

# Chapter 1

## Orientation and Problem Statement

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1.1 Perspectives on Early Childhood Intervention</li><li>1.2 Background to Study and Problem Statement</li><li>1.3 Definition of Terms</li><li>1.4 Organisation of Thesis</li><li>1.5 Summary</li></ul> |
|---|

### 1.1 Perspectives on Early Childhood Intervention

Experts<sup>1</sup> in the field of early childhood intervention are in agreement that the first few years of life are developmentally crucial and are intricately related to learning opportunities and outcomes in later life. This period sets the stage for an individual to develop the ability to grow and participate in the social, educational and vocational context. Should the child's developmental needs not be met during this early period, it could have diverse and detrimental effects on his future prospects of leading a productive and fulfilling life.

It is thus imperative for the well-being of a society to ensure that optimal conditions for early development exist. Alant states: "As social factors for example, family and community poverty, violence, social support, health care access, pre- and post-natal care and child-care environments have been explicitly linked to developmental delays in young children, a large proportion of South African families are at risk in raising young children in less than optimal conditions".<sup>2</sup> Where risk factors for developmental delays are present, effective strategies should be in place to prevent the occurrence of disabilities at a later stage.

Another problem that is encountered in society at present is the high incidence of disabilities due to modern medical advances. "Advances in obstetric management and

intensive neonatal care have enabled survival of low-birthweight and at-risk infants as never before".<sup>3</sup> Survival from serious incidences such as infectious diseases or traumatic brain injury is also higher due to modern medical technology. Research has shown that survivors are likely to have significant developmental delays as they grow and mature.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> A variety of impairments may also follow, such as hearing, visual, intellectual, motor or multiple disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

It has been estimated that 85 % of the world's disabled children live in developing countries and that about 7 % of the world's children are disabled.<sup>3</sup> Due to its history, South Africa can be viewed as a developed, as well as developing, country. Advanced medical technology, private hospitals and practices, and an affluent society, exist alongside vast rural areas with large populations where poverty and diminishing public health services exist.

Where public health services are available for the larger population, the focus is rather on identification and treatment of common conditions than on early intervention and habilitation of long-term developmental disorders. From a human, but also from a medical, social and economical perspective, the existing situation should be considered and addressed. There is a dire need for effective early intervention services within the framework of primary health care.

The challenge is to develop strategies to meet the special needs of children with developmental delays. Over the past decades the concept of early childhood intervention has become firmly established in the health profession. Research data was extensively collected to answer the question put by Bronfenbrenner in 1974: "Is early intervention effective?"<sup>8</sup> Rossetti states that the past 25 years of research has proved the answer to be positive and today the question should rather be: "For whom does it work and under what circumstances?"<sup>7</sup>

Scherzer summarises the problems of the earlier efforts in early intervention: "Over many years of well meaning aid programs, vast funding efforts and myriad professional approaches both by government and non-governmental organisations, there has often been considerable fragmentation, competition and conflicting aims in projects, with much resultant frustration".<sup>3</sup> Briggs also acknowledges the earlier

efforts of professionals dealing with early intervention. Although there is the intention to work together as a multi- or even interdisciplinary team, she states that "...most of these individuals find themselves unprepared to successfully function collaboratively".<sup>9</sup>

There is common consensus among authors in the field of early childhood intervention that the best way of dealing with this complex process of helping children with developmental disorders and their families, is to provide an integrated approach to service delivery. Although the occupational therapist has become widely acknowledged as an integral member of the early intervention team<sup>10</sup>, there is also a great need for these therapists to progress from attempting to function multi- or inter-disciplinarily, to becoming proficient members of a transprofessional team, which is considered to be a prerequisite for being a true early interventionist.<sup>9</sup>

One way of dealing with this momentous task is for educational institutions to provide, not only specialist training for each profession, but also transdisciplinary (or cross-disciplinary, as Blackman uses the term) training. Blackman feels that this view represents a drastic change in the approach from current training. "In essence, the cross-disciplinary nature of the content must be mirrored in cross-disciplinary training approaches rather than being dealt with from within each individual's discipline".<sup>10</sup>

He specifies four important requirements for successful transdisciplinary training:

- to observe other professionals
- to learn from other professionals
- to develop interpersonal skills needed for working in a team
- to function as part of a team

It is necessary to assess the current status of early childhood intervention and education of professionals in South Africa. As will be discussed in the following chapters, based on the literature, communication with key role players in early intervention and the researcher's own previous experience, the existing problems at present seem to culminate in:

- inadequate and fragmented services
- lack of collaboration between professionals

- insecurity and lack of knowledge
- outdated training methods

National and international collaboration is needed in a forward move towards an integrated approach where consensus is reached over principles of intervention, communication and teamwork. The family should play a pivotal role in this process. Within this common goal, each profession should initially develop its own field of specialisation and then cross over the professional boundaries to function in a transdisciplinary approach.

It is evident that we need to accept this new challenge in a scientific and effective manner if we are to address the problems of the child in need.

## **1.2 Background to the Study and Problem Statement**

The University of Pretoria is one of the first educational institutions in South Africa that rose to the challenge of developing a transdisciplinary, postgraduate degree in early childhood intervention. This qualification allows professionals to gain the necessary knowledge and skills required to render services to children in the South African context. Under the auspices of the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (CAAC), different departments and stakeholders began a comprehensive curriculum development programme in 2000 to enable students to register for the two year Master's Degree in Early Childhood Intervention (M ECI) in 2001. The Faculty of Health Sciences is presenting the degree.

Throughout the developmental phase of the Master's Degree, capacity building and research were emphasised as two of the cornerstones for a successful end product. In the spirit of the development of a curriculum for the M ECI based on research, the need for the current study has emerged. One of the seven modules for the Master's Degree focuses on specific specialisation areas. The current study is being undertaken to establish the training needs for specialisation in occupational therapy related to early childhood intervention. The problem facing the researcher is thus to ascertain the needs and skills of occupational therapists who are currently providing a service in

the field of early childhood intervention. Based on the results of the current study, as well as problem areas that are indicated in previous studies and the literature on early childhood intervention, a curriculum for the specialised occupational therapy module could be formulated in accordance with a theoretical foundation and clinical needs and experience of therapists in the field.

### 1.3 Definition of Terms

In order to clarify concepts that are used in the text without further explanation as to the meaning thereof, the following definitions are provided at this point:

**Early childhood Intervention:** In accordance with the policy adopted by the team of professionals involved in the development of the M ECI at the University of Pretoria, "early childhood intervention" refers to the age group from 0 to 6 years.<sup>2</sup> The concept itself is further defined in 2.2.

**Curriculum:** The course and content of study for the Master's Degree.

**Performance components:** "...a specific skill or subsystem that affects one's ability to function".<sup>11</sup>

**Performance areas:** Performance areas can be categorised into activities of daily living (ADL), work and productive activities, and play or leisure activities.<sup>11</sup>

**He/she:** "He" refers to the child and "she" refers to the therapist with no specific reference to gender, implicating either male or female.

## **1.4 Organisation of the Thesis**

### **Chapter 1: Orientation and Problem Statement**

Chapter 1 describes the dilemma of a fast growing population of children with severe disability due to advanced medical technology which increase the survival rate of infants with problems, but on the other hand, the failure of co-ordinated services to provide the necessary early intervention. The background to, and problem statement of, the current study is described. Definitions of terms and organisation of the thesis are given.

### **Chapter 2: Early Childhood Intervention**

In this chapter a discussion on the contemporary concept of early childhood intervention is presented. Where applicable, the more traditional views and evolution of the concepts are included. The importance of the ecological context in the process of early childhood intervention is emphasised and special attention is given to the circumstances present in the South African context.

### **Chapter 3: Curriculum Development**

An outline of the foundations for and process of occupational therapy is given to provide the background for the research questionnaire on the training needs and current level of skills of qualified occupational therapists in the field. Due to the fact that the research results are destined for drawing up a framework for an occupational therapy curriculum, literature on curriculum development is viewed and presented. Previous studies with regard to training of occupational therapists to become proficient in dealing with early childhood intervention are discussed.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter the aims and objectives of the study are described, followed by an explanation of the research design, materials and procedures used in this study.

## Chapter 5: Results and Discussion

The results of the study are presented together with an interpretation of the significance thereof for the proposed curriculum. The results are also linked to the literature review presented in chapters 2 and 3, and conclusions are drawn in relation to previous research. The effectiveness of the questionnaire being used in this research is evaluated and proposals set forth should this study be repeated or a similar study be planned. Suggestions for future research, as these emerged from the previous chapters, are set out at the end of this chapter.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Based on the research results, a framework for the proposed curriculum for the specialised module in occupational therapy is given. The content of the curriculum and appropriate educational methods are discussed.

### 1.5 Summary

In this chapter a brief introduction to the relevant issues in early childhood intervention is presented under *perspectives on early childhood intervention*. These perspectives include the importance of early development, the high incidence of disability, circumstances prevailing in South Africa, the need for collaboration between professionals and the challenge of initiating educational methods that would produce competent early interventionists. The *background to the study* and the problem statement are given, and the *organisation of the thesis* concludes this chapter.