

## CHAPTER 6

# SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The South African Schools Act (1996) ushered in a new era in the field of general education in South Africa and embodies the principles in the Constitution and the white papers on education and training. At this stage in the deliberations of the NCSNET / NCESS it is recognised that the act provides important mechanisms to realise the vision and principles proposed in the NCSNET Public Discussion Document (1997:32). However, it also contains gaps and weaknesses that may have implications with regard to restricting the rights of learners who experience barriers to learning and undermining the development of an integrated education system. These gaps and weaknesses primarily pertain to educational structures that are in place to accommodate the vast amount of learners at risk of experiencing special needs due to contextual factors (refer par. 2.4.2), as well as to the systems, methodologies, and preventive strategies that can meet the needs of these children.

One of the key features of the new Act is the assertion of the right of equal access to basic and quality education for all learners, without discrimination in any way. No learner may therefore be denied admission to an ordinary school on any ground, including the grounds

of disability, language or learning difficulty. This is the first step towards a single inclusive education system for South Africa.

The fact that provision for learners with ‘special needs’ is no longer contained in separate statutes, is already an indication that education for learners who experience barriers to learning is no longer seen as part of a second or separate system in our law.

The Act thus embodies the constitutional right to equal access, the right to claim learning support in order to access the curriculum, and the right of parents to choose. This implies that compulsory exclusion of any learners has effectively been abolished.

While these provisions are significant in addressing previous barriers to learning and providing for the realisation of basic rights, it is important to recognise that the manner in which ‘special education need’ is defined and dealt with in the Act remains premised on limited historical understandings of what constitutes ‘special educational needs’ (NCSNET, 1997:33). It is on these grounds that continuing initiatives in the area of education should continue and be monitored. It is therefore with special concern for Early Childhood Education and for the lack of early educational experience that causes ‘special needs’ that this research was launched. A summary regarding the findings will consequently be presented.

## 6.2 SUMMARIES

### CHAPTER ONE: General orientation, Problem formulation, Research methodology and Plan of study

A statement regarding the eradication of illiteracy introduces this research. The Interim Policy regarding Early Childhood Education in South Africa (1996), however, states that up to 1996 only between 9% and 11% of all South African children from birth to six years have had access to public or private early childhood development facilities (only one in eight Indian and Coloured children and one in sixteen African children).

The lack of education in the early years has severe negative effects on the scholastic performance of a child. In South Africa many young children are deprived of opportunities that would enhance academic success, and these children are then often labelled as having 'special educational needs', which in this research specifically relates to problems regarding literacy acquisition. Because these 'special needs' refer to such a wide range of problems one cannot exclude from intervention those learners whose 'special needs' arise out of contextual disadvantage and educational neglect.

Despite the clear existence of educational neglect and disadvantage, the aim of this research was to establish whether emergent literacy skills could be developed during a short period of intervention for these pre-schoolers at risk.

Chapter one therefore presents a hypothesis regarding this problem, and also describes the anticipated experimental design and clarification of the concepts that are relevant to this study. Lastly, the anticipated programme of study is presented. The following summary of the other chapters will provide a brief overview.

## **CHAPTER TWO: The Nature and Extent of Special Needs in a South African**

### Context

The history of education for learners with ‘special needs’ and of education support services in South Africa indicates massive deprivation and lack of provision for a majority of people on the basis of a literature study. It was argued that the current definitions of ‘special needs’ were inappropriate and unacceptable in a South African context, due to the fact that the special needs that existed were not intrinsic to the learners, and because the definitions of ‘special needs’ referred to a minority of the school-going population, which is not the case in the South African context. In South Africa ‘special needs’ therefore has to be described in terms of the factors that result in ‘special educational needs’:

In this regard it was confirmed that individual difficulties and disabilities can be considered as barriers to learning, as well as social, interpersonal and behavioural factors, and furthermore educational deprivation has a particularly unfavourable influence on the acquisition of emergent literacy skills.

It is therefore also consented that special needs develop due to factors intrinsic to the learner, factors extrinsic to the learner and factors that are the result of a reciprocal interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In this regard specific mention has to be made of the notion of 'risk'. Children who experience mild intrinsic disabilities are at risk of developing special educational needs. However, children who have the least supportive and facilitative early educational environments are likely not to cope if no learning support is given at an early stage. Although this new thinking about special education has led to a policy of inclusion, the culture in which these special needs develop needs to be acknowledged and addressed. This context is described more fully in chapter three.

**CHAPTER THREE:**        Mediation and literacy acquisition in a South  
African culture

In the past three decades psychologists and educators have come to realise that the pre-school years are most important for the child's intellectual development. Feuerstein (1980) found that a major contributing factor that causes learning problems is poor pedagogical input during the first years of life, which confirms Wiechers' (1996:177) statement that the most serious impediment to a child's intellectual maturation is the ignorant or uninvolved parent or early caregiver. The parents or caregivers are called mediators whose task it is to organise and present stimuli for the child. Cultural deprivation, however, results when the mediators fail to transmit necessary content to the new generation.

Literacy forms part of the content that needs to be presented by caregivers. In a South African context, however, either literacy does not have the same value for all, or some cultures were deprived of opportunities to become literate and are unable to provide the necessary resources for their children to become literate. Despite many factors that can affect the learning and literacy acquisition of disadvantaged learners, it is still the duty of society to equip them to excel in a literacy-dominated western society. Existing culture gaps can, however, make teaching difficult. Added to differences in cultural priorities, are also handicapping home-conditions that the disadvantaged groups are often confronted with such as home duties, unfavourable learning conditions and the absence of parental guidance and care. Where the rest of the world is therefore focussing on the importance of early literacy programmes, there has until recently been much silence in this regard in the South African pre-school field. It is also apparent that the formal school system tends to alienate children from a need to learn.

What is therefore needed, is research with regard to literacy acquisition and early literacy practices that can be implemented in order to break the cycle of illiteracy.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**            Breaking the cycle of illiteracy through accelerating the acquisition of informal literacy skills in disadvantaged learners at risk of having special educational needs

The focus on correction rather than prevention continues, in spite of research evidence that suggest reading failure and illiteracy are preventable for all but a very small percentage of

children. Programmes for the prevention of learning and reading problems are also very effective when compared to the cost of remedial efforts, retaining pupils, and placement in special education programmes. “Educators therefore need to invest in children at an early age so that they can have the opportunity to enter the school on an equal footing with other children and learn from the start that they can be successful” (Wasik & Karweit, 1994:54).

In order to develop intervention strategies for the development of early literacy practices, one has to take note of theories regarding the development of reading ability of which three are described in this chapter. The Reading Readiness perspective advocates that reading development occurs as a result of maturation, and that educators should ‘wait’ until a child is ready to learn to read, before the required instruction is given. The Emergent Literacy perspective on the other hand argues that literacy develops naturally when a child interacts informally with literacy concepts. Vygotsky, however, advocates that literacy acquisition occurs through natural and cultural development. Natural development refers to the organic growth and maturation of the child, while cultural development relates closely to the mediated learning theory of Feuerstein that was discussed in chapter 3. This theory also advocates that reading instruction need not be delayed, but must be supported by a teacher who acknowledges the difference between the completed and expected level of literacy development – it is the Zone of Proximal Development. *“Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in co-operation with his peers. Once these processes are internalised they become part of the child’s developmental achievement”* (Vygotsky, 1978:90).

Many programmes exist and are being implemented in other parts of the world. These programs are also discussed in chapter 4. The insights gained from studying these programs include the idea that although one-on-one tutoring is the most powerful form of intervention, at-risk students can, however, make progress by means of very small group instruction. The theory is also advocated that letters, words, and phonemes should be included in a whole language approach. Repeated reading is an effective instrument for introducing books and print conventions. Therefore repeated reading of books, phonemic skills, word identification skills and writing skills should all form part of an early intervention program. A consequent program of intervention was developed for the purpose of this research. The research implementation is subsequently in the next paragraph.

**CHAPTER FIVE: Empirical research, discussion of the results and a proposed framework of intervention**

The research was conducted in a community that meets the criteria for a disadvantaged culture that were described in chapter three. Twenty-nine learners participated in this research – fourteen who formed part of the experimental group, and fifteen who formed part of the control group.

Both groups were assessed by means of standardised and non-standardised measuring instruments that indicated their levels of socio-economic deprivation, mental ages and

levels of informal literacy knowledge. The experimental group was then exposed to a forty-session intervention period and the effects thereof were again measured by means of above-mentioned instruments. The main finding of the research indicated that it was indeed possible to accelerate the disadvantaged pre-schoolers' development of emergent literacy skills despite persisting backlogs in some skills that are generally measured by school readiness tests. The experimental group indicated clear progress regarding informal literacy knowledge as measured by the informal literacy questionnaire. The significant assumption confirmed by the results of this research is then that the absence of a prerequisite level of readiness, such as the skills tested by traditional school readiness tests (refer par. 5.2.4.2), does not imply that opportunities for the presentation and acceleration of emergent literacy skills should be delayed. Rather, contextual settings that promote the development of special educational needs, need to be identified so that emergent literacy development can be promoted.

As a result of the above mentioned findings a proposed framework of intervention was consequently presented. This framework provides for the eradication of special needs and for the removal of barriers to learning by means of an intervention strategy for educators. The educator instructs, guides, facilitates, encourages and supports the disadvantaged pre-schooler towards literacy efficiency by structuring instructional stages according to developmental stages, while at the same time working in the zone of proximal development – these are emergent literacy skills.

### 6.3 CONTRIBUTING CONCLUSIONS

Children from privileged backgrounds enter the schooling system at a greater advantage than children from impoverished homes. Due to the discrepancies between the home and the school and negative schooling experiences, the vast majority of children in schools within impoverished neighbourhoods suffer from the effects of environmental, socio-economic and educational deprivation, and are likely to experience ‘special needs’ when entering the formal school system. Equalising opportunities and access should therefore be provided for these children.

Provision for these children has so far been insufficient as these children form such a large part of the school-going population. If educational psychology is going to make any impact on the equality of learners entering the formal school system, it is imperative that intervention takes place at an early age.

Since all 5/6 year olds will eventually find themselves in a Reception Year, no reason exists why intensive involvement in an informal literacy programme should not be implemented for learners from disadvantaged communities. Although on a small scale, in this research, it was established that much benefit is gained by introducing disadvantaged learners to informal or emergent literacy concepts, despite the lack of skills tested by traditional school readiness tests. The recommendations made in this research report do not deny the limitations imposed by the limited extent of the research regarding the size of the research population. The research results and consequent recommendations are,

however, a culmination of the well documented South African context (refer chapter 3), the resulting existence of special educational needs (refer chapter 2), the study of other intervention programmes (refer chapter 4), the outcome of this research (refer chapter 5), and the continuation of an urgent and extensive need for early intervention strategies.

## 6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

*“The changing nature of South Africa requires the distribution of all human, physical, and educational resources. The establishment of the new order demands fresh visions and offers the opportunity for innovative changes.”* (Nkabinde, 1997:75)

In par. 4.2.1 it is stated that there are two requirements if there is to be an improvement in the academic performance of young learners: Firstly, there must be a strong commitment of resources and support from policy makers, and, secondly, there must be proven, reliable and replicable means of turning research findings into success for young children.

### 6.4.1 Recommendations for policy makers:

Recently the policies regarding the reconstruction of education and especially ‘special education’ in South Africa have indicated a strong focus on mainstreaming. This fact brings to mind the inadequacy of provision for a large number of learners experiencing ‘special needs’. The general curriculum and policies regarding special needs have,

however, focussed on learners with clearly noticable disabilities, while provision for disadvantaged learners at risk of developing ‘special needs’ as a result of poverty and educational neglect is still being marginalised, although it is clear from much research that this aspect does not pertain to a small number of children (refer par. 2.5.1).

Learners often present with ‘special needs’ before the advent of formal schooling. At-risk learners are also easy to identify as they generally come from impoverished backgrounds. The advantages of early identification, assessment and intervention of ‘at-risk’ learners are well documented. Where severe disability is not the causal factor in delayed development, learners should have the right to demonstrate that they have the potential to benefit from ordinary education before alternative placement is considered. Some acknowledgements in this regard have already been made:

*“The transformation with regard to the provisioning of ECD services has created high expectations amongst the communities”.* (Interim Policy on ECD,1996:19)

Due to the discrepancies between the home and the school and negative schooling experiences, the vast majority of children from impoverished neighbourhoods lack emergent literacy knowledge. There is, therefore, a need to provide these learners with equal opportunities and access. Educational policy should therefore advocate that these children need **better than average pre-school literacy introduction.**

There is a strong need for educational support services and policies to focus on prevention rather than cure (refer par. 4.1). Because education support services have previously

strongly emphasised individual needs and individual intervention, a shift should be made where the **cultural context** needs to be acknowledged, and the focus placed on **preventative** learning support. Given the extent of contextual and social causalities of special needs, a holistic approach needs to be taken, which includes curriculum design that promotes among other aspects the acceleration of emergent literacy skills as preventative measure.

As the Reception Year will be the first introductory year of an integrated four-year Junior Primary programme, the policy for ECD provision can therefore focus more strongly on emergent literacy skills for learners from impoverished communities. It is also strongly suggested that a specified curriculum for the introduction of emergent literacy skills is included in the policy regarding the Reception Year Programme. The issue regarding proven, reliable and replicable means of turning research into success for young children will now be addressed:

#### 6.4.2 Recommendations for educators and educational practices

Unless preventive goals and practices become an integral part of the educational process in South Africa, there is little hope of transforming educational outcomes to a margin where success is evident - especially in the disadvantaged communities.

In order to achieve this, a shift regarding early educational practices is imperative.

In this regard it is important to address the roles of the parents or primary caregivers, the pre-school and elementary school teachers, the specialised educational supporters such as educational psychologists, as well as the specific design of an appropriate curriculum.

#### **6.4.2.1 The role of the parent**

As mentioned in par 3.3.3, many parents in disadvantaged communities were never exposed to the school reality as children, or were exposed to negative schooling practices. These parents need to be guided by educators to fulfil a supportive and encouraging role regarding schooling and literacy related activities. It is therefore important for educational support services to become part of the contextual setting and community in which risk factors are prominent.

Training for parents should be conducted through community centres where specialised personnel can address integrated issues and follow a holistic approach. Issues such as health, literacy, career and social development therefore need to be addressed. Parents should be educated to facilitate when their children are still very young, and be informed regarding early interventive practices. They must be empowered to provide social environments and to model behaviour that will promote learning and literacy development. The parents should be motivated to participate actively and even become involved in the same learning programmes as their children.

Garnezy (1991:423) states that high achieving learners have their roots in the family. Parents should therefore be motivated to conduct learning promotive behaviour such as the following:

- Initiate frequent school contact.
- Expose children to stimulating and supportive educators.
- Establish clear, specific boundaries and serve as the dominant authority.
- Avoid conflict between family members.
- Engage in achievement training activities with their children.
- Exercise firm, consistent monitoring and rule enforcement.
- Provide ample nurturing and support.
- Model favourable behavioural patterns.

Parents should also form an integral part of any assessment processes and be informed regarding the outcomes of assessments. The content of findings and the implications thereof need to be shared and explained to parents.

The parents should also become active participants in advocating the rights of their young children to have early literacy exposure where they are unable to provide it.

#### **6.4.2.2 The role of the teacher**

A shift towards a preventive approach will imply that all educators fulfil the special role of preventative educational supporter. Where literacy-related activities had in most

disadvantaged communities been reserved for school-going learners, there needs to be a shift towards a more literacy oriented pre-school phase. The pre-school teacher needs to have knowledge regarding the basic emergent literacy concepts that the learners need to be exposed to. Enjoyment and interest in literacy-related materials and activities should also form an integral part of everyday activities. Teacher training in these aspects can be acquired during formal or informal teacher training.

Pre-school and/or reception year teachers should on the other hand be skilled to recognise conditions such as educational disadvantage and the consequential lack of emergent literacy knowledge, so that accelerative measures can be taken. Identifying these learners will imply that these teachers should be able to recognise health, poverty, and social factors that could cause the development of special educational needs. These teachers should then be equipped with preventative programmes that could be implemented during normal school hours. Included in this role will need to be the support of parents or other care-givers and this support should relate to all aspects of child development, that include health, literacy, moral, and other favourable educational practices.

Teachers will then be equipped to recognise problems and provide screening for possible referral, as well as be able to implement interventive and preventative strategies as advised by more specialised educational services and personnel.

### 6.4.2.3 Specialised educational personnel

Specialised educational supporters such as remedial teachers, psychologists, social workers and health personnel will need to fulfil the important role of eradicating potentially dysfunctional contextual outcomes. The roles of these personnel will best be served when they are working at centres in the community. These services should include the design and development of preventative programmes that could be applied to a whole community. Appropriate measures would also need to include among others health-care, emergent literacy skills and social development. Provision in this regard also needs to include specialised services such as assessment, diagnosis and interventive procedures.

Specialised educational personnel should be empowered to designate alternative placement for learners with problems that had not been addressed or solved by the implementation of preventative strategies. Special support should lastly include the training and guidance of the teachers that were mentioned above.

Training for these specialised services should focus on an integrated approach. Such an approach would equip the personnel with skills for an integrated curriculum design and for the design of interventive programmes. It would also include consultative skills, skills for contextual analysis and skills to provide in-service training to teaching staff. As teachers and educational psychologists will soon start serving internship years, valuable services such as aid to pre-school learners, as well as parental and teacher guidance can be rendered.

#### 6.4.2.4 Curriculum design and early educational practices

Central to accommodating diversity in the South African context is a flexible curriculum and policy of assessment that acknowledges socio-economic disadvantage and resulting special needs. Because disadvantage creates a very significant barrier to learning, the curriculum needs to be designed to include measures that will prevent special educational needs.

The content of learning programmes, the medium of instruction, the teaching style as well as the materials used should provide opportunities for disadvantaged pre-schoolers to enter the formal school system on an equal footing with their more advantaged peers. Literacy accelerative practices should therefore form part of the new curriculum and ECD services.

Regarding the style of teaching and learning, the Draft Discussion Document (1997:21) states that children learn best when they are playing, when they are actively involved in making their own discoveries, when they are having fun, when they are healthy and safe, when they are encouraged to be creative and when they are interacting with others. It is acknowledged that skills, knowledge and attitudes are the main component outcomes of learning. These ideas should also be applied to literacy support and to the development of an appropriate literacy curriculum and intervening strategies for **disadvantaged pre-schoolers**.

Insights gained from the study of various intervention programmes (refer par. 4.6) also suggest that intervention is most effective if it occurs before entry into the formal school. Small group instruction can be applied and learners' attention should be focussed on letters, words, and phonemes. Learners should also learn to blend sounds into words. Repeated reading should form an integral part of instructional activities in order to introduce books and print-conventions.

Because many children actually begin to "read and write" (refer par. 1.8.2) long before they arrive at school, lacking early opportunities and lacking emergent literacy skills should serve as an indication that intervention is needed. The early identification of children who are likely to experience barriers to learning, as well as recognition of the principle of early intervention, should therefore form a significant part of curriculum design and educational practices.

Even before compulsory schooling, continuous assessment, not only of pre-school individuals, but also of contextual settings, should be administered. The outcome of such assessment should then be a description of learner and system needs and should form the basis for intervention. Lacking literacy skills should also be regarded as a cultural phenomenon and handled accordingly. The same principles should apply for the labelling of special educational needs.

### 6.4.3 Recommendations for further research

The ANC (1994) made mention of a ‘whole school review’. This indicates that continuous educational research and change need to take place at schools and in the wider contextual setting. Included in such research should be the reviewing of organisation development theories, that is “*a planned and sustained effort at school self-study and improvement, focussing explicitly on change in both formal and informal norms, structures and procedures...*” (De Jong, 1996:115).

Further research should aim at developing an integrated educational approach with the main aim of preventing the occurrence of special needs that is the result of inadequate early learning experiences and contextual disadvantage. Different models of parental guidance, teacher training and training for specialised educational services in a contextual setting need to be researched in order to develop a systemic model of intervention. Contextual models of intervention would best be served in community centres. Community-based services therefore also need to be researched in order to find an appropriate model that would serve an integrated approach that is health, learning and socially promotive in a South African context.

During this research a strong need for contextually and culturally relevant assessment devices became apparent. The development of such instruments is therefore essential in order to provide preventative measures, and this requires the appropriate research.

Other aspects that also need to be considered for future research purposes are, for example, the longitudinal effect of early literacy exposure for disadvantaged pre-schoolers and the **long-term academic consequences** of early intervention.. Addressing adult illiteracy, the development of early numeracy skills, children learning in a second language and the accommodation of the physically handicapped, for example, can simultaneously be incorporated in such research projects.

It is further recommended that this research design be duplicated with a larger population of pre-schoolers when they enroll in a compulsory Reception Year and internship-years for educators are implemented. The possible use of this framework for accelerating the acquisition of all three “R’s” should urgently be researched. This researcher strongly advocates that all learning and research be conducted in a way that is fun and is natural, emphasising learning that is meaningful and enjoyable.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

When Maxine Greene (1986:23) wrote about teaching in an article titled ‘How Do We Think About Our Craft’, her words captured what is believed to be an important achievement which was strived for and achieved through the findings in this research:

*“Through our own attending and the going-out of our own energies, we are able to break the bonds of the ordinary and the taken-for-granted, to move into spaces never known before. And that is what some of us, considering our craft, want for*

*those we teach: the opportunity and capacity to reach beyond, to move towards what is not yet.”*

The reconstruction of the education and training system has the vision of transforming the educational legacy of the past into a democratic education system that will contribute to the development of literate, creative and productive human beings, leading productive, self-fulfilled lives in a country free of violence, discrimination and prejudice. Lifelong education, training and development opportunities must be created, empowering people to participate effectively in all processes of a democratic society (Interim Policy of Early Childhood Development, 1996:15).

## **TEACHING THE YOUNG SHOULD BE THE BEGINNING**