CHAPTER 1

GENERAL ORIENTATION, PROBLEM FORMULATION, RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PLAN OF STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

As Frederico Mayor, director general of the UN has repeatedly stated, the fundamental educational challenge at the present time is undoubtedly that of eradicating illiteracy – both because of the scale of the problem – there are an estimated one billion adult illiterates in the world and 100 million children deprived of schooling, and because literacy is the key to all or most forms of education (Csapo, 1993:202).

> " *The extent of literacy in South Africa nowadays is not only the concern of educationists but also, among others, that of economists, politicians and social scientists. More people are becoming aware of the problems of illiteracy among the South African population* " (Ellis, 1988:16)

1.2   THE QUEST FOR EARLY INTERVENION

A study, which was conducted in 1994 into early childhood education, indicated that only 10% of children in South Africa between the ages of 0-6 years were receiving edu-care services (National

Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET), 1997:35). The Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector was characterised by disparities in terms of race (white bias), geographic locality (urban bias), social class (middle class bias) and disability (able-bodied bias).

In 1967 the key issue regarding early childhood education in the developed countries seemed to be just how important the earliest years of life are for education. Until that time, formal education had generally been limited to instruction during the school years. In the 1960's people began suggesting that valuable time was being lost by putting off education until the school years. Some people even questioned whether pre-school was early enough to begin early education. The suggestion was made that what was needed, was to begin even earlier with infants. Either because infancy was a critical period for education or because the effects of education were cumulative, it was asserted, that the earlier education started, the better (Clarke-Stewart, 1988:15). Weikart (1988:198) states that providing an intervention programme for young children might help resolve the problems that could crop up later in their lives. He also found that children who experience high quality early education appear to be more effective in society and less likely to be burdens to the society that they live in.

Lack of education in the early years has severe negative effects on the scholastic performance of the child. In this regard many different reasons, ranging from genetic to environmental factors, have been suggested to explain low academic/cognitive performance.

Feuerstein (1980:8) refers to the six-hour retarded child. Failure of this child is attributed to the demands imposed by an academically oriented and alien school system. It is suggested that altering the environment will bring about the desired change or eliminate the apparent poor performance of the individual. Although this theory might oversimplify the problem, it does have important implications for the early intervention period. Implicit or explicit, it is common knowledge that retarded cognitive performance persisting beyond childhood is not a reversible condition. It is therefore also clear that in the South African community, many young children are deprived of opportunities that would enhance their successful performance on academic level, and that they therefore have special educational needs.

Acknowledging that special educational needs often arise as a result of barriers in the way the curriculum has been presented, the term 'barriers to learning' will also be used during this research when referring to learners who are at risk of developing special educational needs due to personal, social or contextual factors. The prevention of special educational needs will be the main focus of this study, therefore the tradition and current perception thereof will now be discussed.

1.3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

1.3.1 The tradition and definition of the term 'special educational needs'

The term 'special educational needs' is the result of educational practices that became prominent in the 1960's, in which an interest in learning disabilities was taken. Few topics in this field have evoked

as much interest or controversy as those related to the definitions of the condition (Hammil, 1990:74).

According to Hammil (1990:74), the distinction must be made between conceptual and operational definitions of learning disabilities. A conceptual definition is a statement that describes learning disabilities theoretically. It is therefore the first step towards developing an operational definition that can be used to identify people who have learning disabilities.

The study of a field cannot begin until the individuals involved have agreed on the definitions of the essential concepts that relate to that field. Without such definitions, professionals, parents, and legislators are confused, firstly about who does and who does not have a learning disability, and secondly about whether learning disabilities even exist.

Learning disabilities are very prominent in the field of education, and therefore many definitions have seen the light over a long period of time. In order to have a clearer understanding of this wide field, a brief presentation of some definitions will follow:

- Kirk (1962:263): "... retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic or other school subjects resulting from a psychological handicap caused by possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional and behavioural disturbances and is not a result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation or cultural and instructional factors."

- Bateman (1965:220) : "... those who manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between their estimated intellectual potential and actual level of performance....and which are not secondary to mental retardation, educational or cultural deprivation...."

- The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (1968:34): "... exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken and written language.... They do not include learning problems that are due to visual, hearing, or to motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage."

- Kass & Myklebust (Northwestern University) (1969:378-379): "... deficits in essential learning processes requiring special education techniques for remediation....
...discrepancy between expected and actual achievement....not primarily the result of sensory, motor, intellectual or emotional handicap, or lack of opportunity to learn..."

- Siegel and Gold (The CEC/DCLD)(1972:14): " A learner with adequate mental ability, sensory processes, and emotional stability who has specific deficits in perceptual, integrative, or expressive processes which impair learning efficiency."

- Wepman, Cruickshank, Deutsch, Morency, & Strother, 1975:306): "... children of any age who demonstrate a substantial deficiency in a particular aspect of academic achievement because of perceptual or perceptual-motor handicaps..."

- The U.S. Office of Education (1977:65083): "... a basic disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written ... does not include children whose learning disabilities are primarily the result of ... environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage."

- Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (1987:222): "...a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities or social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual ... Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions, with socio-environmental influences, and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences."

Contrary to popular belief, considerable agreement exists today among the definitions and the definers. All the definitions mentioned above (Kirk, 1962; Bateman, 1965; NACHC, 1968; Kass & Myklebust, 1969; Siegel & Gold, 1972; Wepman et. Al. 1975; U.S Office of Educational Definition, 1977 and ICLD, 1987) agree that **an individual with learning disabilities is an underachiever, whose literacy efficiency lags behind that of his peer group.**

Traditional identification of special needs (as described above), however, focused on the individual and emphasised pathology. Attempts to identify the cognitive, motivational or behavioural factors

causing 'special needs', in order to correct the problem in these terms, do, however, not constitute an adequate or sufficient model of intervention (Donald 1991:39). What is needed is a definition that will take into account the specific nature of the South African context.

1.3.2   A different perspective on 'special needs' in the South African context

Donald (1991) suggests that the nature of learning disabilities in the South African context cannot be understood if the focus does not shift to a systematical analysis of a particular context in which the child functions, whether at the level of a classroom, a school or a wider systemic context.

Assessment and identification should not indicate that some children are born inferior, but that culture, context and educational deprivation exert a powerful effect on their learning skill acquisition and delay academic development. The tasks that comprise the identification of a learning disability should therefore reflect the skills and objectives required for effective functioning in our society.

Equality of opportunity demands that those deprived of opportunities to learn fundamental skills and concepts must be identified, not as learners with learning disabilities, but as learners with special needs, and that learning support be given to them. Assessment must therefore identify cultural and contextual handicaps, and provide remedy by means of educational opportunity (Kriegler, 1996:116).

1.4   PROVISION OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

The history of education for learners with 'special educational needs' and of education support services in South Africa reflects massive deprivation and lack of educational provision for the majority of learners. The inequities evident in areas of concern can be directly attributed to those social, economic and political factors that have characterised the history of the South African society during the years of apartheid.

These factors resulted in a lack of educational opportunities, which can also be described as barriers to learning (refer par. 1.8.5). They also resulted in inequalities between provision for white and black learners, an inefficient educational bureaucracy that separated these learners from the mainstream, and the provision of highly specialised services to a limited number of learners (NCSNET, 1997:21).

Social issues, social problems, and special needs in the previous educational dispensation were seen as aspects which were not of central concern to the average teacher. They were seen as separate from the main business of teaching 'normal' children. Often these issues were regarded as the concern of welfare and health departments - not education. Within such an education system many children were, therefore, removed to separate classes, schools, or other institutions. In the new South African educational dispensation, with its emphasis on mainstreaming (refer par. 1.5.1), such an approach is impractical, due to the large majority of learners experiencing special educational needs (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwane, 1997:19).

The extent of poverty and disadvantage in a developing society such as South Africa creates social issues, problems and special needs that relate to the great majority of disadvantaged learners. Social issues such as contextual disadvantage and the effects thereof may in fact touch almost all children in some way (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwane, 1997:19).

'Special educational needs' refers to a wide range and a large number of learners, and it must be understood that the needs are 'special' because the learners concerned require special help and support if they are to overcome the particular contextual, social and individual disadvantages and difficulties (barriers) they face, or if they are to be prevented from experiencing these difficulties continuously when entering the formal school system. The following quotation gives a brief summary of the current state of affairs:

> *"The long history of discriminatory provision in this sector delivers a set of conditions that make it difficult to provide a quick-fix solution. It is for this reason that the situation requires a set of immediate measures alongside carefully devised medium- and long-term strategies that will provide a better foundation to address the fundamental need for ECD services"*(Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, 1996:2).

In terms of the new South African Constitution, it is therefore our obligation to meet the developmental and educational needs of all children in a way that is inclusive. The right to education is now established as a fundamental human right (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwane,

1997:19). It means that we cannot exclude from our concern any special needs that arise out of

contextual disadvantage, social problems and individual disabilities or difficulties in learning. This

viewpoint can best be presented by the following pre-amble to Act No 84, 1996 that was

published in the Government Gazette of the Republic of South Africa Vol. 377, Cape Town, 15

November 1996:

> *" WHEREAS the achievement of democracy in South Africa has consigned to history the past*
> *system of education which was based on racial inequality and segregation; and WHEREAS*
> *this country requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in*
> *educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners*
> *and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and*
> *capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism*
> *and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication*
> *of poverty and the economic well-being of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures*
> *and language, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators, and promote their*
> *acceptance of responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in*
> *partnership with the State; and WHEREAS it is necessary to set uniform norms and*
> *standards for the education of learners at schools and the organisation, governance and*
> *funding of schools throughout the Republic of South Africa. "*

According to Nasson & Sameul (1990), and to Nkomo (1990), the main problems in South Africa's

education system are related to the problematic past and particularly to the policy of apartheid and its consequences (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwane, 1997:15). Although much has been done to address injustices of the past, there still appear to be certain areas of neglect (refer par. 1.5.1), with regard to the educational system and its past and present functioning, and especially with regard to the Early Childhood Development sector. These areas provide the set parameters for the research design and execution of this study.

1.5 RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

1.5.1 Reform of the education system

In May 1990, the Minister of Education announced the development of an 'Education Renewal Strategy' for South Africa. The policy document, which was published, noted the need for redress and acknowledged the discriminatory practices of the past. Several recommendations were made for reforms to the existing education system. These included among others an increased availability of support services such as psychological, therapeutic, social and remedial services, and that children requiring such services should as far as possible be included in the mainstream.

In 1992 a very important investigation into education in South Africa was completed. The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), which included a report on Support Services, however, showed significant racial disparities and neglect in the provision of 'special' education and ESS

(Education Support Services) in the country. While this report focussed primarily on outlining policy options within a framework of non-discrimination and redress, there was a recommendation that learners with 'special' needs who are currently in specialised schools should be progressively moved into ordinary learning contexts, as these contexts developed their capacity to provide appropriate education and support (NCSNET, 1997:24).

Mainstreaming, however, is problematic, as young children with disabilities are among those most in need of help for them to develop their potential, and for whom early intervention is likely to be most critical. The Public Discussion Document (NCSNET, 1997: 35) in this regard states: "The absence of ECD services for young children with 'special needs' makes it more difficult for the child beginning in an inclusive class when formal schooling begins. The child has often not had the opportunity to learn the prerequisite skills. Early childhood development and stimulation within an inclusive environment is regarded as the foundation of an integrated society."

Policies of the new government are indicative of an attempt to address the needs within the ECD sector. The Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, the White Paper for Social Welfare, the National Plan of Action for Children, the National Primary Health Care Policy and the Integrated National Disability Strategy are all efforts to prioritise early childhood development on the agenda of, inter alia, different education departments.

The Early Childhood Development pilot project that was launched in 1997 by the Department of

Education focussed on provision for young children not currently in early childhood education programmes for the reception year. Initial investigations, however, have indicated that the children with real needs are being marginalised and totally excluded from support services (NCSNET, 1997). These children form a large portion of our society and excluding them from services will mean that they start school with inadequate learning experiences to equip them for success.

1.6   RESEARCH PROBLEM

As stated in par 1.2, the provision of 'special education' and Education Support Services (ESS) in the country is inadequate despite a recommendation that learners with special needs should be moved into ordinary learning contexts.

Gardner (1991:2) in this regard comments on the very young children who so readily master complex oral language systems, but nevertheless experience the greatest difficulty with literacy acquisition upon their entry into the formal school system. Speaking and understanding language have proved to be unproblematic, but reading and writing may pose severe challenges; counting and numerical games are fun, but learning mathematical operations can prove very vexing. Somehow the natural, universal, or intuitive learning that took place in their homes or immediate surroundings during the first years of life seems entirely different from the school learning that is now required throughout the literate world.

This viewpoint confirms the fact that many learners experience the school system as alien and difficult and therefore special attention should be given to learners with 'barriers to learning' such as lack of educational opportunities at a young age, in order to prevent trauma when entering the formal school system.

The problem addressed in this research would therefore be to establish if and to what extent the acquisition of emergent literacy skills could be accelerated by exposing disadvantaged pre-schoolers to literacy events in spite of the learning barriers before their formal school entry.

In the light of the above mentioned problem the following sub-problems become prominent:

1.6.1   What is the current nature and extent of special needs in the South African context?

1.6.2   What is the current cultural trend of literacy mediation and acquisition in the South African context?

1.6.3   What strategies can be implemented in order to break the cycle of illiteracy evident in the disadvantaged South African context?

1.6.4   Can a framework for intervention be successfully applied to disadvantaged pre-schoolers in a South African context? This problem will be addressed by undertaking an empirical

investigation into a disadvantaged community (refer par. 5.2). This investigation will among others (refer par. 5.2.3) address issues such as the disadvantaged community's willingness to partake in an early literacy programme. It will furthermore address the level of socio-economic status (refer par. 5.2.4.1) and its relevance to the learner's levels of 'school readiness' or 'mental ages' (refer par. 5.2.4.2) as well as their levels of 'informal literacy knowledge' (refer par. 5.2.4.3), and lastly the effect of a literacy intervention programme on the different variables.

1.7   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Robson (1993:78) mentions that to be experimental is simply to be concerned with trying new things - and seeing what happens, what the reception is. There is a change in something, and a concern for the effects that this change might have on something else.

1.7.1   Deducing a hypothesis

Disadvantaged pre-schoolers who experience barriers to learning, and who are at risk of developing special educational needs can acquire emergent literacy skills by means of intervention procedures.

1.7.2 Testing the hypothesis

The testing of this hypothesis will be undertaken by means of qualitative and quantitative research. This strategy involves a study of relevant literature that will indicate the existence of a need and provide criteria for selecting appropriate individuals. A limited field study will serve the purpose of studying the social context in which the participants in the research find themselves, since this aspect bears significant influence on the problem as stated in par. 1.6. Observation of the participants and their contextual setting as well as the conducting of interviews will therefore also serve as a means of gathering qualitative data (refer par. 5.2 and 5.3.1).

Individuals will be selected from a specified population and they will be introduced to experimental conditions by introducing pre-tests, implementing the planned programme, and the administering of post-tests whereby the outcome of the intervention programme can be measured. Hereby the hypothesis will also be tested.

In this experimental design the researcher will make use of standardised measuring instruments as well as non-standardised instruments to test the hypothesis. The participants will be selected pre-schoolers in a disadvantaged community who are most at risk of having special needs.

These participants will then be subjected to an informal literacy programme to establish the following:

- To what extent they are able to achieve emergent literacy skills at an age younger than

what is considered the norm (that is accelerated literacy acquisition)

- If there is a notable difference between the level of emergent literacy that the experimental group have achieved when compared to their peers who attended a formal pre-school.

- If there is an improvement in the general intellectual functioning of the experimental group as a result of exposure to an informal literacy programme.

1.8   CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

1.8.1   Mediation

Feuerstein (1980:15) conceives the development of cognitive structures in an organism as a product of two modalities of interaction between the organism and its environment, namely **direct exposure to sources of stimuli**, and **mediated learning.**

He mentions that exposure to sources of stimuli from the very earliest stages of development produces changes in the organism that affect its behavioural repertoire and cognitive orientation. The modality of learning as a function of direct exposure is consistent with the stimulus-response formulations of the learning theorists and also Piaget's (1966) stimulus-organism-response-formula.

The second modality - mediated learning experience - refers to the way in which a mediating agent

transforms stimuli emitted by the environment, usually a parent or teacher. This mediating agent, guided by his intentions, culture and emotional investment, selects and organises the world of stimuli for the child. Stimuli that are most appropriate are selected by the mediator and then framed, filtered and scheduled. The mediator determines the appearance or disappearance of certain stimuli and ignores others. Through this process of mediation, the cognitive structure of the child is affected (refer par 3.3.3, 4.2.1 and 4.4)

1.8.2   Informal and Emerging literacy skills

Since the 1960's, there has been a gradual discrediting of the view that children who were not ready for a particular series of lessons in a school programme needed to spend time on other kinds of activities until the ripening of readiness occurred. Parents, teachers and researchers began to observe and report the literacy activities of pre-school children. According to Clay (in Strickland & Morrow, 1989:v) they found that pre-school children listened to stories, discussed them, and even made up stories of their own. Theses children scribbled 'letters' to family members, wrote their names and invented print-signs. Some children invented ways of writing their own speech before anyone had thought about teaching them to write, and as a result they could 'read' it back. Other children taught themselves to read before they came to school, often helped by young siblings who were themselves novice readers. Clay (1989:v) further mentions that *"once we began to look at what little children were doing in literate homes and societies, we found that **literacy was an emerging set of knowledge and skills** having its beginnings in very young children who accumulated a little here and a little*

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there as they have moved about their pre-school settings." Clay further found that five-year old school entrants came to school with literacy knowledge that greatly varied from child to child. One child knew about **books**, another had explored **writing**, one could recognise family names and others could read some **letters** of the alphabet. She noticed that it was very rare to find a child who did not have some literacy knowledge on entry to school. It was, however, clear that what they could already do was the springboard from which they dived into the school's instruction. These skills are what is referred to as emergent literacy skills.

Lonigan, Burgess and Anthony (2000:596), who studied the predictive significance of emergent literacy skills for both later emergent literacy skills and reading, made the following statement: *"Emergent literacy consists of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing and thus suggests that significant sources of individual differences in children's later reading skills are present prior to school entry."*

In recent years there has been a surge of research into what is now called **emergent literacy**. The research can be characterised most generally as a search for the developmental precursors of literacy 'bridges', as they are sometimes called, to formal literacy. Children go through predictable developmental progressions as they spontaneously acquire knowledge of how to write down speech - knowledge that will eventually be subject to the correction of academic training (Stewart, 1995:1). Sulzby (1985) recognised that although children younger than six demonstrate literate behaviour it

is not yet in the same totality as conventional reading and writing. The adjective 'emergent' in this regard is useful on four counts. Firstly it implies that development takes place from within the child. Secondly, 'emergence' is a gradual process that takes place over time. Thirdly, for something to emerge there has to be something there in the first place and fourthly, things usually only emerge if the conditions are right (Hall, 1987:10).

The concept 'emergent literacy' has only recently become prominent, even though there is a long history of research with regard to young children's reading and writing. Kriegler (1989) mentions that knowledge of **books**, knowledge of **phonemes**, knowledge of **syntax** and **lexicon**, knowledge regarding **print**-related vocabulary and **writing** skills, as well as the **interest** and motivation in literacy related activities all form an integral part of emergent and developing literacy knowledge and that these skills are at first acquired in an informal, incidental manner. Literacy development is therefore being studied in the fuller sense and literacy learning is not regarded simply as a cognitive skill to be learned but as a complex socio-psycholinguistic activity (Strickland & Morrow, 1989:2). Thus the social aspects of literacy have become significant for the study of literacy development (refer par. 4.3 and 4.4).

Furthermore, Cashdan (1986:2) mentions that literacy is not simply a matter of decoding print into sounds, or of converting sounds to print, it also includes **meaning**. The meaning that a pre-schooler attaches to literacy activities also has important bearing on the emergence of these skills. McLane and McNamee (1992:2) in this regard state that one definition of literacy is to know the letters of the

alphabet and how to use them to read and write, but they also make mention of Frederick Erickson's phrase "... to be lettered means more than this: It involves attitudes, assumptions, and expectations about writing and reading, and about the value of these activities in one's life." Literacy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Reading and writing are more than simply decoding and encoding print - they are also ways of constructing meaning with written language.

1.8.3 Acceleration

Van Tassel-Baska (1986:13) makes the following statement regarding acceleration: "Acceleration is a word that conjures up strong feelings in those who hear it." Frequently someone will be heard to remark how acceleration ruined his life and was responsible for his becoming a social outcast. However, according to Kulik & Kulik (1984), the term 'acceleration' is most frequently associated with gifted individuals who might need a scapegoat for atypical social behaviours that they have developed. Irrespective of the above statements, it is clear that a great deal of mythology surrounds our common understanding of the educational practice called acceleration. Most research reviews that have been conducted on acceleration as well as substantive individual studies have shown it to be a highly effective intervention technique with the intellectually gifted (Kelly, 1985; Adey & Shayer 1990).

Three types of acceleration are currently or historically practised in schools. One type has typically been called **grade acceleration**, which in essence has been defined as having a child 'skip a grade',

usually at the elementary or middle school level. A second kind of acceleration is **telescoping**. Through this kind of acceleration a student for example covers all of the scope and sequence of a two-year curriculum but merely does it in one year. This tends to be a somewhat appealing approach to acceleration because curriculum specialists do not have to alter scope and sequence charts. The child merely covers the material at a faster rate. The third type of acceleration is **content acceleration**. This type of acceleration allows a student to move through a content area at a rate commensurate with his or her level of attainment and capability to proceed. This type of acceleration allows a student the flexibility of progressing through a curriculum area at his/her own rate, regardless of grade placement.

Maltby (1986:97) distinguishes between acceleration and enrichment in the sense that acceleration focuses on 'the rapid pacing of material' to meet the needs of those who learn rapidly, while enrichment refers to the teaching of different content or the use of different teaching methods to meet the needs of learners who have different interests and different ways of learning.

The term 'acceleration' that will be used in this research does not precisely fit any of the above mentioned descriptions but can relate to what Pressy (1949:2) wrote in an important monograph on the subject of acceleration. He defined acceleration very simply as **"progress through an educational program at rates faster or ages younger than what is considered the norm"** (Maltby, 1986:97).

The term 'acceleration' in this research therefore relates to this description in the sense that young learners, at a age younger and at a rate faster than what is considered the norm, will be exposed to literacy concepts in order to determine the influence of this exposure on their general intellectual functioning (mental age) and informal literacy knowledge.

1.8.4   Early Childhood Development

The term 'Early Childhood Development (ECD)', according to the NCSNET Public Discussion Document (1997:148) applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive - physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially. ECD programmes include a variety of strategies and a wide range of services directed at helping families and communities to meet the needs of children in this age group.

Previously the term 'Educare' was used to refer to programmes for children in the 0 to 6 years age group. This has now been replaced by the term Early Childhood Development, that encompasses children from birth to at least nine years, depending on their age when entering formal education (Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, 1996).

1.8.5   Special Educational Needs and Barriers to Learning

'Special Educational Needs' refers to the needs or priorities which the individual person or the system

may have which must be addressed in order to enable the system to respond to differences (diversity) in the learner population, to remove barriers to learning, and to promote effective learning among all learners.

In the Education White Paper 1 on Education and Training (1995) the importance of providing effective response to unsatisfactory educational experiences is acknowledged. In order to address this concern the Ministry appointed a National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training and a National Committee on Education Support Services in October 1996. A Consultative Paper released findings regarding these issues in August 1999, that included aspects regarding the use of the terms 'learners with special educational needs' and 'learners with mild to severe learning difficulties'. In the White Paper 6 on Special Educational Needs (2001:12) it is stated that there should be consistency between the inclusive approach that is embraced, namely that barriers to learning exist primarily within the learning system, and the language in use in the policy papers. Accordingly the White paper adopts the use of the terminology "barriers to learning and development". It will retain the internationally acceptable terms of 'disability' and 'impairments' when referring to learners whose barriers to learning and development are rooted in organic/medical causes.

Acknowledging that 'special educational needs' often arise as a result of barriers in the way the curriculum has been presented, it has been suggested that instead of referring to 'learners with special educational needs', we should refer to learners who experience barriers to learning (NCSNET,

1997:150). This includes learners with disability who commonly experience some form of difficulty in engaging in the learning process, as well as the many other learners who experience some form of difficulty in engaging in the learning process for personal reasons.

With regard to who experiences and what constitutes barriers to learning, the following learners are included: learners with disabilities who may need to use specialised equipment or assisting devices in order to access the curriculum and participate in the learning process; learners who experience some form of learning breakdown as a result of particular barriers to learning (for example a learner who learns at a faster or slower pace than others in the classroom); and learners who are at risk for personal and social reasons (NCSNET, 1997:7).

1.8.6   Contextual Disadvantage and Special Needs

The special educational needs that are related to contextual disadvantage can be seen as primarily 'external' in origin. They are the result of disadvantage in a particular social and educational context. They relate to the social system as a whole, but also to the broader as well as the local community, school, classroom, peer group, family and ultimately the individual person. A disadvantaged educational environment can cause special needs that are the result of poor stimulation, inadequate resources, or of educationally inappropriate policies. Learners who have to learn through a second language is one example which can seriously affect the majority of learners. Differences that lead to these special needs cannot be regarded as exceptions because they are primarily differences of context

which relate to the socio-economic and political structure of a society and the resources and responses of particular communities, schools, families, and children within this structure. A most important aspect of addressing these special needs must be to promote social, educational, and developmental changes that can prevent such needs from arising in the first place.

Kriegler (1996:112) in this regard states that the predictors of the child's ability to benefit from formal education are primarily dependent on the quality and quantity of informal education at home, rather than on global and intractable factors such as 'cultural differences' and 'socio-economic status'. Negating the importance of pre-school informal mediated learning experiences has helped maintain the myth that the discrepancy in educational outcome between black and white children is the result of racially determined and genetically transmitted inferiority.

There was little evidence that supported a need for qualitatively different forms of instruction. It appears that such learners need more teaching, not a different kind of teaching, than other leaners. They need exposure to sources of literacy. They also need to live in a social context where provision is being made for success in the world they are living in, or they need for the governing bodies to take notice of them and provide early literacy experiences which are not available at home due to conditions of the past.

1.9   PROGRAMME OF STUDY

1.9.1   Chapter two will focus on the nature of special needs in the South African context.

1.9.2   In chapter three cultural differences between a literate and illiterate culture with regards to literacy mediation in South Africa will be discussed.

1.9.3   Chapter four will involve a study of literacy-acquisition and a description of appropriate pre-school programmes as means of preventing illiteracy.

1.9.4   Chapter five will deal with an empirical investigation into the effect of an informal literacy programme on the development of emergent reading for pre-schoolers from a disadvantaged society and provide a conceptual framework for intervention.

1.9.5   In chapter six a summary of the research is presented, conclusions are drawn and recommendations regarding the outcomes of the research are made.