Some thoughts on the perceptions of the role of educational psychologists in early childhood intervention

I. Eloff*, J. G. Maree and L. Ebersöhn
University of Pretoria, South Africa

The importance of early childhood intervention in a developing country is indisputable. Even though we have a relatively clear idea of what effective early childhood intervention (ECI) means, there are still uncertainties about the roles of professionals in this ever-changing field. In South Africa we face particular challenges because of huge disparities in the system. Within this context educational psychologists need to find ways in which to make constructive contributions. To explore this question a study was undertaken to find out what educational psychologists can and are doing in early childhood intervention. Three focus groups were conducted, involving educational psychologists and transdisciplinary representatives who work in the field of ECI. Results indicate a number of trends, for example the perception that educational psychologists are making increasing use of an asset-based approach, focusing on learning and teaching, and an increased emphasis on their role in ECI within a context of group work, prevention and a focus on the community.

Introduction

Worldwide the field of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is growing in importance and its direct and indirect benefits are a well-accepted fact among experts in various disciplines. According to Shonkoff and Meisels (2000) this field of intervention is currently approaching maturity and the responsibility of professionals working in this field is increasing.

In recent years ECI has received renewed attention as a possible strategy for promoting development throughout childhood (Reynolds, 2000). The renewed focus

has been brought about by an explosion in research in the neurobiological, behavioural and social sciences which, in turn, lead to a deeper appreciation of early live experiences, the central role of early relationships, and the ability to enhance development through effective intervention (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Recently the focus of ECI has been more clearly defined. The field has progressed from programmes specifically focusing on intelligence, cognitive development and academic achievement to a much broader orientation that realises that early intervention programmes need to be comprehensive and broad-based with elements of strong parental and community involvement to facilitate long-term benefits.

Scientific evidence indicates that early childhood development is influenced by the environments in which children live (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Poverty, for instance, has far-reaching effects on children and their development. Generally speaking, poverty is associated with a wide range of childhood problems, including school underachievement, malnutrition, delinquency and low educational attainment (Reynolds, 2000). Facilitating adequate ECI in South Africa poses unique challenges due to the prevalence of socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, high levels of illiteracy, urbanisation and HIV/AIDS. The number of preschool children and the limited provision of services to young children in South Africa compound the problem. According to the Nation-wide Audit of Early Childhood Development Provision in South Africa, 1.3 million learners are currently enrolled at 23,482 early childhood provision sites, while only around 450,000 learners out of an estimated 960,000 learners between the ages of 5 and 6 are accommodated in some form of Early Childhood Development provisioning (Asmal, 2001a).

Realisation of the importance of early intervention against the frame of reference of the appalling circumstances in which children often grow up in developing countries especially, emphasises the need for a re-examination of global responses to the needs of young children and their families. Shonkoff and Phillips maintain that

> It demands that scientists, policy makers, business and community leaders, practitioners, and parents work together to identify and sustain policies and practices that are effective, generate new strategies that replace those that are not achieving their objectives, and consider new approaches to address the new goals as needed. (2000, p. 2)

Although the South African government, through the Early Childhood Development White Paper (Asmal, 2001a) has committed itself to an adequate response to the needs of children, it also noted that education was but one of the most significant aspects of a child's development and that social and physical development were equally crucial. A commitment was made that these issues would be addressed in partnership with the Departments of Health and Social Development and the Office of the Presidency. According to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1997) the challenge in South Africa suggests a total social reconstruction, including (but not limited to) the handling of issues such as poverty, housing and health.

A clear need exists for educational psychological intervention in early childhood development. Even though many educational psychologists are currently working in this field, little research has been conducted. More research is needed to explore what

our contributions to early intervention should imply. Karoly *et al.* (1998) contend that

> … clearly more research is needed to address the unanswered questions surrounding early childhood intervention programs. As federal, state and local entities proceed to implement early childhood intervention programs, it is essential that these efforts be accompanied by careful, well-designed evaluation studies so that we can continue to learn about which investments have the greatest payoff. (p. 119)

Early intervention refers to the process whereby potential or confirmed problems in a child's development and social interaction can be prevented or minimised by timely and effective therapeutic and teaching practices. To provide effective early intervention to young children, we firstly have to understand the context within which the child develops. Effective intervention, however, also depends on the ability to develop meaningful and sustainable intervention programmes based upon this knowledge. Issues of sustainability as well as impact therefore remain at the heart of early intervention programmes.

Other key issues involved in early childhood intervention include the following:

- The language provided by the caregiver is the medium through which cognitive development is realised.
- Collaboration between parents, professionals, and support systems in the community is vital to ensure meaningful intervention as well as sustainability.
- The acceptance of multi-skilling by participants is inherent to the early intervention process. Every role player needs not only to acquire an understanding of the role and contribution of other team members, but also to acquire some skill in supporting the efforts of other team members. Role players should know what their contributions should entail in order to be able to participate in a process of role release and transdisciplinary activities.
- Efforts by organised health, educational, and welfare services in early intervention have been disappointing locally and internationally. It is against this framework that the need to reflect on the effectiveness of early intervention has been stressed repeatedly by people like Asmal: 'We must never forget that our duty is to reflect from time to time on the impact we are making to change the lives of the children who learn in less than ideal conditions' (2001a, p. 2).

The South African Government has spent considerable time creating frameworks for transition in the fields of early childhood intervention and early childhood education. In 1999 the School Funding Norms and Standard Policy was accepted, which mandated a 'poverty-targeted' approach to budgeting for non-personnel expenditure by the provinces. On average the most under-resourced poorest schools receive seven times more funding than the better resourced ones. Starting with the poorest of the poor, the government intends bringing an additional one million five-year-old learners into the public education system, on a compulsory basis, over the next seven years. The consequence of this comprehensive early childhood development programme is that downstream all five- and six-year-old learners will receive a high quality of poverty-targeted, subsided Reception Year and Grade 1 schooling. This will free

many mothers from childcare to earn a livelihood, reducing the gap between those who can afford to pay for early childhood development and those who cannot, thereby reducing poverty (Asmal, 2001b).

The social and economic conditions in which young children grow up, necessitate a reform of early intervention practices. Furthermore, it is crucial for professionals in the field to maintain government initiatives. Often educational psychology professionals have been trained in the medical model, and prefer viewing themselves as professionals focusing on a specific field, without having to extend themselves by getting involved in broader issues. In the South African situation, however, where relatively few professionals have been trained in this field, it is all the more crucial for these professionals to involve themselves in broader issues and take the initiative. Likewise, training institutions should probably endeavour to prepare professionals better to deal with the complexity of issues confronting them in the workplace.

The above-mentioned issues were attended to through a joint project, undertaken by the Universities of Pretoria and Durban-Westville, to develop a Master's degree in ECI. This research project is a broad interfaculty research programme undertaken by a transdisciplinary team from both the University of Pretoria and the University of Durban-Westville. Participating faculties, departments and centres at the University of Pretoria and the University of Durban-Westville include the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication; and the Departments of Communication Pathology, Educational Psychology, Nursing Science, Dietetics; Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, and Social Work; as well as the Paediatrics Unit (Kalafong).

Students from the various professional disciplines enrol for this course. The approach followed by the project adheres to the international trend of asset-based, family-centred and transdisciplinary intervention. The process of the development of the discipline-specific module in Educational Psychology has led to the rethinking of early intervention issues, prompting the following question: What is the nature of an educational psychologist's activities in early childhood intervention? The dilemmas that need to be attended to include the overlapping of fields of expertise, questions raised by other professionals with regard to where exactly educational psychologists fit in, as well as uncertainty regarding the roles of educational psychologists in general.

The need for the study

According to McCollum and Maude (in Epps & Jackson, 2000) the roles of early interventionists are complex and multifaceted, and usually diverged from the roles of professionals working with older populations. The current study was thus aimed at exploring the roles, functions and contributions of educational psychologists in ECI. This necessitated addressing the current perceptions of what an educational psychologist does, since it seems as if other professionals often express the opinion that educational psychological services often overlap with those of other professionals. To enable them to do transdisciplinary work and to practise role release, it seems essential that educational psychologists should know exactly what their role implies.

Research question

The research question that this article investigates is: What are some of the perceptions of what an educational psychologist does in ECI in South Africa?

Limitations of the study

This was a limited, local study, and the findings reported in this article have limited generalisation value but they do, however, have a naturalistic generalisation value. Furthermore, the sample size of the current study is an obvious limitation. However this limitation is a function of the context of the study. It should be kept in mind that it is always probable that other researchers might interpret the material in a different manner. These interviews do not *prove* anything. Although the interviews were conducted in a relatively uncontrolled context, which, in turn, could lead to erroneous conclusions, it is nonetheless assumed that much can be learned from them.

Research design

A qualitative, explorative, descriptive, subjective and contextual research design was used in this study. An inductive approach was followed where information was obtained from participants. The research was open and not directed by any preconceived ideas or hypotheses (Olivier, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2000).

During the course of this study constructivist and interpretive paradigms were implemented. These paradigms are presented in Table 1.

Ensuring validity of the research

Validity of any study should ensure that the explanations of phenomena being studied would match the realities of the world. Validity in qualitative research includes internal causal inferences and external generalisability, as well as issues of objectivity and

Table 1. A simplified scheme of different perspectives, research strategies and methods of data collection and analysis utilised in this study

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Data collection
Interpretive	Reality can be understood and interpreted but not predicted or controlled.	Knowledge arises from observation and interpretation.	Interpretive inquiry: participant observation and interviewing.
Constructivist	Reality can only be known by those who personally experience it.	Knowledge is constructed through a process of self-conscious action by those who are personally experiencing such action.	Personal narratives, lived experience.

Adapted from Schurink (in De Vos, 1998).

reliability. Validity of qualitative designs thus includes the degree to which the interpretations and concepts used have mutual meaning to both the participant and the researcher. Both parties should therefore agree on the description and composition of events and, most especially, on their meanings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

In qualitative research, validity is dependent on data collection and analysis techniques. Qualitative research requires the use of various strategies to enhance validity. These strategies are employed to maintain the least degree of interference while increasing the quality of the data. Strategies used to increase and enhance validity during the study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Strategies to increase and enhance validity during data collection and analysis in the current study

Data collection

Strategy	Description
Participant language: verbatim accounts	Obtained literal statements of participant such as verbatim accounts of conversations, transcripts as well as quotations from documents.
Mechanically recorded data	Used tape recordings.
Low-inference descriptors	Recorded concrete, precise, and detailed descriptions of the participant and the situations in field notes.
Participant researcher	Used the participant's written documents.
Member checking	Rephrased and probed to obtain more complete and subtle meanings during interviews and therapy sessions.
Participant review	Participants reviewed the researcher's synthesis of all interview

(Adapted from McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, pp. 407–409)

Data analysis

Participant validation	The participants were asked to validate the data analysis process. The participants were also required to state whether they agreed with the results of the data analysis throughout the process.
Avoiding subjective interpretation	The researchers acted as objectively as possible while analysing the research data.
Avoiding poor coding of qualitative data	The research data were carefully coded by the researchers and verified by an external coder.
Avoiding making unsupported inferences	Generalisations were not made beyond the capability of the data to support such statements (particularly in the table of categories). The external coder assisted in this process.
Avoiding selective use of data	Data were not used selectively to falsely verify findings. The external coder assisted in this process.
Avoiding the unfair aggregation of data	Data were only aggregated a value if it could be supported by the research data. The external coder assisted in this process.
Avoiding researcher bias	The researchers guarded against their own expectations, misperceptions and need to find answers that would support their preconceived notions about the research. The external coder assisted in this process.

(Adapted from Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, pp. 116–121)

Ethical aspects

Ethical measures to ensure the research participants' well-being were implemented throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained and confidentiality was maintained. The researchers gave feedback to the research participants on a regular basis, which allowed for no deception on the researchers' part. The research findings were released in an accurate and responsible manner.

Research method

Focus group interviews

The researchers identified the need to obtain information in terms of preferences, dislikes, and processes during a relatively free discussion, for which reason this study was conducted by means of focus group interviewing. According to Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (1998),

> Focus group interviews are designed to do exactly what the name implies—to focus. A focus group interview could therefore be described as a purposive discussion of a specific topic … The group interaction will consist of verbal and non-verbal communication and an interplay of perceptions and opinions that will stimulate discussion without necessarily modifying or changing the ideas and opinions of participating individuals. (pp. 315–317).

Focus groups were suggested as a means to create a social environment in which individual members were stimulated by the perceptions, opinions and ideas of each other, which in turn, increased the richness of data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). We used the focus group technique to gather qualitative data and to gain deeper understanding of behaviour, to test preliminary information, and to test ideas (Du Plooy, 1995). Focus groups enabled us to capitalise on the group interaction around a topic (Swanson & Holton, 1997).

Focus groups were furthermore of value by offering us exposure to the typical learning processes, experiences and perspectives of the participants. We expected focus groups to share individual and group views and experiences, techniques used in their respective practices, and comments relating to the role of education. We used focus group results to assist us in the creation of deeper understanding.

We implemented the following procedures when conducting focus group interviews, as suggested by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996):

- Delineate the general purpose—we communicate the research aim by means of a purpose statement to the group.
- Designate a facilitator—the moderator assumed the role of facilitator in order to maintain a supportive and non-evaluative environment.
- Refine the research goal—during this stage we planned the topics that were to be discussed. This served as the general scope of discussion.
- Select the participants—this activity was dealt with by means of the proposed sampling technique.

- Determine the number of focus group interviews—the way in which we addressed this issue is described below.
  Arrange for the focus group facility—explained below.
  Develop an interview guide—the moderator compiled the interview guide to give an outline of the focus group interview procedures and to provide a general idea of the questions that were to be addressed.
  Conduct the focus group interview—we arranged the venues prior to commencement of the interviews (including layout and recording equipment). The moderator was trained in facilitation techniques and facilitated the interview. Upon completion of the interview the moderator invited final comments and thanked the audience for their participation.
- Analyse the focus group data—transcribed and coded data were utilised as proposed in the section of this proposal that deals with data analysis.

Three focus groups were arranged and the participants were deliberately selected from different professional disciplines, but all with a common interest in or participation in early childhood intervention activities. The first group consisted of seven participants, the second of six and the third of 14 participants. The focus groups assembled at the University of Pretoria in a room free of distractions, equipped with audiovisual facilities.

The participants were invited to participate by written invitation. Attendance was confirmed on the day before each of the groups met. The moderator initiated the discussions with a short introduction at the beginning. The anonymity of the participants was addressed, the topic of discussion was announced and the participants invited to express their views. The focus group meetings lasted for one hour, concluded by a summary of the main points of view by the moderator. Focus group interviews were video- and audio-taped and we prepared transcripts of these confidential interviews. The moderator's and the participants' field notes were also used.

Data analysis

Data from the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and copies were made for two coders who read through the data independently. In this study the constant comparative method of analysis was used, which involves constant reading and movement across the data (Silverman, 2000). Data analysis can thus be described as a process or concurrent flow of reduction of data, data display and conclusion drawing/ verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcriptions were read and themes emerged through the reading and rereading of the data. After refinement, the themes were collated and compared with the field notes of the participants in the focus groups.

Results

Results from the data analysis process will first be presented in table form to indicate the main themes that were identified during this study. This will be followed by an

exposition in which each of the themes that were identified will be supported by references to the raw data, in order to create a coherent synopsis of the research results. The following main themes were identified:

- Prevention: learning and teaching
- Group work
- Empowerment/enablement
- Parental guidance
- Community
- Networking, referral and collaboration. The findings of the study are summarised in Table 3.

'arental gu.

These themes represent the perceptions of the professionals involved regarding what educational psychologists do, or should do, in ECI. The following references to raw data and literature serve to illustrate and support the above perceptions.

Prevention: learning and teaching

In the current study the theme *learning and teaching* figured in different ways. A notion existed that educational psychologists are the experts on learning, learning problems and cognitive development. On the other hand there was the admittance that educational psychologists not only teach and guide others, but that they themselves are constant learners, reflecting on their own activities, and learning from those with whom they interact.

Table 3.   Themes representing focus group members' perceptions

Themes	*Perceptions*
Prevention: learning and teaching	Educational psychologists are able to prevent learning problems and assist learners with learning problems. To prevent learning problems educational psychologists should promote school readiness and a learning culture in communities. Educational psychologists themselves should learn from communities and ensure continuous learning through reflection.
Group work	Educational psychologists do group assessments as well as group therapy in early childhood intervention. They establish and sustain groups with parents and caregivers. They work in transdisciplinary settings.
Empowerment / Enablement	Empowerment of parents, caregivers and thus the community is regarded as essential in ensuring sustainability of the interventions.
Parental guidance	Educational psychologists can assist parents in understanding disabilities, in providing skills, knowledge and an awareness of assets in an empowering way so that parents can eventually learn from each other. The point of departure should be from what the parents are already doing, and with sensitivity regarding culture, values and stress factors.
Community	Educational psychologists are committed to working within communities by identifying assets and mobilising them within the community.
Networking, referral and collaboration	Educational psychologists collaborate with, refer to, network and practise role release with other professionals in transdisciplinary early intervention teams.

> And I'm thinking about learning … This is the one area in which we are the experts. We are trained to assist families and children individually.
>
> … because reflection sustains continuous learning, and that is the whole cycle: unlearning things they have learnt.
>
> On the contradictory—let's go in and see what we can learn from them as well, what can we learn.
>
> Shouldn't it be us who should be learning? Shouldn't we be reflecting about what we have been doing and how should we change what we are doing and how should we change what we have been doing, because it is not working …we should be thinking what we could learn from them.

Freire (in Mokwena, 1997) also rejects the idea of the professional regarding himself as an expert. He describes learning as a 'process occurring in dialogue, where the concerns, views and recommendations of the community are listened to and respected' (p. 66).

   Another perception in this regard was that educational psychologists can prevent learning problems by ensuring that learners are ready for school. Enhancing the degree of attention to their language development, their early literacy development, as well as their numeracy and problem-solving strategies may bring about this ideal. It was suggested that educational psychologists should encourage and establish a learning culture in communities in order to create environments in which cognitive stimulation can be optimised.

> It involves encouragment of a learning culture within the communities itself.
>
> … would be the idea of learning, and I think learning preparation, numeracy, early numeracy, early literacy, hmm, and then the idea of problem solving.
>
> Maybe prevention is one of the approaches, the underlying approach to the whole, the whole endeavour.

The perception that educational psychologists can assist at-risk learners by implementing school readiness programmes is supported in the literature. In describing the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, Reynolds (2000) contends that the curriculum philosophy in these centres emphasises the need to provide activities and experiences that could lead to the development of basic skills in language arts, reading, mathematics and the promotion of psychological and social development. Karoly *et al.* (1998) conclude that although the impact of early intervention programmes on children's IQs may be short-lived, it seems as if strong and longer-lasting benefits exist in terms of the attainment of educational outcomes, such as academic achievement, better retention skills and a decrease in the need for special education.

Group work

It was acknowledged that in ECI educational psychologists make use of group assessments and therapy rather than individual assessments or therapy. Another facet of

group work involves the establishment and facilitation of groups, for example support groups for parents and caregivers. Allowing parents or caregivers to take the lead may improve the sustainability of the group.

> Educational psychologists, together with professionals from other disciplines, … work together in a group to ensure a more comprehensive service, while at the same time helping and learning from each other.

> It might be that within a specific community you might start with group assessment for intervention, which could then narrow down to the individual.

> I think if we look at our intervention, it might go both ways, group therapy as well as group work with the parents.

> … just to emphasise where group work is concerned, this is transdisciplinary—we're still talking interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary—were still talking of … we're in a group and teach the parent to do group work.

Literature in organisational development supports the importance of group versus individual efforts. According to early intervention literature, delivery of services in team format is considered best practice (Briggs, 1997).

The importance of support groups is also confirmed in literature. Support groups are described as a way to meet the emotional and practical needs of individuals who share a common problem or issue. These groups can meet a family's need for information as well as the need for a connection to a network of families. Support is given by others who know and understand coping strategies (Frank, Newcomb & Beckman, 1996).

Empowerment/enablement

Empowerment of the community is seen as an essential part of the task of an educational psychologist in ECI. Empowerment of parents and communities is regarded as essential to maintain sustainability.

Empowerment also suggests that intervention should commence with what the community has to offer, thus building on their assets and strengthening and rewarding what they are already doing well.

> I think the idea to be co-operative and motivated to empower the community is as important as prevention.

> … that is really the bottom line off sustainability and if you are able to empower them, then they're not going to keep having these new people coming in with new ideas. They are not going to be frustrated, because they are going to be OK on their own.

In the literature empowerment is defined as 'an act of gaining or assuming power' (Labonte in Mokwena, 1997, p. 66). This implies that communities need to be allowed enough space to make their own decisions and to employ strategies in accordance with their own norms and values, with professionals being available when needed.

Parental guidance

Parental guidance was regarded as an integral part of ECI although there appeared to be a difference in perceptions as to how it should be approached. Whereas some participants expressed the opinion that educational psychologists should train parents in the basic principles of child rearing, for example how to play and communicate with one's children, others referred to an asset-based approach. This meant that they would focus on the strengths of parents' existing interventions, combining these interventions with assets in the community to support the parents and their children. All participants agreed that parental guidance should be characterised by sensitivity with regard to parents' values, cultures, and the stress parents experience while raising children. It was also suggested that interventions by the transdisciplinary team should be kept simple and easy to follow, in order to prevent parents from feeling overwhelmed by recommendations from various disciplines.

It was also agreed that both children and their mothers should benefit from the interventions. Educational psychologists should assist mothers to accept and understand disabilities in their children. By empowering parents with such skills and knowledge, parents may learn from one another.

> I think one of the most effective interventions, is the intervention that tells people to change only one thing.

> … to look at what they are doing. In raising a child they are doing a lot of things right.

> We should be thinking of creative ways in which to intervene, and the first thing we should be doing is to start where they are—for us to make the effort to really understand where they are, hmm, to identify the assets and then see how we can mobilise them.

> … but I think if they can learn from each other that would also help us with the sustain-ability of the project.

Briggs (1997) expresses the opinion that a great deal can be done by taking advantage of the strengths and resources within a team. She proposes that the expertise of professionals and families can be used to ensure continuing education efforts, ensuring that everybody benefits from the expertise of others. Smith (in Roberts, Rule & Innocetti, 1998) argues that

> What I have learned … is that family members can and do make important decisions about what is best for their loved ones. I have been learning to trust my own resources and understanding of what would be the best for my family and I. The acknowledgement of the stress of parents may also lead to the alternation of parent participation requirements. (pp. xiii, 229)

Community

Participants agreed that educational psychologists working in ECI should be committed to working with communities, and not only with individuals within communities. The question remains: What then should educational psychologists do

in communities? It was agreed upon that educational psychologists should no longer act as the (sole) experts, providing solutions to the community, but rather act as a facilitator and agents of change who facilitate the identification and establishment of assets; mobilising these within communities, for example identifying leaders within the community who will become facilitators. To be able to do this, educational psychologists need to be flexible, creative and culture-sensitive.

> We must not stay focused on the single child—because we must do community work, or else we're missing the issue.

> If within a community, we establish whatever kind of asset is available and we can enable those adolescents, or parents or whoever, in a community—to learn to facilitate under supervision of psychologists or social workers.

> We also found, if you have a strong leader in the community … then half your battles are won.

According to Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) creative leaders in community development have come to the realisation that development must start from within the community and that effective community development efforts are based upon an understanding of the community's assets, abilities and capacities. The key role of the professional is to facilitate the location of local assets, to begin connecting them with one another and tapping into assets not readily available to the community.

Networking, referral and collaboration

It was apparent from the current study that is expected from educational psychologists to collaborate with other professionals and to refer to other professionals when specialised intervention is required. They should be able to network with other professionals and to identify and utilise resources. This serves to emphasise the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration and the possibility of role release.

> I think collaborating, so much of intervention will be collaborating with social work, occupational therapy, speech therapy.

> Yes, and then in true transdisciplinary nature—to sometimes go beyond the boundaries you are used to and somebody able to say—even though I know there are experts who can do it, I am willing to do teamwork in what we call networking: asking, peer review, yes, peer review would probably also be a skill. To say I am envisaging this intervention—what can you contribute?

The above tendency is also reflected in the literature. Briggs (1997) concludes that training models for team interactions should emphasise the necessity to reach beyond traditional disciplinary and departmental borders when collaborating within organisations and communities.

To be able to collaborate with others and to practise role release necessitates a careful consideration of the roles of the professionals involved in early childhood intervention.

Discussion

Although the current results cannot necessarily be generalised to the broad South African context, several trends do bear interest and will subsequently be discussed.

First of all, supporting 'school-based support teams' (SSTs) should include help on how to recognise and develop programmes for learners experiencing barriers to learning of one sort or another (as appropriate to the South African context, staff–student ratios, etc., and not necessarily existing international models, for example the American approach). Theory-wise, educational psychologists will also need an enhanced input on (for instance) systems theory, organisational analysis and development (i.e. whole-school development), and constructivist perspectives on teaching, learning and assessment.

Furthermore, there appears to be a shift away from the deficit model towards a more empowering/enabling asset-based paradigm. According to Trivette, Dunst and Deal (1997) contemporary early intervention practices are defined primarily in terms of service-based solutions of meeting child and family needs. This means that relationships with children and families are identified by the nature of the services rendered, for example speech therapy. This form of conceptualising early intervention is, however, extremely limited. By contrast, the asset-based approach to community development, mostly associated with the work of Kretzmannn and McKnight (1993) is more expansive and expanding. This approach represents a shift away from a narrow focus on the needs and deficits in a community, to the assumption that all communities possess strengths and assets, to a lesser or greater extent, and that these strengths and assets form the basis of effective intervention.

Internationally there has been a consistent trend to redefine the notion of 'expertise' as the main thrust behind intervention to a culture of sharing and collaboration. Professionals in a variety of fields are moving away from prescriptive models implemented by so-called experts, towards an understanding that the planning and delivery of intervention services is a collaborative process between families and service providers (Roberts *et al.*, 1998). Mott (1997) maintains that collaboration should be thought of as 'the mutual effort of all the individuals involved in the child's life, who are working together toward a mutually agreed-upon goal or goals' (p.154). The family should be at the centre of the process and not the interventionist—s/he is only one player in the collaboration process.

The notions of learning and teaching are strongly emphasised. However, it should be noted that learning and teaching are considered to be strongly reciprocal and not viewed linearly from a top-down perspective. It is rather a cyclical, two-way or even 'multiple-way' process between all the stakeholders involved. The notion of 'learning' can only be fully grasped once clarity is reached on the twin questions 'who is learning from whom?' and '*what* is it that is being learned?'

Some of the themes mentioned in this article identified may have implications for the training of educational psychologists. Prevention, group work, parental guidance/support and the focus on the community in particular appear to be defining concepts. Briggs (1997) indicates that the most likely places for changes to occur in

communication, collaboration and commitment are in training programmes designed for the training of early interventionists. She stresses the importance of interdisciplinary courses, experience and self-reflection and introduces the idea of interdisciplinary infant seminars taught by a team from a variety of disciplines. Epps and Jackson (2000) hypothesise that there are a number of key issues regarding professional development in early childhood specialisation, which may include the following:

- Training across disciplines as well as within disciplines.
- Core competencies including infant-related competencies, family-related competencies, teaching competencies, and inter-agency and advocacy competencies.
- Family involvement in teaching.
- Interaction with a variety of young children and families.
- Quality supervision and mentorship.
- Personal reflection.
- Support from colleagues.

The theme of group work featured quite strongly in the current study, revolving around group work on two seemingly unrelated but inherently linked domains: (i) group work in a transdisciplinary setting, and (ii) group work for the purpose of relieving a person's workload. Viewed from the perspective that the field of early intervention is faced with many challenges as it moves towards an integrated service delivery strategy, the necessity to collaborate in groups seems non-negotiable. Epps and Jackson emphasise the need for group-based efforts in the following terms:

> Psychologists can assist in effecting substantive paradigm shifts by planting seeds of developmental and family centered care over time in a cycle of continuous quality improvement … At the heart of reform at a broader level is the development of community-based systems of care involving interagency teams. Such reform efforts are consistent with the conceptual underpinnings of much of psychology. (2000, p. 223)

Donald (2003, personal communication) also stresses the importance of co-ordinating and organising services in relation to 'district support teams' and developing ways of integrating the expertise from so-called special schools into the service offered by these teams to 'full-service' and other local schools. Much innovative, people-sensitive work and organisational analysis will have to go into the process of helping special schools fulfil their dual function of resource centres and service to severely disabled young learners.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the new inclusive education policy (Department of Education, 2001) in South Africa has important implications for what educational psychologists will have to do in practice, for example running workshops for, and supporting teachers on building flexibility (accommodating diversity) into the curriculum, including teaching and assessment processes, an important focus on early identification in the Foundation Phase (of disabilities and learning difficulties). This includes developing identification and referral (to 'full-service' schools) procedures, screening devices appropriate to the South African context, etc.

Clearly, there are no easy solutions to the challenges posed to ECI in the twenty-first century. However, it is worthwhile remembering that education innovation is not brought about overnight and will take many years to be facilitated. Nonetheless, the findings in this article suggest that educational planners will consistently need to redefine the intended aims in ECI. As is the case in other countries, South Africa urgently needs an ECI environment that is conducive to the facilitation of the emotional, educational and psychological wellbeing of its citizenry to ensure its survival and thriving in the twenty-first century. Lazarus (2004) has the following to say in this regard:

> We also need to reflect on our *practices* in the schools, other education institutions, and in the district education support system. This reflection needs to focus on issues such as the extent to which we are allowing and supporting practices to be developed from 'the ground up' … including acknowledging and drawing from indigenous knowledges in local community contexts. (p. 74)

References

Asmal, K. (2001a) Address at the launch of the White Paper for Early Childhood Development and the nation-wide audit of ECD Provisioning in South Africa.

Asmal, K. (2001b) Speech on the occasion of the Education Budget Debate, National Council of Provinces.

Briggs, M. H. (1997) *Building early intervention teams. Working together for children and families* (Gaithersburg, Aspen Publishers, Inc.).

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000) *Research methods in education* (5th edn) (London, Routledge).

Department of Education (DoE) (2001) *Education White Paper 6: Special needs education* (Pretoria, Department of Education).

Donald, D., Lazarus, S. & Lolwana, P. (1997) *Educational psychology in social context* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press).

Du Plooy, G. M. (1995) *Introduction to communication: communication research* (Kenwyn, Juta).

Epps, S. & Jackson, B. J. (2000) *Empowered families, successful children. Early intervention programs that work* (Washington DC, American Psychological Association).

Frank, N., Newcomb, S. & Beckman, P. J. (1996) Developing and implementing support groups for families, in: P. J. Beckman (Ed.) *Strategies for working with families of young children with disabilities* (Baltimore, MD, Paul H. Brookes Publishing).

Karoly, L. A., Greenwood, P. W., Everingham, S., Houbè, J., Kilburn, M. R., Rydell, C. P. *et al.* (1998) *Investing in our children. What we know and what we don't know about the costs and benefits of early childhood interventions* (Santa Monica, CA, Rand).

Kretzmann, J. P. & McKnight, J. L. (1993) *Building communities from the inside out* (Chicago, IL, ACTA Publications).

Lazarus, S. (2004) *An exploration of how native American worldviews, including healing approaches, can contribute to and transform support services in education.* Research report (Cape Town, University of the Western Cape).

McMillan, J. H. & Schumacher, S. (1997) *Research in education: a conceptual introduction* (4th edn) (New York, Longman).

McMillan, J. H. & Schumacher, S. (2001) *Research in education: a conceptual introduction* (5th edn) (New York, Longman).

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994) *An expanded sourcebook. Qualitative data analysis* (2nd edn) (Newbury Park, CA, Sage).

Mokwena, K. (1997) Empowerment as a tool for community health development, *CHASA Journal of Comprehensive Health,* 8, 66–70.

Mott, D. W. (1997) The home environment, in: S. K. Thurman, J. R. Cornwell & S. R. Gottwald (Eds) *Contexts of early intervention. Systems and settings* (Baltimore, MD, Paul Brookes Publishing).

Olivier, M. A. J., Myburgh, C .P. H. & Poggenpoel, M. (2000) Adolescents' views on termination of pregnancy, *South African Journal of Education,* 20, 213–222.

Reynolds, A. J. (2000) *Success in early intervention.* (Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press).

Roberts, R. N., Rule, S. & Innocetti, M. S. (1998) *Strengthening the family professional partnership in services for young children* (Baltimore, MD, Paul H. Brookes Publishing).

De Vos, A. S. (Ed.) *Research at grass roots. A primer for the caring professions.* (Pretoria, J. L. van Schaik Publishers).

Schurink, E. M., Schurink, W. J. & Poggenpoel, M. (1998) Focus group interviewing and audio-visual methodology in qualitative research, in A. S. De Vos (Ed.) *Research at grass roots. A primer for the caring professions* (Pretoria, J. L. van Schaik Publishers), 313–333.

Shonkoff, J. P. & Meisels, S. J. (2000) *Handbook of early child development* (2nd edn) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Shonkoff, P. J. & Phillips, D. A. (2000) *From neurons to neighborhoods* (Washington DC, Washington Academy Press).

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing qualitative research. A practical handbook* (London, Sage).

Swanson, R. A. & Holton, E. F. (Eds.) (1997) *Human resource development—research handbook, linking research and practice* (San Francisco, CA, Berret Koehler).

Trivette, C. M., Dunst, C. J. & Deal, A. G. (1997) Resource based approach to early intervention, in: S. K. Thurman, J. R. Cornwell & S. R. Gottwald (Eds) *Contexts of early intervention. Systems and settings* (Baltimore, MD, Paul Brookes Publishing).

Vaughn, S., Schumm, J. S. & Sinagub, J. (1996) *Focus group interviews in education and psychology* (Newbury Park, CA, Sage).