners were selected based on their availability and accessibility. It was convenient for the researcher to draw a sample of three latchkey children for this study. The sample consists of a group of three latchkey children (only boys) from the same school. The researcher used learners from the school where she worked as an intern psychologist, because of the accessibility of resources and participants.

Data collected from the three participants were verified by interviewing the three latchkey children's parents and their educators. An additional participant is a parent who was a latchkey child. This former latchkey child parent provided insightful information through reflecting on her personal experiences as a child. McMillan & Schumacher (2001:175) maintain that the main purpose of convenient sampling may not be to generalise, but to better understand relationships that may exist. The sample size of this study is small. The researcher's intention is not to generalise the findings to a larger population, but to understand their experiences so as to decide whether there is a comparison between a latchkey situation and a specific child's relationships with the self and with others.

### 4.2.2 Research approach

In educational research, the researcher has a choice of either using quantitative or qualitative research approaches or even both in the same study. Qualitative research is inductive and presents data in a narrative mode, unlike in quantitative research where results are presented by numbers (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:1). The choice of the research approach can be influenced by the nature of data, the research problem or the preferences of the researcher (White 2004:15).

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach is used to collect data by using qualitative techniques such as interviews and case studies. The researcher uses a qualitative approach in order to provide descriptive interpretations about the selected cases. The qualitative method is a relevant research approach for it is concerned with understanding the context of the participant through the exploration of their relationships with the self and others. White (2004:17-18) presents some characteristics of qualitative research as follows:

- Qualitative research is humanistic in the sense that we study people qualitatively; we get to know them personally and experience what they experience daily.
- Qualitative research usually involves fieldwork. In order to collect data the researcher must physically go to people, settings or an institution to interview and observe the behaviour in its natural setting.
- Qualitative research is descriptive; the researcher uses words and pictures, rather than numbers to convey what has been learnt about the phenomenon.
- Qualitative researchers try to understand people within their own frame of reference.
- Qualitative researchers emphasise validity in their research, therefore methods are designed to verify collected data and what people actually say and do.
- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

McMillan & Schumacher (2001:15) present the following table (4.1) to illustrate some of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods.

**Table 4.1** *Quantitative and qualitative research approaches*

<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>
<i>Assumption about the world</i>	<i>A single reality, i.e. measured by an instrument</i>	<i>Multiple realities, e.g interviews of principal, teachers and students about a social situation</i>
<i>Research purpose</i>	<i>Establishing relationships between measured variables</i>	<i>Understanding a social situation from participants' perspectives</i>
<i>Research methods and process</i>	<i>Procedures (sequential steps) are established before study begins</i>	<i>Flexible, changing strategies; design emerges as data are collected</i>
<i>Prototypical study (clearest example)</i>	<i>Experimental design to reduce error and bias</i>	<i>Ethnography using "disciplined subjectivity"</i>
<i>Researcher role</i>	<i>Detached with use of instrument</i>	<i>Prepared person becomes immersed in social situation.</i>
<i>Importance of context</i>	<i>Goal of universal context-free generalizations</i>	<i>Goal of detailed context-bound generalizations</i>

### **4.2.3 Instruments, procedures and analysis**

The researcher used qualitative techniques to establish and explore the relationships of latchkey children. In this study, data were collected through the use of a literature review, interviews and case studies. These qualitative techniques are discussed in detail below.

#### 4.2.3.1 Literature review

McMillan & Schumacher (2001:108) define a literature review as a critique of the status of knowledge of a carefully defined topic and it enables a reader to gain further insight into the topic. A literature study reveals that somebody has already carried out the same research (White 2004:20). According to McMillan & Schumacher (2001:109) reviewing the literature enables the researcher to

- *define and limit the research problem*
- *place the study in a historical perspective*
- *avoid unintentional and unnecessary replication*
- *select promising methods and measures*
- *relate the findings to previous knowledge and suggest further research*
- *develop research hypotheses*

The literature review is very important in this study for it provides the researcher with deeper insight into the research topic. It also enables the researcher to design the research study, select the research methods, define and limit the problem. The literature review can also help in suggesting questions for future research, and recommendations made by other researchers.

#### 4.2.3.2 Case study

De Vaus (2006:6) defines a case as the object of study and a unit of analysis about which we collect information. The unit of analysis may be a person whom we seek to understand as a whole, an environment or an event. A case refers to an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon and not a number of research subjects sampled (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:403). "A case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2002:9). In this case the researcher used qualitative case studies to describe, explore and analyse the situation of latchkey children. Case studies can establish cause and effect, and observe effects in the real context. A case study is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects and is

characterised by flexibility and adaptability (Cohen *et al* 2002:9). Therefore, a case study can be defined as an intensive or in-depth study of a participant which the researcher understands depending on observations, interviews, historical and biographical data.

In this study the researcher uses case studies to analyse and explore issues pertaining to latchkey children in terms of intrapsychic and interpersonal relations. In general, case studies emphasise a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of selected research respondents (Sohnge 2003:247). The researcher uses case studies as a research method, because it provides knowledge to understand the impact of the latchkey situation on children's relationships.

Bogdan & Biklen (2003:54) highlighted the following suggestions for selecting a case study:

- Choose something that is reasonable and accessible.
- Study something that you are not directly involved with.
- Openness and flexibility are encouraged.
- Study something that is interesting and important.

The researcher has taken consideration of Bogdan & Biklen's suggestions in the selection of three case studies for the research.

#### **4.2.3.3 Interviews**

"Interviews are one of the most commonly recognised forms of qualitative research methods" (Mason 2002:63). It is the most common method used for data collection in the social and human sciences and can also be used in other types of investigation. An interview involves a one-on-one verbal interaction between a researcher and a respondent (Goddard & Melville 2001:48). According to Amatarangu, Baldry, Sarshar, & Newton (2002:23) the interview is widely used because it is flexible and can be used almost everywhere and can produce data of great depth. Through interaction, the researcher

collects data from participants in order to answer the research question. This researcher used interviews to obtain data on the experiences and relationships of latchkey children.

Mason (2002:63) suggested that the researcher should ask himself or herself the following questions about whether the method selected is the right choice, rather than assuming too soon in the process that you have made the right choices.

- *Why might I want to use an interview?*
- *Why might I want to speak to or interact with people to generate data in order to answer my research questions?*
- *Why might I want to use qualitative interviewing?*
- *Why this style and approach rather than a more structured form of interviewing or questionnaire?*
- *What are the shortcomings of qualitative interviewing for generating data which will help me to answer my research questions?*

The researcher did consider the above questions in making the choice of using interviews. Another question was what kind of interview would be relevant to the research study. Cohen *et al* (2002:273) identified four main kinds of interviews which might be used as research tools:

- **Structured interview.** In a structured interview, the content and procedures are organised in advance. The structured interview can be useful when the researcher is aware of unknown information. Therefore, she or he is in a position to frame questions that will supply the knowledge required. This means that the sequence and wording of the questions are determined by means of a schedule and the interviewer is left little freedom to make amendments. As a result there is no room for exploration in a structured interview because the questions do not allow the participants to elaborate on their answers.

- **Unstructured interview.** The unstructured interview is an open situation and the researcher has a greater flexibility and freedom. Even though the research purpose governs the questions asked, the content, sequence and wording are entirely in the hands of the interviewer. This does not mean that the unstructured interview is a more informal affair; it needs to be carefully planned. Table 4.3 presents the strengths and weaknesses of an unstructured interview. Unlike the structured interview, unstructured interviews allow the researcher to make follow-up questions or rephrase the questions.
- **Non-directive interview.** The main feature of a non-directive interview is minimal direction or control exhibited by the interviewer. This gives the respondent the freedom to express his or her subjective feelings as fully and as spontaneously as he or she chooses or is able to do. Its disadvantage is that the interviewee might dominate the interview and the purpose of the interview ends up not being achieved.
- **Focused interview.** It focuses on a respondent's subjective responses to a known situation in which she or he has been involved and which has been analysed by the interviewer prior to the interview. In this way the researcher uses the data from the interview to substantiate or reject previously formulated hypotheses. In the focused interview, however the interviewer can play a more active role, such as to introduce more explicit verbal cues to the stimulus pattern or even represent it. The focus interview is also important in providing concrete data from responses by informants.

According to Mason (2002:62) the term 'qualitative interviewing' is usually intended to refer to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. Mason (2002:72) identified the following steps to be followed in qualitative interviewing:

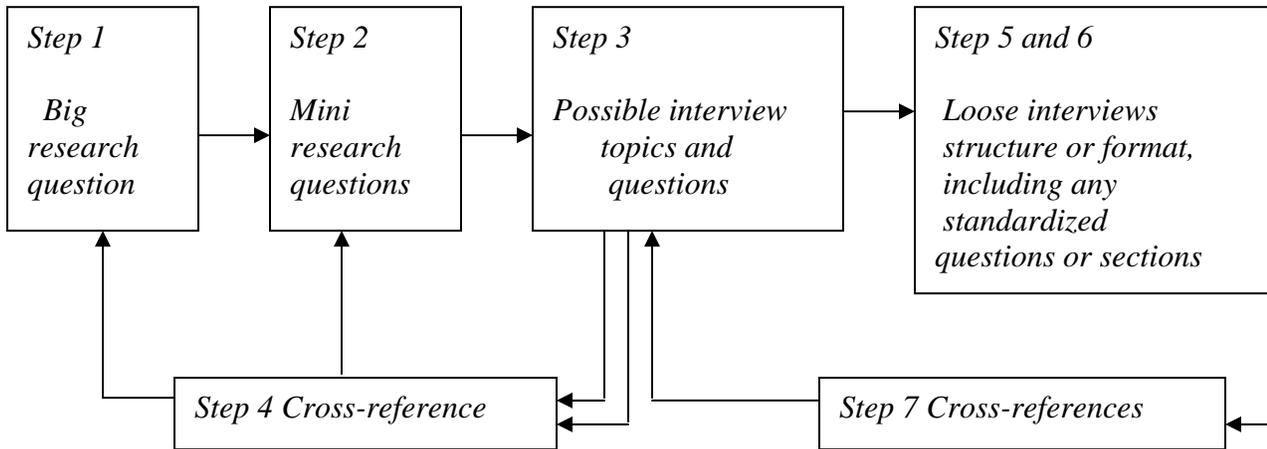


Figure 4.2 Steps in qualitative interviewing (Mason 2002:72)

In this study the researcher used the unstructured interview to gather information from latchkey children, their parents and educators. By using unstructured interviews, it is evident that the study recognises that participants are unique individuals and that there is a need to explore the context of participants.

**Table 4.3**

*Strengths and weaknesses of unstructured interviews (Cohen et al 2002:271)*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<i>Questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things; there is no predetermination of question topics or wording.</i>	<i>Increases the salience and relevance of questions; interviews are built on and emerge from observations; the interview can be matched to individuals and circumstances.</i>	<i>Different information collected from different people with different questions less systematic and comprehensive if certain questions do not arise 'naturally'. Data organization and analysis can be quite difficult.</i>

When using an unstructured interview, the researcher does not prepare questions before the interview. The research question is kept in mind and questions will depend on the context during the interview. The exploration, wording, sequencing and questioning is the responsibility of the interviewer (Cohen *et al* 2002:273). In contrast to the above statement, De Vos, Fouche, Poggenpoel & Schurink (2002:299) & De Vos *et al* (2002:302) came up with the idea of using unstructured interviews with a schedule in a qualitative approach. A research schedule is seen as a guideline for the interviewer and it contains questions which are not asked in a particular sequence. It ensures that all the relevant topics are covered during the interview. If the interview schedule is produced beforehand, it forces the researcher to think explicitly about what she or he hopes the interview might cover (De Vos *et al* 2002:302).

The researcher prepared the interview schedule as requested by the Department of Education before approval for conducting the research was given. The schedule includes the basic features of the relational theory that the researcher wanted to explore during the interview (see table 4.3 below).

### **Interview setting**

Learners and educators were interviewed in an office at school while parents were interviewed at home, and a tape recorder was used. The following introduction was used:

- Greetings
- Explanations of the purpose of the interview
- Signing of consent forms
- Explaining the clause of confidentiality

Interviews with learner participants were conducted according to the basic features of the relational theory mentioned above. Educators' and parents' interviews were also based on the child's relationships, with the basic features shown below in the interview schedule. The parent who was a latchkey child was also interviewed in order to gain information on her personal experiences.

### Interview schedule

No questions were prepared beforehand. The topic was kept in mind and questions depended on the context during the interview.

The following basic features of the relational theory were explored while interviewing the research participants;

*Table 4.3 Interview schedule on the basic features of the Relational theory*

INTRAPSYCHIC	INTERPSYCHIC
<p><i>Ego</i></p> <p>Exploration of the ego to estimate the person's inner resources, to assess the latchkey child's vulnerabilities and the ability to cope with the situation of self-care.</p>	<p><i>Relationships with self</i></p> <p>This involves the child's awareness and interactions with the self. It includes his or her feelings, thinking and involvement. Positive interactions with the self leads to healthy interactions with others.</p>
<p><i>Self-concept</i></p> <p>The self-concept is a person's private mental image of himself or herself, that is, a collection of beliefs about the kind of person he or she is. The latchkey child's self-concept is explored.</p>	<p><i>Relationships with parents</i></p> <p>A relationship established during early childhood which affects the child's ability and willingness to form relationships with others.</p>
<p><i>Identity</i></p> <p>Identity involves knowing who and what one is and the knowledge that one is distinguishable from all others. Exploration on how latchkey children see themselves.</p>	<p><i>Relationship with peers</i></p> <p>Peers play an important role in the child's social development and the ability to relate to one's peers is also a prerequisite in learning social skills.</p>
<p><i>Self-actualisation</i></p> <p>Exploring the latchkey child's ability to achieve what he or she is capable of achieving; the achievement of success.</p>	<p><i>Relationships with teachers</i></p> <p>Educators play an important role in the child's development. The child's ability to adjust at school depends on the relationship between the child and educators and peers.</p>

### **4.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION**

The purpose is to ensure that all research processes undertaken are conducted in accordance with professional and ethical procedures. Participants were informed of the nature of the research prior to the interview. Participation in this study was voluntary and respondents' identities would remain confidential. The data collected from participants would not be used for disciplinary measures or for any reward purposes. The participants would not be exposed to any form of risk or danger. Approval for participation was gained by means of written correspondence. Permission to do the research in a school was applied for at the Department of Education and the school governing body. Letters of permission were given to parents to fill in and they were also asked to sign the consent form.

### **4.4 SUMMARY**

In this chapter the research design, selection of research method and sampling were discussed. It was established that the use of qualitative research methods is relevant to the study. Qualitative interviews and case studies were used to explore the experiences, feelings and relationships of latchkey children. Data obtained from the study and the findings will be interpreted and discussed in chapter five.

## CHAPTER 5

### EMPIRICAL STUDY AND RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

As has been stated in chapter one, chapter five will focus on data analysis and the empirical findings. It builds on the previous chapter which explained the research design and the methodology that were used. The chapter presents empirical data obtained through unstructured interviews, using three case studies which are analysed making use of a specific procedure. The profile of the participants includes three latchkey children, their parents and educators. The data collected through interviews will be analysed within the framework of the relational theory.

Triangulation is used in this research to determine whether the data collected from different sources such as latchkey children, their parents and teachers are compatible to increase the reliability of the interviews. 'Triangulation' refers to the use of a variety of methods or different types of sources that provide data about the same events or relationships (De Vos *et al* 2002:341). According to Creswell (2002:571), triangulation provides a means to determine whether data collected from different sources support or refute one another.

This researcher used the basic features of the relational theory in order to establish a complete picture of the impact of the latchkey situation on children's relationships, by making use of interviews from different sources. Data was organised under the core themes of the relational theory, as will be explained below.

#### ➤ **Intrapsychic structure**

This is a relationship with the innermost structure of the self (ego, self-concept, identity, self-actualisation).

➤ **Interpsychic structure**

It is a relationship with the outer structure and includes the following:

- Relationship with parents
- Relationship with siblings
- Relationship with peers
- Relationship with educators

## **5.2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

It was explained in the previous chapter that the participants in this study consisted of three learners from the same school aged nine, ten and eleven, who were selected because they spend most of their after-school hours alone without any adult supervision. They were identified by teachers in the school as a response to the request circulated by the researcher. Parents and teachers of these children also participated in the study in order to provide more information about latchkey children. An additional participant, a parent who was a latchkey child herself, provided valuable information through reflecting on her personal experiences. Fictitious names were used in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

### **Biographical details**

#### **Case 1**

**Lutendo**, 8 years 9 months old, in grade 2, is the second child in a family. He lives with both the father and the mother who are working long hours. The father comes home earlier than the mother; at about half past five. The mother is studying at UNISA. The children spend most of their time with the father. Lutendo has a younger brother who is at pre-school and an older sister who is fifteen years old. His sister arrives home an hour after him.

#### **Case 2**

**Mashudu**, 10 years 11 months old, in grade 4 is the older child in the family of two children. He has a younger brother. The two boys attend the same school and use the

same transport after school. Both parents are working and arrive home at about half past six in the evening. Mashudu and his younger brother have to spend at least four hours without supervision.

### **Case 3**

**Ambani**, 11 years 10 months old, in grade 6, is an only child who lives with his mother and aunt. Ambani has been in the care of his maternal grandmother since he was six months old and only moved in with his mother in 2005. His mother is a single-parent who has to work for their survival. Both the mother and aunt work long hours, from eight in the morning until seven in the evening. This leaves him spending at least four hours at home alone after-school.

**Masindi**, a 47 years old parent was interviewed to determine her experience of being a latchkey child. During the interviews her responses confirmed most of the data gained from the literature as discussed in chapter three section 3.4.2.

## **5.3 COLLECTION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS**

The researcher used three case studies in order to collect the information which helped in answering the research question. Unstructured interviews were conducted with the participants in order to gain more information on the impact of the latchkey situation on children's experiences and relationships with the self and others. The interviews were conducted at school and at the participants' homes during July and August 2006. The subjects were informed about the purpose of the interviews. They were also assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information given. During the interviews the participants were allowed to use their home language (Setswana). Interviews were transcribed. The information was interpreted according to the relations theory - the intrapsychic and the interpsychic processes.

The researcher used triangulation in data analyses and interpretation in order to ensure the study's trustworthiness. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001:408)

triangulation can refer to the use of the information from many researchers and many data sources to validate the collected data. The information collected from the above participant; their parents and teachers are discussed below.

## **5.4 INTERVIEW ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

Data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing process in which data collection and analyses influence each other (Hanley-Maxwell, Al Hano, & Skivington 2007:104). In this study the emerging and recurring themes were categorized into intrapsychic and interpsychic relationships.

### **5.4.1 Intrapsychic structure**

#### **5.4.1.1 Relationship with the self**

##### *Case study A*

Lutendo expressed negative emotions about being in a latchkey situation, such as sadness, loneliness, anger, frustration, confusion, isolation, fear, rejection and being disliked. Some of the feelings are depicted in the child's own words; "*My sister does not like me and sometimes I like to hit her back because I feel angry and cannot concentrate on what I am doing. I feel sad when my sister is not home. I stay in the house alone until she or my mother comes back. My mother becomes busy with her UNISA homework. When she is finished she goes to sleep.*" The mother confirmed that most of the time she is busy with her homework and studies. She does not have enough time to spend with her children. Emotionally, the child seems to feel deprived of the special relationship that he needs with his parents, especially with his mother. This indicates that the child needs the mother's love, nurturance, care and attention. The teacher mentioned that the child is afraid of rejection. He wants to be in a group, and does not want to be alone. The teacher further indicated that the child experiences negative feelings such as sadness, fear, loneliness, and anger. He is a manipulative and sensitive child.

Lutendo is in the initial stage of self-care. This is the stage that Robinson (1986:65) calls the orientation stage. During this stage Lutendo has learnt some coping skills, for example, he spends most of his time with friends as a way of escaping from fears of being at home alone. However, he forgets to lock the door, and this could be because he is still young and negligent about routines. There is also evidence of low self-esteem resulting in fear and aggressive behaviour. It seems that his ego needs are not fully met and this could be due to the negative feelings indicated previously. However, unrealistic meaning attribution is also noticed when he uses defense mechanisms such as submission, rationalisation, and feelings of guilt and self-blame. Coping skills are apparent in his words when he says; *“I know that it is a mistake not to do my homework. My father gives me warnings and I keep on doing what he does not like. He will end up hitting me. I am the one who makes my daddy angry. I know that they teach me not to just leave my homework. I know that sometimes you can make a person angry and then someone can hit you. It won’t happen again. I know it is a mistake; it won’t happen again. It was not my intention; it is a mistake. They have the right to shout and hit me.”* This is an indication of a negative self concept; he is always accusing himself of doing the wrong things. This is an indication of the inadequate stability of the self-concept and identity distortion. On the other hand he is positive about his future; *“What I wish is to pass, have a work like being a policeman. I want to be like my grandfather who was a policeman.”* This is an indication that he has hope for the future and he needs some help in improving his self-concept and his role confusion. The mother and the teacher confirm the aggression aspects, but the other aspects indicated are part of the innate feelings within the individual.

### ***Case study B***

Mashudu experienced feelings such as boredom, shame, insecurity, anger, confusion, fear, and rejection by his father, teachers and peers. Although he feels insecure, Mashudu accepts the latchkey situation because his parents earn a living. Mashudu stated that he does not mind staying at home alone, because his parents have work. The mother added that he does not like the idea of being at home alone. Likewise, the teacher indicated that Mashudu is scared of everything and is always defensive. Mashudu seems to be in the

stage which Robinson (1986:65) calls a stage of *acceptance*. It implies that children accept the arrangements. Even though they are worried and fearful, they understand their latchkey situation.

Mashudu displays aggressive and oppositional defiant behaviour in defying parents' and teachers' instructions. He refuses to go to the shop to buy a small packet of sugar and soap, because people will tease and laugh at him. The teacher mentioned that Mashudu is an intelligent child and is very strong. She adds that he is very aggressive, always in trouble and on the defense. The teacher thinks that the issue of being at home alone most of the time causes him always to defend himself. The teacher finds him to be very stubborn and aggressive. The mother sees her child as a small boy who is angry about the situation at home. She strongly agrees that he is an aggressive child. He becomes aggressive towards anyone he comes into contact with. This kind of behaviour leads to feelings of rejection by other people.

It seems that the child's ego is in danger of disintegration. Mashudu may be in danger of not forming relationships with the self and others because he does not trust people. "*I don't want a nanny who sleeps at our home. I want a nanny who comes and goes because I don't want to sleep with women that are not my family*". He seems to indicate identity confusion, related to his responsibility at a young age and situation at home such parents fighting. According to the mother Mashudu also resents supervising and taking care of his younger brother. The younger brother seems to be adjusting well while Mashudu does not seem to be coping emotionally. This leads to the development of an unrealistic self-concept, as well as low self-esteem.

Mashudu has an unrealistic positive self-concept which is reflected in his attitude of being stubborn, and self-reliant, and by refusing help from other people. He does not want his family's financial status to be known and he is ashamed of it, as indicated by him saying; "*People will say that we are poor.*" He has a low self-esteem and does not want people to see that they are struggling financially. Although unrealistic attribution of meaning is noticed, he understands the situation, and he no longer questions the self-care

arrangement. However, Mashudu may find it difficult to actualise his potential in the future, since his identity is unbalanced.

### *Case study C*

In Ambani's case negative experiences with the self are noticed. He misses it to be with his mother and feels deprived of getting to know her better. As a result Ambani reveals unpleasant feelings of isolation, rejection, inadequacy, loneliness and fear of intruders at home. His anxieties and fear are expressed in the interview when he says that at first he was scared of being at home alone. Now he prays and knows that God will protect him and when he is at school, God will protect the house. This is his way of coping with his fears and anxieties. It seems his ego needs are not yet fully met. Ambani finds it difficult to cope with the stresses and strains of being at home alone, which results in feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and frustration. He seems to be on the level that Robinson (1986:65) calls the *level of tolerance*. According to Robinson (1986:65) children on this level feel cheated and consider the arrangement as being unfair. The teacher feels that the latchkey situation has a negative effect on Ambani's self-concept and the way he handles stressful situations. The teacher believes that the situation would have been different if the boy had someone to take care of him after school. The mother thinks that his situation of being alone at home after school affects him negatively and he is easily influenced by peers. This is an indication that he is not coping with the pressure and stresses of the latchkey situation.

Ambani reveals his need for love, acceptance and nurturance from the mother. Since the mother is not available most of the time, Ambani feels isolated and rejected. "*I am used to being alone after school and sometimes on weekends*" It adds to the fact that he is not happy to stay at home alone. When he is bored he sleeps or watches television. According to the teacher Ambani at times isolates himself from people. He experiences the world as a difficult and unsafe place. This might have detrimental effects on how he perceives relationships.

As it was mentioned in chapter two section 2.4.1.3 'identity' refers to the meanings which a person attributes to the self. Although Ambani feels rejected and isolated, he displays a positive self-identity; "*I will pass at the end of the year*". He is positive about his future. This is supported by both the teacher and his mother – the two agreed that his performance is on an average level. The teacher further indicated that Ambani is a child with potential and that with extra help from the mother he might excel in his schoolwork. This means that if his needs are met he will be able to actualise his potential more. Ambani expressed a vision of a positive future, in which he projected his present situation. He said that his children will not be at home alone, because he will hire a nanny to take care of them. An unrealistic positive self-concept is displayed because there is no guarantee that he will never leave his children alone at home. Ambani mentioned previously that he was happy to be home alone, but later says; "*Life was good the time my grandmother was here, it was wonderful to come home and find her home*" and that he will never let his children be at home alone. The contradictions of his feelings may indicate that the boy is not happy with his present latchkey situation.

## **5.4.2 Interpsychic structure**

### **5.4.2.1 Relationship with parent**

#### **Case study A**

The relationship between Lutendo and his parents seems to be unhealthy. Lutendo is not happy because he spends very little time with his mom, as a result his needs for nurturance, care and mother love is not satisfied. He seems to be in need of nurturance and care from the mother who is occupied with her studies and work. In order to support the above-mentioned opinion, Lutendo says, "*My mother is not used to stay with us. We all know that we are not used to stay with her. She comes home late in the evening and then we are asleep. I get along very well with my father. I do not feel good when my father says he will not give me money for the games. But I know that my mother will give me money games*". There is evidence of a positive relationship with the father as indicated by the child. According to the mother, Lutendo has a good relationship with his

father. That could be because the father spends more of his free time with his children than the mother.

The discipline issue in the family is also questionable. The way discipline is imposed in the family seems to be inconsistent. Lutendo indicated that his father punishes them by taking away privileges such as not giving them money to play games. The children know that if the father takes away the privileges, the mother will secretly give them the money for games. The mother indicated that she is very strict and as a result the children confide in their father. The mother stressed that Lutendo only comes to her when he is in conflict with his father. However, it appears that she is the one spoiling him, and it seems that she wants to make up for the time that she is not with him.

There is evidence of communication problems amongst the family members. The child revealed a communication problem in the interview when he said that his parents shout at him when homework is not done. The mother indicates that Lutendo does not listen to his sister because she is also young. The teacher supported this by saying that Lutendo is always involved in verbal fights, is always ready to attack and questions authority.

### **Case study B**

The relationship between Mashudu and his parents seems to be unhealthy. The family struggles with discipline and communication. Mashudu does as he likes and he defies his parents' instructions "*I do not want to go and buy the smallest things. I told my mother that I will not go and buy small things.*" Discipline is not effective because Mashudu's parents are reluctant to impose discipline since they feel that they owe him something for looking after his younger brother. The mother indicated that Mashudu is an inquisitive child who wants to be given answers and reasons for decisions. He wants to have the advantages and disadvantages of every action or a decision taken explained to him. As an inquisitive child, he feels disappointed when his father refuses to give him answers and reasons for the questions he asked. Unlike the father, the mother is always willing to answer him, but the researcher thinks that is not satisfactory, since some of the questions need to be addressed by the father.

Mashudu seems not to be happy about the self-care situation but accepts it because he is only alone at home, because their parents are working for them. *They bring us food ...why should we argue if they work for me and my brother? They not going to taverns or gambling*". Mashudu sounds angry, and this indicates that he is not happy with the situation of being at home without his parents' supervision. Although he mentioned that he is happy, his words contradict his feelings as are expressed in the following sentence: *"I do not know how to say it... I am fine as long as they bring money"*. The mother mentioned that Mashudu does not like the idea of being at home alone; he thinks there should be somebody such as a friend or a family member at home when they arrive there.

### **Case study C**

The mother expects too much from Ambani which results in feelings of inadequacy, because he does not meet the mother's expectations. During the interview the mother indicated that her relationship with her child is better now compared to the previous year when they started to stay together. The attachment problem was identified in the interview with the mother who indicated that whatever time she gets, she tries to bond with her child. She does not have time for entertainment. All she does is to be at work or be with her son. She said that Ambani stayed with his grandmother since the age of six weeks until the age of ten. At first the mother expected him to act like an adult, and that put a lot of strain on their relationship. Now their relationship has improved a lot, although, Ambani still finds it difficult to confide in his mother. However, one wonders if the communication problem is due to the attachment issue or because of the latchkey situation. The mother finds it difficult to discipline her child and resorts to corporal punishment. Ambani reported to educators that the mother used to beat him a lot, but not so much lately.

### **5.4.2.2 Relationship with siblings**

#### **Case study A**

In Lutendo's case sibling rivalry is apparent, which is normal at that age. Lutendo mentioned that he sometimes fights with his sister who locks herself in her room. He also

stated that he is lonely and misses his younger brother (who comes home late in the afternoon from the pre-school), because when he is at home they play together. The mother added that he also fights with his younger brother for his father's attention. Although sibling rivalry tends to be common in most families, the absence of a grown-up to mediate leaves children to suffer emotional and physical abuse among siblings. Lutendo ignores others as a coping mechanism in sibling conflicts, *"I just ignore her and concentrate on what I am doing, like watching television."*

### **Case study B**

Mashudu is in a sibling care-taking relationship, which he feels is not his responsibility. Mashudu and his younger brother spend afternoons without adult supervision at home. This was confirmed by the mother who indicated that Mashudu takes care of his brother after school. Mashudu indicated that he fights with his brother over watching television. In order to solve the conflict, they take turns in watching television and carrying out routines. In his interview he made it clear that he does not prepare food for his younger brother: *"My younger brother prepares food for himself."* This is an indication that they do not get along well. The mother stressed that Mashudu loves his younger brother although they always fight.

### **Case study C**

Ambani is an only child in the family.

### **5.4.2.3 Relationship with peers**

#### **Case study A**

As discussed above in section 5.4.1.1 of the relationships with the self, Lutendo has a negative self-concept and his identity is distorted. It emerged in the interview that Lutendo does not spend his after-school time at home. He said that he likes to go and play soccer with friends. He also indicated that if he does not play soccer, he sits and watches television with friends at home. His mother confirmed that if Lutendo does not go to his friends, he invites them to his home. When the parents come home things are missing or the television is out of order. The teacher described Lutendo as a child who loves his

friends and sometimes gets into trouble trying to cover for his friends. She also indicated that Lutendo would realise after a fight that he was not supposed to get involved in the fight on behalf of his friends. The teacher further indicated that Lutendo is easily influenced in a group and always wants to be part of the group. Lutendo needs approval and acceptance which he seems to get from his peers. Although his self-concept seems to be negative, with less interaction with his peers, self-concept might improve in future.

### **Case study B**

From the interviews it was ascertained that Mashudu has a relationship problem with friends. He tends to fight and bully his classmates. The result is that, he becomes lonely, bored and is rejected by his peers. Mashudu stressed that he does not have friends. *“I do not spend most of the time at home because I get bored and I do not have friends. My younger brother has friends who come and stay with him and he is not bored.”* It may be interpreted that he is not susceptible and vulnerable to peer pressure. The teacher sees him as isolated, lonely, and rejected by his friends. His mother agrees that Mashudu does not have friends. He spends most of his time alone.

### **Case study C**

Ambani, as in the other two cases has an unhealthy relationship with his peers. It came out in the interviews with his parent, the educator and himself that he does not seem to have the ability to socialise. Ambani mentioned that he plays with friends but when his mother is at home, he watches television and does not play with friends. The teacher indicated that Ambani always wants to please his friends. However, he is not successful because he has a socialisation problem. The teacher also noticed that even though Ambani tries to please his friends, he seems to be rejected by them because of his inability to play with them. The teacher further indicated that Ambani sometimes prefers to be alone at school. During break he sits in the classroom or under a tree reading a magazine or only staring at a book. Avoiding people seems to be his way of coping with rejection. His mother agrees with the teacher that Ambani is easily influenced and manipulated by his peers. He tends to conform to peer pressure by following the group's instructions and values. She added that his need to please his peers made him vulnerable

to peer manipulation. When his peers instruct him to perform a bad activity, he does not hesitate to do it. His mother also commented that when Ambani arrives home he sometimes plays with his neighbours or watches television. Could it be that Ambani's rejection is caused by the fact that he avoids to be with other children or is rejected by them because of his inability to socialise?

Ambani reveals a form of anxiety in being involved in physical fights. He indicated that he is afraid of being hurt. His anxiousness for physical fighting is revealed in his words when he says, *"I feel fine when I tell them that I don't want to fight with them. Sometimes when I see people fighting I stop them, because I don't want to see them getting hurt."* The teacher supported this by saying that Ambani is sometimes involved in verbal fights but he does not have the strength for physical fighting.

#### **5.4.2.4 Relationship with educators**

##### **Case study A**

Both Lutendo and his mother reported that his homework is not done and his scholastic performance is poor. On the other hand, the teacher felt that there was no problem with his school performance. The mother stressed that Lutendo's performance for 2006 has dropped as compared to the previous year. She also indicated that his school performance is affected by his diet. Since there is no adult supervision at home, Lutendo eats junk food. In the evening he does not have an appetite, as a result he is not eating properly. Robinson (1986:66) maintains that eating junk food contributes to being underweight or overweight, high blood pressure and calcium deficiencies. As a result the child's schoolwork will be affected, due to a lack of concentration and energy.

##### **Case study B**

According to the teacher, Mashudu always fights with teachers and learners. His mother indicated that Mashudu's relationship with teachers at school is not so good. His mother said that her son's problem is not mainly scholastic, but behavioural. The mother indicated that Mashudu is angry about the situation at home, because his parents are continually fighting. She strongly agrees that he carries that anger with him to school. He

becomes aggressive at school and clashes with teachers. As a result classes are interrupted and it becomes difficult for learning to take place. The teacher agrees with the mother that Mashudu's scholastic performance is better than that of other children who are in self-care. She thinks that with support from the parents he can do well. Homework is sometimes not done. His spelling and writing also improved as compared to the first term. The teacher thinks that there is hope that he will proceed to the next grade. Even though there is evidence of a lack of commitment, dedication, and responsibility regarding school tasks, the teacher thinks that he will do well in the next grade.

### **Case study C**

The failure to cope with academic tasks due to a lack of parental involvement and supervision is reflected in this case. It is supported by the teacher who indicated that Ambani does not do his homework. The homework is sometimes only done with the help of the mother. Contrary to that, Ambani claims that he does his homework alone at home without adult supervision. In all the interviews of case three it showed that Ambani's first term school performance was better than the second term. In the second term, it dropped but there is hope of improvement in the third term. The teacher commented that Ambani seems to be improving due to the teacher's appreciation, motivation and assurance of hope. The mother also agrees with the teacher who indicated that the mother is not involved in the child's schoolwork. The mother's work shift appears to affect Ambani's schoolwork negatively. It seems that lack of adult supervision contributes to poor academic performance.

## **5.5 GENERAL FINDINGS**

In this study, the interviews confirmed that latchkey situations generally have a negative impact on children's relationships with self, parents, siblings, peers and educators. The findings of the empirical study will be discussed below under the abovementioned different relationships. Reference will also be made to the literature review.

### **5.5.1 Relationship with self**

Being in a latchkey situation seems to be problematic to all participants. All participants expressed negative feelings such as loneliness, boredom, fear, anger, confusion, insecurity, inadequacy, rejection, and a sense of isolation. Long (1989:104) pointed out that latchkey children experience negative emotions such as fear, loneliness, stress, and conflict. Belle (1999:99) added that unsupervised children often experience fear when left at home alone. Participants spoke of watching television when they are alone at home to avoid boredom. It can be concluded that children resorted to television viewing in order to cope with boredom, fear, loneliness and other negative feelings (Belle 1999:107). In a situation where children are not supervised during the after-school hours, such children spend more time watching television than when they are supervised. It is during the after-school hours that such children spend more time watching television than when they are under parental supervision (Eberstadt 2003:5).

According to the parent (Masindi) who was in a latchkey situation, she enjoyed the freedom of going and playing anywhere she liked. She walked alone without fear of being raped or assaulted. She indicated that there were times that she felt lonely and she became angry. Masindi added that even though she enjoyed the freedom of being independent, she still felt that it was not right for her to be in self-care. She indicated that she later became rebellious and made wrong choices because she was not ready for any responsibilities. She confirmed that latchkey children experience negative emotions and behaviours when they are left without adult supervision. It seems that Masindi suppressed her fear, and now she revealed it by not letting her child spend time with her friends. This notion is supported by Robinson *et al* (1986:474) in (chapter three) that normally latchkey children experience lifetime fear. The lifetime fear is reflected in the mother who is afraid to leave her daughter (14 years old) alone for even a short period of time.

### **5.5.2 Relationship with parents**

All participants seem to experience unhealthy relationships with their parents. Problems with communication and discipline emanate in all the case studies. In case study A, there exist a relationship problem between the mother and the child. The child seems to be in

need of nurturance and care from the mother who is occupied with her studies. In case study B, both the father and the mother arrive at home late. The parents seem to have a communication problem with their inquisitive child. The inquisitive child feels disappointed when his father does not give him answers to his questions. Communication problems are also revealed between the mother and the child in case study C. The mother does not have enough time to discuss things that happened at school with him. When the mother arrives home, both the mother and Ambani are tired and want to go to bed.

Participants' parents seem to have some difficulties in disciplining their children. Children know that their parents are responsible for their welfare, meaning that it is their duty to make sure that their children are safe and well cared for. It seems children are using their latchkey situation to get away with being naughty. Parents also seem to be lenient or inconsistent as regards discipline. However, it is their responsibility to take care of their children even though they are away from home for several hours without parental supervision. The use of a latchkey situation to get away from discipline is what Robinson (1986:128) calls social exchange (see section 3.3.2). The author maintains that with social exchange, family problems, such as discipline, arise when the latchkey child uses self-care as a demand for more equality in family decision making. Haley (2004) adds that children faced with such responsibilities as being in self-care feels overwhelmed. As a result, children use such responsibilities as a bargaining chip in a situation of discipline (Robinson 1986:128).

The interview with Masindi, (the parent who was a latchkey child) also indicated communication problems with her parents. Masindi indicated that she expressed her bitterness against her parents for not answering the questions that she had. She confronted her parents and asked them why they always left her alone. Since there were no answers, she mentioned that she later became rebellious and made the wrong choices. Masindi thinks that it could have been prevented if her parents had listened to her and had given her explanations to her questions. Instead, her parents were neglectful, and not interested in her questions.

### **5.5.3 Relationship with siblings**

Sibling rivalry is apparent in cases A and B. Lutendo and Mashudu fights with their siblings. In case A, Lutendo does not listen to his elder sister and he is also jealous of the younger brother. In case B, Mashudu fights with his younger brother and feels that it is not his responsibility to take care of the younger brother. His younger brother takes care of himself because he prepares his own food and plays with his friends. Parents of these participants stressed that even though their children always fight with their siblings, they love their siblings and maintain that sibling rivalry is normal. Belle (1999:116) maintains that younger siblings report that older siblings are more scolding and physically punitive than either their mothers or fathers. There are a lot of emotional conflicts that occur in sibling relationships and unfortunately there are no adults to mediate (Haley 2004). In contrast, Rathus (2006:333) found that siblings make a unique contribution to one another's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

For some children, being in self-care is part of a larger responsibility, for they have a household duty to run and in some cases supervise younger siblings. Such children are often called 'hurried' children because they are given too much responsibility at an early age (Haley 2004). In addition the author pointed out that these children do not have the maturity of a parent to be responsible for themselves and for younger siblings. Rathus (2006:333) concludes that the interaction of children who spend more time with their siblings than with their parents could have both the negative and positive effects.

### **5.5.4 Relationship with peers**

The children's relationships with their peers seem to be unhealthy in all the participants. In case studies A and C there exists evidence of peer pressure because of the need for belonging. They want to please friends, so they become vulnerable to friends. In order to be accepted in a group a child must successfully conform to the standards set by the group, which is conforming to peer pressure, norms and values (Vrey 1992:104). Lutendo differs from Ambani in the sense that he has friends and sometimes he gets into trouble trying to cover for his friends. Ambani does not have friends and does not have the ability to socialise. Ambani, like Mashudu is rejected by his peers and reveals signs of isolation.

On the other hand Mashudu does not buy friendship or want to please friends. He fights with his friends and bullies his classmates; as a result he experiences rejection from friends and classmates. The literature supports the above idea that self-assertion and the development of self-concept takes place in the peer group, and each member of the group must accept the group values or face rejection (Reddy 1995:99).

The relationship between Masindi and her peers was not healthy because she felt that she was an intruder at her friend's home. She indicated that it was strange for her to see a mother preparing food.

### **5.5.5 Relationship with educators**

It is evident that being in a latchkey situation has an impact on children's scholastic progress. The relationship between latchkey children and educators is often not healthy. Children's homework is affected, because they are unsupervised and if there is no one to provide supervision after school, the homework is not done. Some children are exhausted, by the time their parents arrive home. In case studies A and C, there was an indication that because there is no after-school supervision children perform poorly at school and do not do their homework. In case study B, both the mother and the teacher agreed that Mashudu's scholastic performance is not bad, but he has a behavioural problem. Mashudu is aggressive at school and clashes with teachers, classmates and other learners. The teacher stressed that his homework is sometimes not done, but there is hope of progressing to the next grade. Reddy (1995:106) concludes that the more positive a child's perception of the teacher's attitudes towards him, the higher his scholastic achievement. If children's relationships with educators are unhealthy, they are likely to develop negative feelings such as "the teacher hates them" and will therefore withdraw from learning activities or may become aggressive or even depressed (Ralph and Eddowes 2002:55). Dowd (1991:17) maintains that both parents and teachers rank a latchkey situation as a detrimental factor to educational progress.

According to Masindi, being in self-care has a negative impact on the child's relationship with schoolwork. She said that her schoolwork was average. Her homework was done

early in the morning at school, not at home. She thinks that if she was supervised after school she could have performed better in her schoolwork.

## **5.5 SUMMARY**

The empirical study's results indicate that latchkey or self-care arrangements have a negative impact on children's relationships. The literature findings show both the negative and positive benefits of being in self-care. In the interview Masindi indicated that children who enjoy the freedom of self-care tend to experience long term effects in the future. Unfortunately, from the three children interviewed, this cannot be determined as they are still young. However, it presents a potential future study to determine whether those who enjoy the benefits of self-care, experience negative effects in the future.

In all the interviews conducted with latchkey children, educators and parents, there is a strong indication that all the participants want a solution to this social phenomenon. The main concern is the manner in which the problems are solved. Latchkey children wish to have someone at home when they come home. Parents think it will be beneficial to their children's safety and alleviate their worries. On the other hand, teachers feel that their children's scholastic performance will improve if they have an adult to supervise their homework. Parents, however, need to provide for their children.

In the final chapter the summary, guidelines and recommendations will be presented.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES**

#### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

The problem of latchkey children as a global phenomenon that is also prevalent in South Africa has been discussed in chapters one to five. It was indicated that the rise of economic demands aggravates the problem. Chapter six will, therefore, explore guidelines suggested in global literature to make recommendations for the South African context. In this chapter the data collected from literature and the empirical research will be compared to determine what the similarities and differences are.

#### **6.2 FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE STUDY**

In chapter three it was mentioned that it is difficult to give a clear definition of 'latchkey children'. The problem, as identified from literature, includes:

- Definition of 'latchkey' children
- Contributory factors to the phenomenon of 'latchkey' children.
- The impact of self-care on the relationships of a child with his parents, siblings, peers and educators.
- The lack of a convincing theoretical framework.

It has been established from the literature study that the definition of 'latchkey children' is unclear and that there is no consensus on how the concept should be defined. Having explored existing literature and definitions of latchkey children, a description with five variables which is suitable to the South African context was suggested. The suggested variables take into consideration the age of the children, parents' employment status, and the amount of time spent alone at home, the presence of siblings and the time the child is alone, namely in the morning, during the weekends or only in the afternoon. As defined in chapter three (section 3.2) the term 'latchkey' refers to unsupervised children between

the ages of six to sixteen, who spend certain times alone or with a younger sibling after or before school, during the evenings, weekends, and during school holidays while their parents or guardians are not at home for whatever reason.

In the South African context, “latchkey children” could be defined as children who are younger than sixteen years old and who are in self-care or under the care of siblings, for more than an hour either during the week or on weekends. Although the definition considered that parents leave their children while going to work, it should also be borne in mind that there are other parents who leave their children due to other constraining factors (Eberstadt 2001:9). It emanated from the interview with parents and teachers as well as from the literature study that some parents leave their children to go gambling, or casinos or taverns. Since this study only focused on children left alone while their parents went to work, children left alone while their parents went gambling or to taverns would be another topic for research.

Arrighetti (2001:66) identified some of the factors contributing to the number of latchkey children, such as divorce, single-parent families and limited day-care options. Eberstadt (2001:9) maintains that most women leave their children at home out of necessity. On grounds of the mentioned reasons for leaving children in self-care, the literature indicated that leaving children alone is a number one problem in scholastic achievement (Alston 2005).

The literature indicates that the impact of self-care on children’s relationships is both positive and negative. Ochiltree (1992:52) maintains that the experience of children having to care for themselves is not always negative and may even be part of the experience of becoming independent and self-reliant. On the other hand both Long & Long (1989:104) and Belle (1999:99) found that latchkey children experience high incidences of fear, loneliness, stress and conflict when they are left alone without adult supervision.

In chapter three, the theoretical frameworks were discussed in order to explore latchkey relationships within their experiential world. Robinson (1986:125) indicates that theoretical frameworks for guiding latchkey research such as family system theories, child development theories and an ecological perspective are very important and need to be considered in latchkey research.

The reviewed literature confirmed that relationships can be either healthy or unhealthy. Unhealthy relationships are associated with behavioural problems that are destructive, and self-harming; causing anxiety, addiction, depression, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, and scholastic problems (Buchanan & Hudson 2000:36), while healthy relationships, on the other hand, are associated with positive feelings such as love, security, comfort, acceptance, trust and self-esteem (Silverman 2001:233, Ralph & Eddowes 2002:61). The chapter also included a discussion of the relational theory. The relational theory is significant in the exploration of relationships in general. The two structures of the relational theory namely, intrapsychic and interpsychic processes were discussed in detail. The structures involve *inter alia* a child's relationships with the self, and significant others such as parents, siblings, peers, and educators. A relationship with parents is a foundation for a healthy relationship with the self and others in a young child's life (Ralph & Eddowes 2002:111, Buchanan & Hudson 2000:34-35). A child who experiences an unhealthy relationship with his or her parents is likely to experience problems in relationships with the self, siblings, peers, and educators.

### **6.3 FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

Children who experience an unhealthy relationship with the self reveal negative feelings such as loneliness, boredom, fear, anger, confusion, insecurity, inadequacy, rejection, and a sense of isolation as reflected in chapter 5 (section 5.5.1). Negative feelings imply that an unhealthy relationship with the self has developed. The negative emotions experienced by latchkey children seem to have a long-term effect because it leads to a lifetime of fear in adulthood, which is called the latchkey syndrome (Chapter 3 section 3.5.3.). Since it has been indicated that latchkey children feel insecure, inadequate and angry, these

feelings are likely to be directed towards peers and siblings. In that way, relationships with peers and siblings will also be affected negatively. Especially older siblings feel overwhelmed by the responsibility and are likely to get involved in conflict with their younger siblings. Eventually, parents have to mediate in children's emotional conflict with their siblings, but due to their absence, sibling rivalry increases. Parents seem to have communication problems with their children, in the sense that the children do not have enough time to be with their parents and to express their feelings and thoughts about self-care. Children's schoolwork is affected because without supervision homework is not done and this results in an unhealthy relationship with educators at school. Unhealthy relationships with educators may lead to withdrawal from school activities which could have a serious impact on latchkey children's scholastic performance.

#### **6.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

- Children's responses were very short. They did not give enough clarity on their responses and it gave rise to more exploration from the interviewer.
- Few sources were consulted on latchkey children because there are limited academic literature, which led to the use of unpublished sources on the internet.
- The study focused only on the relationships with the self, parents, siblings, peers and educators. Aspects such as the relationship with God, objects and ideas were only touched on.
- Defining the concept 'latchkey children' is a problem and it is also difficult to determine exactly how a latchkey child is defined in terms of age, hours at home, or type of supervision.

#### **6.5 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY**

It has emerged from the literature study that the problem has its challenges. This study established that children want this problem to be solved. Parents and teachers want the latchkey problem to be solved as well, as was indicated in chapter 5 (section 5.6). It is

therefore essential that steps should be taken to address the problem. The question is how to address the problem of latchkey children. This will be attempted in the next section.

## 6.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

It has emerged from the literature study that the problem has its challenges. The problem of latchkey children should be given attention in terms of encouraging more research on the phenomenon, doing large-scale surveys to determine the severity of the issue and using computational modelling to determine the impact of the problem in the society.

In order to address this problem:

- Universities should encourage PhD or MEd studies in the field to generate more data and understanding of the problem.
- A panel of experts on latchkey children should be established to provide guidance on the definitions of latchkey children.
- The Department of Education should set systems in place that would help to identify children who fit into the category, especially to set up counselling services for latchkey children.
- The Department of Education should conduct national workshops to create awareness of the problem and to train educators on how to assist these children.
- Social welfare organisations, the Department of Education and other organisations should set up affordable aftercare services for children.
- There has been an outcry about teenage girls and boys who have been raped and abused in the media. There is a need for a study to determine whether there is a link between child abuse and the latchkey situation.
- A further study recommended would be looking at gambling and alcohol consumption and its contribution to the latchkey situation. Recently a Xhosa television series called “Home affairs” had scenes of an alcohol addicted mother who left her children to fend for themselves while she went on a drinking spree. A study would help to generate evidence to determine whether the problem of gambling and alcohol addiction have a connection with the latchkey situation.

## **6.7 GUIDELINES TO PARENTS AND EDUCATORS**

### **6.7.1 Guidelines to parents**

The findings of the empirical study indicate that a latchkey arrangement has a negative impact on children's relationships with the self and with others. It has also emerged that self-care affect children differently. Therefore it is advisable for parents to check whether their children are ready for self-care or not. Alston (2005) came up with the following criteria to check children's readiness for self-care:

- Parents should make sure that their children who are ready to be left alone at home know their names, ages, addresses, and telephone numbers of parents.
- Children should be able to give their parents' names, their employer's names, work addresses and telephone numbers.
- Children should know how to respond to emergencies, by being able to dial 911 and to give information. Children should also know what to do if followed by a stranger, what to do in a case of fire etcetera. They should know how to answer the telephone when alone at home.
- Children, who are ready for the responsibility to take care of themselves, must be able to follow instructions and to take initiative without being asked.
- Children who are ready have good relationships with themselves, with parents with peers, and with other people in the community.

According to the empirical findings as stated in chapter 5 (section 5.5) participants revealed relationship problems with the self and others. Participants expressed negative feelings such as boredom, loneliness, fear, anger, confusion, insecurity, inadequacy, rejection, and a sense of isolation. Some suggestions on how to help parents to help their children to deal with negative feelings are discussed below.

### **Dealing with negative feelings**

Both the literature and empirical findings show that latchkey children are often bored and resort to unacceptable behaviour to compensate for such boredom. Boredom is the feeling

of being weary and impatient because one lacks interest in some activities (Oxford Dictionary 2006:161). In order to avoid boredom, parents should let the child make a list of activities such as reading a book, pen pal writing, sport activities and other activities that a child enjoys. If the family has an internet connection, children should only have access to internet when they are under supervision.

Loneliness is unhappy feelings that result from a gap between actual and desired social relationships (Berk 2007:473). The feeling of emotional and social loneliness starts at an early age in children, between the ages of five or six (Dunn 2004:94).

Children should be encouraged to find ways to accept their latchkey arrangement and be comfortable when they are left alone. Latchkey children also need to be guided on how to use self-care time for self-exploration in order to understand themselves better. This could be done by using activities (such as sports, speeches, dramas etcetera) that encourage them to understand who they are, how to learn and digest information, as well as their strengths and talents. Such activities will go a long way in helping them to explore their goals and dreams. Although this might be difficult with primary school children, they need to develop knowledge and understanding of the self for the formation of satisfying relationships. Healthy relationships may result due to keeping the balance between satisfying relationships with others and a secure satisfying relationship with the self (Berk 2007:473).

Fear is experienced when children feel that they are not safe in their homes. It is the responsibility of parents to make sure that children are safe at home. They must learn to lock doors and not to allow strangers in the in the house. When children feel safe at home, they become less insecure and afraid. It is advisable that parents must teach their children responsibility and self-discipline. It will prepare them on how to keep themselves safe and how to be ready to handle emergencies. Children should know the telephone numbers of their neighbour, police or response unit in case of an emergency.

**Dealing with Siblings**

According to Berk (2007:345) children are regarded as a significant source of support in a family. Sibling rivalry seems to increase in the interaction among siblings. When parents are not at home, older siblings should learn what to do and how to support one another, especially when a younger sibling is injured, feels sick or did not arrive home. A warm, close sibling relationship is considered an important source for healthy relationships in families (Berk 2007:443).

**Dealing with peers**

Berk (2007:339) maintains that peer interaction becomes an important source for development in middle childhood. Peer interaction is a powerful predictor of psychological well-being whereas rejection is related to sadness, isolation, poor scholastic achievements and low self-esteem (Dunn 2004:87, Berk 2007:341). Peers could have a positive or negative influence on each other. Parents need to teach children to be careful with friends since peer pressure can influence them into behaviour they might never think about on their own. Children should be guided on how to handle their friends, for example, only one friend should be allowed over to visit in the absence of parents. Interventions such as modelling, coaching, and reinforcement of positive social skills will be beneficial to children.

**Dealing with parent-child communication**

A good parent-child relationship will create a positive experience and assure the child's safety, and lessen the parent's worries about the child. Parents should encourage children to share their feelings and thoughts of being alone. Children should be asked about their feelings and whether they prefer to be alone at home or with a babysitter (<http://www.ci.phoenix.az.us/FIRE/keykids.html>). Parents should listen and take children's comments seriously.

**Dealing with children's homework**

Homework needs to be supervised by parents or other adults. When parents are unable to monitor children's homework, it may affect scholastic performance. Parents are advised

to provide guidance for homework problems and check any concerns of the child. After care centres at schools where homework classes are available should be established to meet the needs of children and to assist them with their homework. Supportive child care call centres where children who might be scared, lonely or distressed can talk to an adult must be established by the Department of Education.

### **6.7.2 Guidelines to educators**

The educator plays an important role in the development of the child. The educator's helpfulness, warmth and observations also contribute to the child's adjustment. Educators, in the absence of parents, are also responsible for the safety of learners, including latchkey children. The school can play an important role by means of classroom intervention. Educators are advised to use the following tips in trying to help latchkey children to deal with homework, boredom, safety, emotions and telephone skills:

- Homework. Educators are advised to make an arrangement for most homework for the week to be completed on weekends. In this way parents who work longer hours can be given enough time to supervise their children's homework. Homework or extra classes can be established whereby learners will be supervised after school. The Department of Education or schools should try to organise after care facilities whereby children get food and do their homework under supervision.
- Boredom. In order to help children to deal with boredom, boredom buster activities can be used. For example, let children plan for the 2010 soccer tournament by designing posters of accommodation and transport, write and practice a speech for a special occasion and other interesting topics that will keep them busy. Educators can use these activities in class and give children the task to do it at home to avoid boredom.
- Children's safety is a concern for both parents and educators. Children should be taught about the dangers in the communities. All children need to be taught how to keep themselves safe. People such as police officers, nurses, and fire-fighters should be invited to teach children how to handle an emergency at home.

- Observation of children's emotions. Educators can get a picture of children's emotional state through observing them in different situations. Children's behaviour helps educators to identify and become aware of their feelings, problems, strengths and weaknesses. Educators should also encourage latchkey children to talk about being alone at home. When children share their experiences of self-care, they learn that it is normal to feel lonely, afraid and bored and that other children also feel the same way.
- Telephone skills are also important in helping latchkey children. Educators and parents should teach children how to handle calls without alerting a caller that a parent is not home. They have to make sure that all children know important telephone numbers which should be placed in a safe and accessible place.

(Summarised from Robinson 1989:95-103)

It has emerged from the literature that after-school care might be expensive to some parents. The Department of Education could maybe try to extend the school hours with two to three hours in order to cater for the needs of children without supervision at home. In that time children could be supervised by educators at school. After-school facilities such as sport coaching need to be provided to children. Principals or the school governing bodies should meet with parents and arrange block or community programmes in the neighbourhood. The programme necessitates adults who are available at home to take care of latchkey children voluntarily or at a lesser fee.

## **6.8 SUMMARY**

“During the all-important years between childhood and adulthood, kids really do need something constructive to do, and they also still need to have their activities supervised. Most of all, they need to know that their parents care about them, are involved in their lives, and have their best interests at heart.”(T. Berry Brazelton of Harvard University as cited by Alston 2005).

The findings of the study indicate that self-care has a negative impact on the child's relationships with the self, parents, siblings, peers and educators. It is an indication that latchkey children and their families need support from the community. The Department of Education needs to be involved in the issues concerning learners. In order to create an understanding of this social phenomenon, all stakeholders should be made aware of the impact of self-care on children's relationships.

The researcher realises that the problem of latchkey children is a worldwide phenomenon. It is to be found in all cultural, racial and socioeconomic situations, including urban, rural and suburban areas. A summary of the guidelines for educators and parents is provided in section 6.7.1 and 6.7.2 to assist those who are faced with the challenges of latchkey arrangements.

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HISTORICITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Strictly confidential

*BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF CHILD*

SURNAME: \_\_\_\_\_

NAMES: \_\_\_\_\_

HOME LANGUAGE: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE OF BIRTH: \_\_\_\_\_

AGE: \_\_\_\_\_

GRADE: \_\_\_\_\_

SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

SIBLINGS: \_\_\_\_\_

WHO HELPS WITH HOMEWORK: \_\_\_\_\_

*INFORMATION OF PARENTS*

*MOTHER*

NAME AND SURNAME: \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE NO: \_\_\_\_\_

HOME ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

OCCUPATION: \_\_\_\_\_

*FATHER*

NAME AND SURNAME: \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE NO: \_\_\_\_\_

HOME ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

OCCUPATION: \_\_\_\_\_

FAMILY SETUP: \_\_\_\_\_

MARITAL STATUS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**THE LETTER OF PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH ON  
LATCHKEY CHILDREN (PARENT CONSENT FORM)**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

I, the undersigned ..... (Full names and surname)

Parent/guardian/of .....hereby give / do not give consent for my  
child to participate in a research study on latchkey children.

I the undersigned accept, on behalf of my child, as his/her parent/guardian and on behalf  
of myself and my spouse to be interviewed for research purposes.

Signed at ..... (Place), this ..... (Day) ..... (Month)

.....  
Parent /Guardian

P. O BOX 2005  
HAMMANSRAAL  
0400  
30 March 2006

The SGB Committee  
P.O. Box 30164  
Wonderboompoort  
PRETORIA  
0033

The School Governing Body

PERMISSION TO DO A RESEARCH STUDY WITH CHILDREN WHO ARE IN  
SELF-CARE DURING THE AFTER SCHOOL HOURS.

I am an MEd student at Unisa, presently doing my internship at Prospectus Novus School. I hereby request you to grant me the permission to do my research in this school. Participation in the research study will only focus on a small sample which will include learners, teachers and parents. A research of this kind could be of benefit since learners' experiences and the impact of being in self-care could be identified. As a result guidelines and parental guidance can be provided when there is a need.

It would be appreciated if my request could be highly considered.

Yours faithfully

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M.E Rambau