CHAPTER 4

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ILLITERACY THROUGH ACCELERATING THE ACQUISITION OF INFORMAL LITERACY SKILLS IN DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS AT RISK OF HAVING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

"In this parable, the idea of putting the ambulance at the bottom of a cliff clearly is foolish on many levels. Waiting for children to be injured and only then providing them with help is cruel and inhuman if the damage can be prevented. Further, it is needlessly expensive; an ambulance costs more than a fence.

Yet, longstanding policies in special education, especially for children with learning disabilities, are very much like this ill-considered idea. Schools generally provide good programs in grade 0, 1st grade and beyond, but they know with certainty that a number of children will fail by the wayside. In particular, a certain number of children of normal intelligence will fail to learn to read. After a while, these children are very likely to be retained, assigned to long-term remedial services, or labelled as having learning disabilities and provided with special educational services. By the time that these services are rendered,

most of the children will already have realised that they have failed at their most important task - learning to read. Accordingly, they will have lost most of their motivation, enthusiasm, and positive expectations. Schools will be paying for years - in special education and in remedial instruction costs - for failing to ensure that students succeed in the early grades" (Slavin, 1996:4).

The focus on correction rather than prevention continues in spite of an impressive and growing body of authoritative opinion and research evidence which suggest that reading failure is preventable for all but a very small percentage of children (Clay, 1985; Hall, Prevatte & Cunningham, 1993; Hiebert & Taylor, 1994; Taylor, Strait & Medo, 1994). These findings are particularly important since very little evidence suggests that programmes designed to correct reading problems beyond second grade are successful, and some studies (Kennedy, Birman & Demaline, 1986) suggest that efforts to correct reading problems beyond third grade are largely unsuccessful.

Pikulski (1994:30) mentions the fact that programmes for the prevention of reading problems seem expensive on the surface, but that they are actually very cost effective when compared to the costs involved in remedial efforts and the retaining of students for one or more years of schooling, as well as placement in expensive, yet minimally effective, special education programmes (Dyer, 1992; Slavin, 1989; Smith & Strain, 1988). In addition, there is no way to determine the saving of human suffering, humiliation, and frustration that would occur if children did not experience the painful school failure that all too often follows them through school and life.

The term 'early intervention', used in a variety of ways in the professional literature, often refers to programmes designed for pre-school children. Research reviews strongly suggest that these programmes will play a critical role in efforts to eradicate reading and school failure (Slavin, Karweit & Wasik, 1994) and thereby breaking the cycle of illiteracy, especially in a South African context.

4.2 BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ILLITERACY

Today, the tendency is that children with special educational needs should be mainstreamed for much of the day. However, mainstreamed students with special educational needs are often poorly accepted by their peers, struggle with academic content, and develop low self-esteems (Bear, Clever & Proctor, 1991:409).

Slavin (1996:5) argues for the implementation of preventative and early intervention programs, which are powerful enough to ensure that virtually every child is successful in the first place. Evidence is accumulating that it is in fact possible to ensure success for almost all children in the early elementary grades if they are helped at an early age.

4.2.1 Early intervention and the prevention of school failure:

"*Educators need to invest in children at an early age so that they can have the opportunity*

to enter school on an equal footing with other children and learn from the start that they can be successful." (Wasik & Karweit, 1994:54).

There is growing consensus among policy makers and educators that effective interventions in pre-school, grade 0 and/or first grade will pay off in later achievement and reduce the need for special education (Slavin, 1994:1). This issue is addressed in the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (1996:19), which states that:

" The transformation with regard to the provisioning of ECD services has created high expectations amongst the communities. 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 that provide a poor learning environment are disadvantaged. There is, therefore, a need to provide equal opportunities and access for all children."

Many disadvantaged learners, therefore, still have limited early experiences and come to school on a very unequal footing with their non-disadvantaged peers. These disadvantaged learners do not show obvious signs of delay, and are often not identified for services from which they could benefit until it is too late. They will therefore continue to enter school poorly prepared to learn.

Slavin (1994:2) addresses the issue by stating: "Start students off with success, and they will build

on this success throughout their school careers."

Children who get off to a good start in the early years stand a better chance of being successful at school (Wasik & Karweit, 1994:13). Experiences in the years from birth to age 3 set a foundation for language and cognitive skills that prepare children for formal schooling and help prevent school failure.

Although research findings consistently support the effectiveness of early intervention (Casto & White, 1985; Farran, 1990), there are still many unanswered questions regarding these intervention strategies and very little is done in reality to eradicate the problems.

An important question pertains to the intensity of this early intervention, and the question is whether this early intervention has to start and continue throughout pre-school and the elementary school years. It also needs to be established at what age the intervention should occur in order to make it effective.

Two important questions come up when one considers the implementation of early intervention programmes for students who experience barriers to learning, namely:

- Can pre-school education alone prevent early failure?

There is a strong belief among educators and the general public that early childhood education is a good investment (Karweit, 1994:58), especially for promoting later school success for disadvantaged students. This belief is emphasised by the following statement in Lubeck & Garret (1989:8) *"The effect of early intervention on school success is well documented. I believe that early intervention therapy, language stimulation and rich experiences at ages three and four will do more to increase the achievement of at-risk children and to reduce dropouts than any amount of money spent at grades seven through twelve."*

- Do we have any evidence of accelerated progress in late starters?

"There may be isolated examples which support this hope, but correlations from a follow-up study of 100 children two and three years after school entry lead me to state rather dogmatically that where a child stood in relation to his age-mates at the end of his first year at school was roughly where one could expect to find him at 7 or 8. This is what one would expect if learning to read is dependent on the acquisition and practice of a complex set of learned behaviours, and not the product of sudden insights" (Clay, 1979:13).

Almost all children, regardless of social class or other factors, enter first grade full of enthusiasm, motivation, and self-confidence, fully expecting to succeed in school (Entwistle & Hayduk, 1981).

By the end of the first grade, many of these students have already discovered that their initial high expectations are not being actualised, and they have begun to see school as punishing and demeaning. Trying to rectify failure later on is difficult, because by then students who have failed are likely to be unmotivated, to have poor self-concepts as learners, to be anxious about reading, and to hate it. Success in the early grades does not guarantee success throughout the school years and beyond, but failure in the early grades does virtually guarantee failure in later schooling (Slavin, 1994:4), and this is a critical problem in the South African context.

Two things must happen 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 into success for young children. There must therefore be programmes far more effective than those generally used today - capable of ensuring academic success for virtually all children. Many believe that reading acquisition is the most powerful tool that can be used to break the cycle of illiteracy.

4.2.2 The importance of reading efficiency for academic success

As stated in par. 4.2.1, disadvantaged learners need to enter school with the same skills as non-disadvantaged learners in order to be successful in school. These skills specifically regard **reading** efficiency due to the fact that there is widespread acceptance of the conclusion that students who fail to learn to read in the first grade are seriously at risk (Felton, 1998; Bayder, Brookes-Gunn and

Furstenburg,1993; Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000). It is also important because reading performance can easily be measured and because **success in the first grade is essentially synonymous with success in reading.**

Mason, Kerr, Sinha & Mc Cormick (1990), Mason & Sinha (1993) and Dyer (1992) all reached the dismal conclusion that poor readers in first grade remain at the bottom of the class in later grades. Thus waiting for low-achieving children to mature denies them the opportunity to learn about literacy concepts before they are too far behind their peers. Lentz (1988) in Lonigan et. al (2000: 396) has concluded that children who enter the school with limited reading-related skills are at high risk of qualifying for special educational services, and adds that the majority of school-age children that are referred for special education evaluation are referred because of unsatisfactory progress in reading. It is therefore important that much emphasis be placed on the acquisition and development of emergent reading skills (refer par. 1.8.2).

The purpose should therefore be to identify the key aspects of reading efficiency, and of the manner in which it is acquired before formal school entry, in order to design effective early intervention programmes.

4.3 READING ACQUISITION

There are mainly two schools of thought regarding the development of reading efficiency. The first

is the 'reading readiness' theory that has existed since the beginning of this century, but has undergone several transformations, and the second is the 'emergent literacy' theory that has become more apparent in research and theory building in the last 15 years. These theories will be briefly discussed.

4.3.1 A Reading Readiness Perspective

The reading readiness theory is an earlier and most influential theory in the United States and continues to play an important role among educational practitioners.

Coltheart (1979:3) mentions that the term 'readiness' was first used by Patrick in 1899, who viewed cognitive development as a function of 'ripening' and stated that "a child's powers, whether physical or mental, ripen in a certain rather definite order at the age of 7, and that there is a certain mental readiness for some things and a non-readiness for others."

When the concept of reading readiness was first introduced in the 1900s it was generally agreed that maturation was the precondition for reading readiness. Gesell, who was very influential in development studies and early educational practices in the United States during the period ranging from the 1920s to the 1950s (in Teale & Sulzby, 1986), advocated a naturalist position and believed that development was the result of maturation. The direct outcome of this kind of position was the philosophy of "wait and see" until the child was ready for instruction. Accordingly educators delayed

reading instruction until a child was 'ready' to read, that is, until the child possessed some prerequisite skills.

Many problems can be attributed to the reading readiness theory. Opponents thereof would argue that merely waiting for development is not sufficient. They would also argue about the age at which instruction should begin. In some countries instruction begins at 5, some 6 and some at the age of 7. If the maturational viewpoint is correct, then the countries that begin at 5 would have numerous cases of reading failure, and those that begin at 7 would have few (Mason & Sinha, 1993:139).

In the last several decades, reading readiness concepts have undergone some change of emphasis which resulted in the inclusion of activities to develop auditory discrimination and memory, and visual discrimination and memory. Later, letter names and sounds, word recognition, and some general skills were added (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Reading readiness therefore emphasises the 'waiting' until a child is ready to learn to read.

4.3.2 An emergent literacy perspective

Objections to the reading readiness concept have become more apparent in research and theory building in the last 15 years. A principal reason has been the perspective termed 'emergent literacy'. There appeared a proliferation of studies that challenged both the behaviourist theory and the notion of neutral ripening (Allen & Mason, 1989; Clay, 1979; Mason, 1989; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). All

these studies share the following shifting perspective, namely that

- Literacy emerges before children are formally taught to read.
- Literacy is defined to encompass the whole act of reading, not merely decoding.
- The child's point of view and active involvement in emergent literacy constructs is featured.
- The social setting for literacy learning is not ignored.

The term **emergent literacy** gives legitimacy to children's literacy behaviours, but still indicates a difference from conventional reading behaviour (Teale & Sulzby, 1986), and provides a way to broaden its focus and to integrate reading and writing. Read's (1971) research on invented spelling led to studies about developmental changes in children's phonological awareness and knowledge about letter-sound correspondences. This approach of studying children's responses to discover the kinds of mental strategies they can understand and apply is central to both Piaget's and Vygotsky's perspectives about child development.

Although many researchers emphasised the natural way in which children learn to read, a close inspection of the so-called 'natural' reading would reveal that a plethora of activities go on at the homes of literacy efficient school-beginners, under the tutelage of a parent or other sibling (Mason & Sinha, 1993:141; Goodman & Goodman, 1974). Such activities include informal interactions that use literacy concepts, involvement in reading and writing, and staged opportunities for exploration

of literacy materials. Mason and Sinha (1993:138) therefore argue that a way out of this theoretical conflict is for educators to learn to apply a Vygotskian model to literacy development and mediation. This model will now be described:

4.4 THE VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVE ON LITERACY ACQUISITION

> " *It is not true that imitation is a mechanical activity and that anyone can imitate almost anything if shown how. To imitate, it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new. With assistance, every child can do more than he can by himself - though only within the limitations of his development. Imitation and instruction bring out the specifically human qualities of the mind and lead the child to new developmental levels. What the child can do in co-operation today, he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it and it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as the ripening functions. For a time our schools favoured the "complex" system of instruction, which was believed to be adapted to the child's way of thinking. In offering the child problems he was able to handle without help, this method failed to utilise the zone of proximal development and to lead the child to what he could not yet do. Instruction was oriented to the child's weakness rather than his strength, thus encouraging him to remain at the pre-school stage of development* (Vygotsky, 1983:268)."

Explicitly or implicitly, most explanations of mediated learning draw on the theoretical perspective of Lev Vygotsky (Rogoff, 1990), and include the role of the teacher or tutor, and of the cultural milieu for learning.

Vygotsky's theory entails social constructs of development and provides an explanation of how social interactions between learner and teacher lead the learner towards proficiency. Four relevant aspects of Vygotsky's theory include: Development, mediation or instruction, the 'zone of proximal development', and the acquisition of literacy concepts:

4.4.1 Development

Vygotsky (1992) proposed a model of development that matched the basic principles of early childhood education and suggested an appropriate way for teachers to guide and support children's learning and development. He distinguished between two kinds of development, namely **natural and cultural**. Natural development is "closely bound up with the processes of general organic growth and the maturation of the child", while cultural development allows mastery not only of items of cultural experience, but the habits and forms of cultural behaviour and the cultural methods of reasoning, that were addressed in chapter 3. Cultural development under which literacy learning and development are explained, arises from the use of symbols to solve problems, that is, through the use of speech and actions involving more abstract representations.

This cultural development can be closely linked to the mediated learning theory of Feuerstein (1980), and the interaction between learner and teacher with regard to the development of reading and writing efficiency.

Vygotsky (1992) proposed four stages in cultural development that can be applied to the development of reading and writing as well as to other aspects of reasoning: The first stage is the **natural developmental** level in which the child creates "associative or conditional reflexive connections between the stimuli and reactions." At this point the child is limited by attention, interest and memory. Movement into the second stage occurs with the **assistance of an adult**. The child makes some use of symbols and the adult operates within the child's range of understanding, maintaining his interest and easing memory demands. At the same time the adult also leads the child to new understandings. In the third stage the child figures out how to make effective **use of symbols and tools** and then practises that discovery. In the fourth stage the child is **freed from external signs and symbols**, and the process becomes internalised, that is, when the physical presence is no longer needed as the child starts to use the inner schemes, tries to use as signs his remembrances, the knowledge he formerly acquired.

4.4.2 Literacy mediation and instruction

Vygotsky (1983) mentions that reading instruction need not be delayed, but it does need to be supported; that is, because of its complexity, reading cannot be expected to develop without

assistance from others (Mason & Sinha, 1993:142). The nature of reading assistance does however not follow a reading readiness or direct instruction model. As Bruner (1985:24) suggests, the teacher should provide 'various forms of consciousness' until the children have experienced various aspects of the concepts. That is, the teacher organises learning tasks, making it possible for children to try them out and, in applying concepts to practical and increasingly more complex tasks, learn to understand how to use them for their own purposes. The teacher therefore **guides**, **instructs**, **facilitates** and **supports** the child during the learning tasks as well as **motivates** towards achievement.

Research suggests that more academic kindergarten programmes can be beneficial, particularly for educationally disadvantaged students (Pallas, Natriello, & Mc Dill, 1990). Mason & Sinha (1993:137) suggest that emergent literacy constructs should be framed by a Vygotskian model of learning and development.

4.4.3 The zone of proximal development

The Vygotskian theory offers a very important framework for studying and applying adult-young child interactions in shared literacy activities. The zone of proximal development refers not only to the completed level of development (the stage where the child can solve a problem independently) but also to the expected level of development where the child can solve the problem with the help of an expert.

The **difference between the completed and expected level is the zone of proximal development**. According to Vygotsky (1978:90): *"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 independent developmental achievement."*

4.4.4 Literacy acquisition

Most emergent literacy research is compatible with the Vygotskian viewpoint . For instance, an adult reading a story to a child would be functioning in the child's zone of proximal development. In the process, there are things that the child may already know (for example the concept of a story, pictures and their relation to the story, or picture-print connections). Teaching to the level for which the child is 'ready' would be according to Vygotsky (1978:89), "teaching to yesterday's development". There are however areas where the child would soon reach developmentally but has not reached yet (for example being able to predict, relating experiences to text, et cetera). The adult acts as mediator between the child and the text in the areas where the child cannot function alone.

One can draw on Vygotsky's stages in a proposal of four instructional steps when instructing acquiring literacy concepts. The four steps weave together home and classroom language, literacy and play activities through mediation by the teacher who understands how to accompany

observation of children's entering and changing levels of competency with support and guidance toward new learning and cultural development.

The first step is natural involvement in which the teacher provides opportunities for learners to explore literacy activities and events. Learning-tasks that are embedded in everyday activities should be part of this step – this is situated learning. A realistic task is more meaningful to learners, and the teacher can more easily observe how the learners are exploring, what they are interested in and how proficient they are naturally.

The second step is mediated learning, in which there is support or assistance by the adult. The teachers guide learners' participation in new activities. They establish learning environments in which learners try out their skills under their tutelage, and they help them become self-directed learners by using

instructional approaches, modelling and coaching. As new procedures are introduced, teachers model the process to be learned and then coach the learners as they try out the technique of thinking and monitoring the processes.

The third step is external activity, or child-directed learning and practice with the aid of props and occasional coaching by an adult. As children practise and realise how to use varying strategies, they gain self-confidence and independent control of concepts, and teachers can arrange varied opportunities for working independently and in collaboration with peers.

The fourth step, internal or independent activity, occurs when students can link learned concepts to other, related concepts, test out general principles, and operate without help or expert others, and so begin to have an internalised process of thinking, reasoning and solving problems. Eventually learners carry out tasks unaided and achieve a general understanding of procedures and underlying concepts (Mason & Sinha, 1993:148).

The theories of Vygotsky will be regarded as a valuable framework for the intervention of this research. It will however also be useful to regard other practices of pre-school intervention that have been used for learners at risk.

4.5 EFFECTIVE EARLY INTERVENTION POGRAMMES FOR LEARNERS AT RISK

As was discussed in chapter 2, there are many definitions of at-risk learners, but all share the common meaning of students who have **a high probability of academic failure and eventually dropping out of school.** Overwhelming proportions of such students are economically disadvantaged, from single-parent homes and members of the traditional coloured communities. Research indicates that offering effective intervention is expensive, but less so than the long term costs of failure, including costs of special education, children being retained a grade, or children dropping out of school (Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1992; Walberg, 1984).

It is reasonable to assume that the earlier a programme starts, the greater its potential impact. That is, when early learning deficits are prevented, there is less chance that failure will occur and that special intervention will be needed at higher grades. A second assumption is that, of all basic skill domains, learning to read is the most critical to disadvantaged children's success in school. Children who cannot read at or near grade level will almost certainly experience difficulties with skills in most other school subjects (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000). In the early grades, school success is also essentially identical to reading success. Few children are retained or assigned to special education on the basis of failure in subjects other than reading.

Research has further shown that failure to read adequately by third grade is associated with significantly higher risks of not graduating from high school, early pregnancy, delinquency, and other problems (Kellam, 1990; Kohlberg, Ricks, & Snarey, 1984; Loyd, 1978). Based on this rationale, improvement of reading skills in the early grades should be a key focus for prevention of school failure of disadvantaged children (Ross, Smith, Casey & Slavin, 1995:774).

In South Africa, despite the existence of a long-term connection between education of young children and social reform, actual support and intervention for pre-schoolers at risk has so far been intermittent, being picked up and abandoned as a function of economic, social, and political forces (refer par. 1.5). Pre-schools in South Africa are operated by multiple sponsors, including churches, public schools, private schools, and profit and non-profit day care centres. Given the different auspices, regulations and governing agencies vary widely. Consequently, no regularised,

institutionalised system yet guarantees pre-school for the disadvantaged or any other group. Part of the issue surrounding the future direction of pre-school programmes is the question of legal and financial status within the education system. It is therefore important to acknowledge some of the programmes that have been implemented world-wide, and the effects thereof for students at risk, in order to draw on information gained to develop an appropriate model of intervention.

The United States Department of Education's Joint Dissemination Review panel has identified some curricular models and programmes that have been certified as effective. For this research some programmes were reviewed and will be discussed shortly. The programmes were chosen on the basis of the following three criteria:

- They are described in reasonably full detail in a nationally distributed U.S. education journal that subjects its articles to review by an editorial board;
- Their primary focus is working with first-grade, at risk learners, who are likely to make limited progress in learning to read; and
- Data suggest that these programmes were effective, that is, learner participation in the programmes led to substantially better reading achievement than that of similar learners who had not participated in the programmes.

The focus on describing these programmes will be to identify the common features that seem related to preventing reading problems. The identification of features that are common to successful early

intervention programmes may be useful for those working with learners who require early intervention or for planning early intervention programmes. The emphasis will not be so much on justifying programme effects but focus instead on programme improvement and the application of these improvements for at-risk South African pre-schoolers.

4.5.1 Kindergarten Integrated Thematic Experiences (KITE)

KITE incorporates Astra's Magic Math and **Alphaphonics**, which are two widely used and well evaluated programmes. Three features of the KITE programme are noteworthy. Firstly, it relies on a **systematic approach to the introduction of letters and letter-sound correspondence**. Secondly, it encourages teacher input, modification, and creativity, so that teacher 'ownership' is possible, and lastly, it has enough evaluation and a long continued history of operation, so that it is likely that teachers utilising this method will replicate the results in their classrooms (Karweit, 1994:96)

4.5.2 Early Prevention of School Failure (EPSF)

This programme is designed for at-risk kindergarten and first grade students. The programme focuses on early identification of developmental needs and learning styles. It also has a first grade component called On the Way to Success in Reading and Writing, which includes a literature-based reading and writing programme, use of themes and units, and higher process thinking activities. The programme is based on child growth and development and the principles of learning which **focus on children's**

different rates of learning and different learning styles (Werner, 1991:1).

4.5.3 Writing to read (WTR)

The primary goal of WTR is to increase the reading and writing skills of kindergarten learners. Learners work on computers for an hour each day. The computer lab has five work stations. In one station the learners **learn phonics by means of drill games**; in the second station learners use a word processor on the computer to enter the stories they are writing. In a third station they listen to **tape recorded stories** while they follow the text in a book; in the fourth station they write stories with pencil and paper; and in the fifth station they get additional practice with **phonics**.

4.5.4. Story Telling and Retelling (STaR)

StaR is an interactive **story-reading programme** for pre-school through first grade learners that was developed as a part of the Success for All programme. The goals of this programme are to **introduce children to books and the conventions of print**, to motivate pre-readers to want to become readers by involving them in high-interest books, to provide experience with language used in books, and to help develop and improve comprehension skills and strategies. This programme provides an enjoyable introduction to literature, especially for children who were likely to have little experience with print and books (Karweit, 1994:97).

Karweit (1994:98) finds that the greatest emphasis on policy changes has been on changing the external conditions of pre-schools, but that more substantial reform will result from attending to the activities and daily routines that take place in the pre-schools. Good quality pre-school experiences require attention to what goes on each and every day in the kindergarten classrooms.

Matched pre- and post-test studies of children in classrooms using STaR compared with regular kindergarten classrooms indicated positive effects on individually administered tests of language development and comprehension.

4.5.5. Success for All

In this programme, which is being implemented at the John Hopkins University's Centre for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR), the focus is on prevention and intensive early intervention for children in the pre-school through 6th grade.

This reading programme **integrates phonics and whole-language** approaches to develop decoding skills and comprehension abilities. The beginning reading programme emphasises reading to learners, engaging learners in discussions of story structure and developing oral language skills. Learners frequently read aloud and discuss stories in pairs.

Certified teachers tutor learners who are having difficulty with reading, individually for 20 minutes

each day. Tutoring in the SFA programme is directly integrated with the reading curriculum. The tutors work with the children on particular stories or lessons with which they experienced difficulty during regular class (Ross, Smith, Casey & Slavin, 1995:778).

Learners spend most of the day in conventional heterogeneous-ability group classes. During the 90-minute reading period, they are, however, regrouped according to reading performance level. These classes are typically 5-10 learners smaller than regular classes. Every eight weeks the learner's progress is assessed and adaptations are made to the tutoring selections (Ross, Smith, Casey & Slavin, 1995:779; Pikulski, 1994:32).

4.5.6. The Winston-Salem Project

This project operated in the first-grade classrooms of two schools in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (USA). The one school serves learners from middle class backgrounds; the other one serves learners from low socio-economic backgrounds. In both schools classroom instruction is reorganised into four 30-minute blocks in which learners are instructed in heterogeneous groups. The **Basal block** consists primarily of selective use of instructional suggestions from a recently published basal reading programme that includes an anthology of children's literature and accompanying paperback books. The **Writing block** consists of 5-10 minute mini-lessons and learner independent writing activities. The **Working with Words** block consists of 'word wall' activities in which learners learn to read and spell words that are posted by the teacher each week, and a 'making words' activity in which learners

manipulate groups of letters to form as many words as possible. During **Reading block** learners read self-selected books, including informational books related to science and social studies topics. These learners spend a sizeable amount of time in reading related activities (Pikulski, 1994:33)

4.5.7 The Boulder Project

This programme involves a teacher working with three children for thirty minutes each day, while a teacher's aid instructs another group of three at the same time. After half a year the teacher and the aid exchange groups. The programme focuses on the **repeated reading of predictable trade-books, teaching word identification skills through the use of analogy or word patterns, writing words from the word pattern instruction and writing about topics of choice in notebooks** (Pikulski, 1994:33)

4.5.8 Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery is an individual tutoring programme in which a tutor meets a child for thirty minutes each day outside the child's regular classroom. Reading Recovery lessons operate within a clearly defined framework in which teachers and learners are involved in five major activities each day. The first activity is the **reading of familiar stories**, in which learners read at least two stories from books that they have read previously. Secondly, the teacher makes a running record of a book that was introduced to the child the previous day. The running record is a set of notations that records

the child's oral reading. Next **is working with letters**, which can also occur at several times during the reading lesson. Fourthly, the child **dictates a sentence or short story** that the teacher records and then rereads to the child, guiding him/her to read it accurately. The teacher then rewrites the message on a strip of paper, cuts it into individual words, and asks the child to reconstruct the message. This material is taken home daily for further practice. The final activity is the reading of a new book that is thoroughly explored first, and then concepts, story language and vocabulary items are introduced by the teacher as needed (Clay, 1985; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk & Seltzer, 1994).

4.5.9 Weikart (Perry Pre-school)

The research at Perry pre-school consists of two parts, namely the effect of participation in pre-school versus no pre-school, and the effect of participation in a particular pre-school curriculum. Disadvantaged, low-IQ children from low socio-economic status were selected and randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. The Perry Pre-school Project took place during the academic year as a regular school programme. The children entered the programme at age 3 and attended the programme for 2 years. The sessions were half-day, 5 days per week, and the teachers **visited the home** of learners for 90 minutes weekly. The approach emphasised **developmentally appropriate activities** (Piaget), and stressed the role of learners' planning and initiation in their own learning. The short-term benefit of this programme was evident in the 11-point differences in IQ scores between programme and control students, and the percentage enrolled in special education was also appreciably lower for pre-school enrolees. The percentage experimental students who graduated

from high school was 18% higher than the control group (Wasik & Karweit, 1994:51; Slavin, 1996:7).

4.6 INSIGHTS GAINED FROM PROGRAMMES

One of the most important arguments is that treatment is most effective if it comes early in a child's school career - in the first grade or perhaps even before that (Pikulski, 1994:35).

Wasik & Slavin (1994) reviewed evidence that one-on-one tutoring is the most powerful form of instruction. The positive results of the Boulder Project, however, suggest that at least some at-risk learners can make progress with very small group instruction.

All of the programmes include instruction that focuses learners' attention on letters and words, and especially phonemic awareness so that children develop a conscious understanding that spoken words are composed of identifiable sounds. 'Success for All' also provides instruction in blending sounds into words. Both the Winston-Salem and Boulder Projects focus on working with word patterns (e.g. tin, pin, in). Although specific approaches to word recognition may vary among programmes, the systematic instruction in phoneme and word recognition is a major focus for all the programmes. A systematic approach to the introduction of letters and letter-sound correspondence can be followed. The development of phonemic awareness, however, should also be integrated with a whole language approach. This view is consistent with the research done by Wasik (2001), who suggests that children

who have advanced phonemic awareness are more ready to learn to read and are more successful at it.

Repeated reading is the most common instructional activity with books and other texts because the impact of repeated reading is well documented (Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985). Children should be introduced to books and print conventions. A great variety of texts can be used in literacy development programmes. Predictable, easy to read texts are extremely successful. The texts should enable the students to read successfully. Initial texts should be easy and those introduced thereafter can present increasing levels of challenge. There is a definite absence of traditional workbook and isolated skill practice materials in all the successful programmes.

The programmes are all clearly oriented towards ensuring that learners conceptualise reading as a meaning-constructing process, but also emphasise teaching word identification strategies to help learners become independent readers. There is a firm research base for the position that a balance between the reading of meaningful, connected texts and systematic word identification instruction results in superior achievement (Adams, 1990).

It is important to acknowledge that children learn at different rates and that different learning styles are implemented. Repeated reading of books, phonemic skills, word identification skills, and writing skills should form the basis of an early intervention programme. Some studies, like the Weikert project (Slavin, 1996), also advocate a strong connection between the home environment and

successful intervention.

4.7 SUMMARY

In order to break the cycle of illiteracy the focus should be on prevention of learning difficulties rather than on attempting to rectify them after a period of failure. Early intervention, through the application of language and literacy stimulation at a young age, will do much to decrease the failure rate of children who experience barriers to learning.

In order for disadvantaged learners to be successful at school they need to enter school with the same skills as non-disadvantaged learners, with specific focus on literacy and language skills, of which reading is the most important.

There is currently a strong commitment of policy makers to improve the early educational experiences of learners who experience barriers to learning. There is, however, still a need for effective early intervention programmes that can be applied in the South African context. Chapter 5 will draw on insights from other programmes in order to establish the effect of an early literacy programme in a disadvantaged South African context.