

6 CONCLUSION, CRITICAL EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 5 provided a detailed layout of the results and findings of the study. The chapter presented a discussion of the following main comparative results:

- Characteristics of services rendered before the intervention phase: Problematic issues identified in services rendered before the intervention phase include: inadequate staffing levels; the labour intensity and specialised nature of the services; inadequate resources to deliver services; long waiting lists; and inadequate services to clients on waiting lists. Services are mostly provided by means of the consultation, monitoring and direct models (one-to-one and groups) and are delivered mostly in clinical settings. Most of the service delivery models used can be correlated with international trends, except for the limited use of the community-based model. In addition, some participants identified collaboration with the school system as being inadequate, thereby adding to the list of problematic issues in service delivery.
- Processes of change that occurred in managers' perceptions after the intervention phase: Results suggest that some participants benefited from the intervention phase by forming more distinct opinions. An increase has been noted in perceptions regarding: inadequate resources; adequacy of service delivery models; understanding the nature of the problems; and distinct commitments to change. In addition, a decrease has been noted in the number of participants who feel unsure about certain aspects of service delivery.
- The service delivery models that services were using before and after the intervention phase respectively: Findings seem to suggest that services are strengthening and refining their services in the application of the early intervention, prevention and client-education models, as well as in health promotion and the family-centred models. Staffing strategies are considered or used by many services. The use of direct, one-to-one and group models remains prominent and few changes to these models are being considered. Findings may

suggest shifts in the perceptions regarding the use of the case management, community-based and trans-disciplinary models. Further findings suggest that services are implementing changes related to workforce development and organisational / procedural development. Resource allocation and development of partnerships are less evident changes. Perceptions regarding best practice principles have also been identified and have provided an early attempt at exploring these principles. Rating highest amongst these principles are the early intervention, prevention, client-education and client / family-centred models, as well as the use of staffing strategies.

6.1 The Concept of Early Intervention

Throughout all the phases of the project, the processes of change in services have been illustrated from the initial phases of problem identification to the later phases of indicating participants' commitment to change and the implementation of changes in practice. Noteworthy is the high evidence of participants' critical reflection on practice. In addition, the characteristics of services' approaches in the process of change management have been identified. The characteristics suggest that services have a sound base for facilitating change, with characteristics related to management style, the management tools utilised (for example strategic planning), and managers' approaches to change. Characteristics that facilitate the process of change moderately have been identified and relate to management style and managers' comfort levels with regard to certain management tasks. Noteworthy is the identification of characteristics that may inhibit processes of change: the limited focus of services on external factors influencing service delivery; limited management training undertaken and the difficulties in implementing change due to limited resources; and the ability for upper management to see the need for change.

Chapter 6 will critically evaluate the results and findings of the study, and will include a discussion of the research design utilised. Recommendations for future research and for practice will also be made in this chapter.

6.1 EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The results and findings of this study need to be viewed within the context of a number of factors. These include: the difficulty in defining the concept of early intervention and consequently the impact of these variances on the study; the variation amongst the targeted population group under investigation; the design and methodology utilised; the timeframe of the project; and the difficulty in capturing and measuring processes of change. In addition, the application of online focus groups in this project requires some consideration.

6.1.1 The Concept of Early Intervention

The dilemma surrounding the definition of “early intervention”, as discussed in Chapter 2, was demonstrated during this project in that variations exist amongst services regarding this concept. Some services prioritise different age groups under this term. In addition, the variety of disciplines involved in service delivery and the consequent focus of service delivery varied amongst services. The developing nature of this field also provided difficulties, with some services prioritising the early childhood period and others providing a combination of early intervention as well as other services, for example services to children of school-going age. This difficulty was addressed by using a combination of data collection methods and bearing the individual context of each organisation in mind. The use of the questionnaires, combined with the discussions and interviews, allowed for these differences to surface in order to be considered during the data analysis and interpretation phases.

Although definitions of terminologies were provided, terminology such as that pertaining to the different team approaches, and the case management and consultation models in particular, proved to be interpreted and applied by participants in different ways. The different interpretations need to be considered when interpreting this study’s results and may warrant further investigation in order to obtain a more accurate and in-depth

understanding of these models and their interpretations in practice.

6.1.2 The Targeted Population Group under Investigation

The occupational therapy managers selected to participate provided some variation amongst services and the information obtained. This is due to the varied natures of organisational structures, the different contexts of services across the state, as well as in the variety of the application of early intervention services. Some participants found it difficult to isolate occupational therapy managers when studying the phenomenon of early intervention, due to the multi-disciplinary nature of the field. A recommendation for future research would be to include other disciplines in a study related to early intervention service delivery in order to obtain a multi-disciplinary perspective. For the purposes of this study, the occupational therapy perspective proved to be valuable.

In addition, some managers were not directly involved in the field of early intervention and had limited clinical experience in this regard. Others served as both managers and clinical therapists, with another temporarily attending to the management role, while being a clinical therapist. Due to the limited sizes of some organisations, one therapist would attend to both roles while having no staff to oversee. To accommodate for limited clinical experience, some managers participated together with a clinical therapist in cases where this situation could be foreseen. However, this was not possible in all the cases. This resulted in some variation in the information obtained, especially regarding management-specific information. These variations and context-specific situations were taken into account when interpreting the data.

Findings from the short questionnaires and the question related to coverage of the project in the follow-up interviews, highlighted the varying contexts of the services across the state. These variances impacted on the study. As indicated by the services, all the

information provided to services may not have been appropriate, though a high number of participants still indicated that the focus groups were worthwhile. These variances also made the pre- and post-test design difficult to execute and contributed to the variations in the results obtained.

Due to the nature of the positions held by the participants, time to participate was a significant factor that had to be kept in mind in the planning of the project. Online focus groups proved to be appropriate to allow for participation in places and at times that were convenient for the participants. Limitations were however observed in participation due to participants' restrictions in terms of time.

The number of participants and its influence on the depth of statistical analysis warrants discussion. Due to the small number of participants (14), statistical analysis was restricted to descriptive statistics. Although this was a limitation in terms of the research, it was not the only focus of the study and the data obtained from the questionnaire was supplemented by the data obtained from the other tools.

6.1.3 Design, Methodology and Timeframe of the Project

The use of aspects of the participatory action research approach, the pre-post test design, as well as the methodology employed at each stage of the project and the timeframe of the design proved to be appropriate for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it facilitated active discussion and critical reflection from participants, which is the basis for facilitating change in organisations. It also allowed for reflection and discussion over a period of six months and by means of different mediums. The project was effective in corresponding with the aim of the participatory action research design, as stated by DePoy and Gitlin (1998), in order to generate knowledge to inform action in practice.

Secondly, the design proved to be appropriate in providing factual as well as

rich descriptive information. The factual nature of the data obtained from the first questionnaire provided a valuable, measurable and concrete starting point for discussions. The data obtained from the second questionnaire provided concrete evidence to compare with the results of the first questionnaire, although it was limited with regard to the statistical analyses (as discussed previously). The focus groups provided complementary descriptive and

contextual data. In addition, the timeframe of the design allowed for the follow-up interviews to be individually tailored according to a pre-set structure in order to provide more opportunity for in-depth and context-specific data to be obtained.

A limitation was the different categories utilised during the pre- and post-tests (except for the questionnaire, which remained the same) and the pre-set indicators utilised during the first focus group's discussions, the discussions of focus groups 2–5, and the interviews. These inconsistencies made direct comparisons between the pre- and post-intervention findings difficult.

The unprescriptive nature of the participatory research design allowed for data collection methods to be used in combination (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998; Hart & Bond, 1995). Several authors, including DePoy and Gitlin (1998), as well as Kohn, LeBlanc and Mortola (1994), support the use of a combination of data collection methods to study a phenomenon. This was a strong point in the design of the project since it allowed for data collection methods to compliment each other. It also allowed for contextual information to be gathered and strengthened the validity and reliability of the results and findings obtained.

In addition, the approach adopted allowed for flexibility in the application of the design, as well as the control and structure provided by the researcher. In this instance, participants were actively involved in discussions, in the selection of topics for the discussions, and in shaping the follow-up interviews by means of the individualised information that they provided in the previous stages of the project. It allowed the

project in terms of the coverage of the phenomenon. Issues raised by participants were considered during the interpretation of the data and the discussion of the results and findings. In addition, participants had the opportunity at various stages during the project to provide input into the data analysis process and to verify data obtained from the study. Participants made changes where required with the resulting changes being made to data interpretation. The reliability of data obtained was further strengthened by measures such as peer review and pilot testing of measurement instruments, as well as the use of co-coders during data analysis procedures.

6.1.4 Measuring Processes of Change

The aim of this project was to facilitate change in perceptions and to document the processes of change occurring in 14 services across South Australia, from the viewpoint of managers. In order to achieve this, change in perceptions had to be measured. This proved to be a difficult process due to the different stages at which the various organisations were in their own development and processes of change. This difficulty was addressed by the multi-phased design and the use of multiple methodologies that allowed for contextual factors to be considered when data was collected and interpreted. On its own, the mostly statistical data obtained from the questionnaires in the implementation of the pre-post test design, would have been insufficient to capture this complex phenomenon. In addition to this, the timeframe of the project allowed for data collection over a six-month period, in order to accommodate the progressive, dynamic and continually evolving nature of the process of change. The recommendation for future research of this nature is to consider a longer period of time to allow for more changes to occur in practice. The six-month timeframe had the advantage that participants demonstrated clear recall of the focus group discussions, but had the disadvantage of not allowing sufficient time for changes in practice to be implemented by all the services.

6.1.5 The Use of Online Focus Groups *Focus Groups*

In general, the choice of using online focus groups was appropriate. Some limitations existed and valuable lessons were learnt regarding the practical application of this relatively new research medium.

6.1.5.1 *Quality of Discussion elicited*

The use of online focus groups as a communication medium provided some limitations regarding the quality of discussion elicited when compared with face-to-face focus groups. The time lapse between posting a message and waiting for a reply within the week of discussion, resulted in some issues not being fully discussed. It was anticipated that a week of discussion would be sufficient to discuss the topics, but this period may have been too short due to the number of participants participating and the amount of information that was covered in a given discussion. This project had a maximum of seven participants per discussion room, which proved to be adequate to facilitate an active discussion. A recommendation for future research would be not to include more than seven participants and to also consider the nature of the information under discussion as well as the allocated time available for discussion. Less information may have provided more opportunities for in-depth discussion with perhaps an additional discussion session to provide further information. Due to the limited time available to participants, this was not a viable option and neither was the extension of the discussion for another week.

Given the results obtained by means of the indicators, it does illustrate that the change-orientated program was effective in facilitating critical reflection on practice. For the purposes of this project and due to the nature of the information provided, which was mostly factual and introductory, this medium was effective.

6.1.5.2 *Practical Application of Online Focus Groups*

Preparation and planning proved to be essential. A well-developed structure for the discussion was valuable in terms of ordering the discussion. It allowed for participants to be easily orientated when first entering the discussion room and for the discussion to be grouped under the relevant topics. Both of these aspects are essential since information overload is one of the aspects that had to be guarded against when using this medium (McConnell, 1994). In addition, it was essential to prepare the participants to use this medium. Some participants indicated that this was their first experience in using such a medium. Most participants indicated a positive experience in using the medium, with only one experiencing technical difficulties due to her computer set-up.

The system of reminders to participate in the discussion also proved to be valuable. Since participation was reliant on participants having to independently enter the discussion room in their own time, discussion could easily have been hampered. It was recommended that participants enter the site at least three times during the week of the discussion and a system of reminders, that included regular e-mail updates being sent to participants during the discussion week, was used.

6.1.5.3 *Experiences of Participants in using Online Focus Groups*

The experiences of participants varied. Most indicated a very positive experience, while some indicated frustration at not being able to discuss issues face-to-face. These contrasts may suggest links with variations in personal communication styles and familiarity with this communication medium. Participants seemed to value the fact that they could re-visit contributions and respond in their own time, without having to travel anywhere. Future research into the use of this medium is highly recommended, since it is well-suited to some types of research – in this case, the focused discussion of factual data.

6.2.3 All participants commented on the usefulness of the online discussions. As indicated before, country therapists participated more frequently and seemed to have a greater need for discussions with peers. Other participants commented on the value of discussions with peers on a regular basis. It is a recommendation of this research project that a similar discussion forum be developed for therapists to use as a professional peer communication medium. This will provide opportunities for reflection on practice, mentoring, and other support for therapists, and will facilitate a unified approach in practice for occupational therapists.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The following recommendations for practice can be made as a result of this research project:

6.2.1 Issues identified with regard to Early Intervention Service Delivery

This project indicated managers' perceptions of the major issues in early intervention service delivery related to limited resources, understaffing, long waiting lists and limited services provided to those on waiting lists, as well as insufficient collaboration with the school system. It is recommended that lobbying bodies, such as the Occupational Therapy Association (South Australia) and others, recognise these issues and become actively involved in addressing some of these service delivery issues.

6.2.2 Exploration of the Principles of Best Practice

This project provided a starting point in the development of the principles of best practice for South Australia, as perceived by managers of services. It is recommended that these principles be investigated further, as suggested by Shonkoff and Meisels (2000). In addition, participants indicated a need for a unified approach amongst occupational therapists (refer Appendix R), hence a set of standards will provide a sound basis for practice.

6.2.3 The Concept of Early Intervention and its Application in Practice

It is recommended that the concept of early intervention and its application be explored further by therapists in practice, due to the differences experienced in perceptions, applications and priorities of different services. Dialogue amongst services regarding the prioritisation of early intervention services will assist with presenting a unified approach amongst services. This will include a discussion on the proportion of children of school-going age and older children being serviced. Such a discussion forum would be valuable for exploring the different issues involved in service delivery, while a program similar to the change-orientated program utilised during this program, would provide opportunities for exposure to different types of service delivery models. Springfield, Rodger and Maas (1993) recommend that therapists should be aware of the different types of models in order to utilise them flexibly in practice.

6.2.4 The Use of an Online Communication Medium

Consideration can be given to an online communication medium, similar to the one used during this study. A similar professional communication medium is used by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Ontario, Canada (Whalen & Wright, 2000) and others exist both internationally and nationally. It would be useful to have a South Australian discussion forum for context-specific issues. Such a medium would facilitate ongoing discussion amongst therapists and facilitate critical reflection on practice, which is essential for a developing field such as early intervention.

6.2.5 The Case Management, Consultation and Tele-Rehab Models

The case management, consultation and tele-rehab models should be investigated further with regard to their use and the perceptions held by clinicians concerning these models. This project provided some initial exploration of these models, but indicated

some variations in perceptions and applications in practice that are worth exploring in more depth.

6.2.6 Managers' Time Commitments and Divisions

Time commitments and divisions of managers need to receive some consideration.

This project indicated that managers spend most of their time on clinical work. It is recommended that more time be spent on the building of external relations and monitoring the environment. This project has identified these characteristics as not being facilitative of the process of change.

6.2.7 Managers' Training

It is further recommended that management-specific training be provided to managers in order to assist in equipping them for their management duties. This project indicated that most managers have not received any management-specific training, which is not conducive to the facilitation of the processes of change in practice. Training related to financial planning would be beneficial, since managers indicated low levels of comfort in this area. Training and support in aspects of the process of change, such as obtaining resources to facilitate change and to positively influence staff and upper management regarding the processes of change, would be valuable. Other training options are for conflict management, negotiation and strategic management. Training in these areas will improve managers' comfort levels in dealing with these management tasks, which will in turn influence the facilitation of change in their services.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to the more detailed recommendations made in the preceding text as it relates to the specifics of this study, the following recommendations are also made:

- In order to obtain more in-depth and context-specific information with regard to change in service delivery models, a recommendation for future research is to focus on a smaller number of organisations. Changes could be followed over a longer period of time and methodology could be included to expand on the practical changes occurring – observations and viewpoints of clinicians in specific settings could be included in addition to the perceptions of managers. This will facilitate further exploration of the perceptions related to and the implementation of models such as the case management and team approaches.
- To investigate and expand on the use of online discussion groups as a research medium, building on the valuable lessons learnt from this project.

6.4 CONCLUSION

This project provided valuable information on managers' perceptions of the processes of change occurring in service delivery. It provided context-specific information related to 14 managers' perceptions of early intervention service delivery in South Australia. In addition, it provided information on the application of online focus groups as a research medium. From these aspects, recommendations for practice and future research have been formulated. In conclusion, this project has achieved its overall aim of data collection in order to inform practice.