



A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ACCELERATING EMERGENT LITERACY SKILLS OF DISADVANTAGED PRE-SCHOOLERS

BY

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This research is dedicated to
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AFFIDAVIT

I, Professor J.W.M. Pretorius (PhD) hereby declare that I have edited the PhD dissertation of Ezette du Plessis, titled: “A Conceptual Framework for Accelerating Emergent Literacy Skills of Disadvantaged Pre-Schoolers”.

Signature J.W.M. Pretorius

Date 16 | 5 | 02



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SUMMARY

The history of education for learners with special needs and of educational support services in South Africa, like much of the history of our country, reflects massive deprivation and lack of educational provision for the majority of learners. In South Africa a large number of learners are unable to benefit from 'normal' instruction, because of handicapping conditions that precede formal instruction. These conditions are referred to as 'barriers to learning' and are in the way of learning success.

Although it is acknowledged that factors such as physical, intellectual and emotional handicaps imply 'special educational needs', a large number of learners experience barriers to learning as a result of contextual factors. In South Africa factors such as poverty, contextual disadvantage and educational deprivation hinder cognitive development and lead to the development of special needs.

The most significant impediment to learners' cognitive development is the absence of mediated learning experiences at an early age. Mediators (parents and teachers) need to arrange content and guide the learners towards effective learning. An important aspect of early childhood development is exposure to and guidance towards the literacy efficiency that is needed to excel in a world filled with print. Many parents in South Africa are, however, ill-equipped to provide the necessary early guidance for their children. Due to cultural differences and contextual disadvantages many South African children lack emergent literacy skills and enter the school system on an unequal footing with their non-

disadvantaged peers. The existence of special educational needs due to these factors does not pertain to a small number of children. Such contexts and learners therefore need to be identified so that pre-school support programmes can be provided and special needs can be prevented.

It was established in this research that despite educational deprivation it is possible to accelerate the acquisition of emergent literacy skills. A conceptual framework in this regard is provided that stipulates the role of the educator, the role of the learner, the instructional procedures and the relevant literacy skills that would enable literacy acceleration. An important argument in this research, however, states that the absence of a 'prerequisite level of readiness', such as the skills tested by traditional school readiness tests, does not imply that opportunities for the presentation and acquisition of emergent literacy skills should be delayed. Rather, contextual settings that promote the development of special educational needs, need to be identified so that emergent literacy support can be provided.

KEYWORDS

Emergent Literacy Skills

Special Educational Needs

Disadvantaged Pre-Schoolers

Prevention of School Failure

Early Childhood Development

Mediation

Barriers to learning

Contextual disadvantage

Educational Deprivation

Acceleration

CHAPTER 1

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

1.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

1.2 THE QUEST FOR EARLY INTERVENION

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Bateman (1965:220) : “... those who manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between their estimated intellectual potential and actual level of performance....and which are not secondary to mental retardation, educational or cultural deprivation....”
- The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (1968:34): “... exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken and written language.... They do not include learning problems that are due to visual, hearing, or to motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage.”
- Kass & Myklebust (Northwestern University) (1969:378-379): “... deficits in essential learning processes requiring special education techniques for remediation....
...discrepancy between expected and actual achievement....not primarily the result of sensory, motor, intellectual or emotional handicap, or lack of opportunity to learn...”
- Siegel and Gold (The CEC/DCLD)(1972:14): “ A learner with adequate mental ability, sensory processes, and emotional stability who has specific deficits in perceptual, integrative, or expressive processes which impair learning efficiency.”
- Wepman, Cruickshank, Deutsch, Morency, & Strother, 1975:306): “... children of any age who demonstrate a substantial deficiency in a particular aspect of academic achievement because of perceptual or perceptual-motor handicaps...”

- The U.S. Office of Education (1977:65083): "... a basic disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written ... does not include children whose learning disabilities are primarily the result of ... environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage."
- Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (1987:222): "...a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities or social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual ... Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions, with socio-environmental influences, and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.4 PROVISION OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1997:19). It means that we cannot exclude from our concern any special needs that arise out of contextual disadvantage, social problems and individual disabilities or difficulties in learning. This viewpoint can best be presented by the following pre-amble to Act No 84, 1996 that was published in the Government Gazette of the Republic of South Africa Vol. 377, Cape Town, 15 November 1996:

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

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

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

1.5 RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

1.5.1 Reform of the education system

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.6 RESEARCH PROBLEM

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

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

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

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

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

- 1.6.1 What is the current nature and extent of special needs in the South African context?
- 1.6.2 What is the current cultural trend of literacy mediation and acquisition in the South African context?
- 1.6.3 What strategies can be implemented in order to break the cycle of illiteracy evident in the disadvantaged South African context?
- 1.6.4 Can a framework for intervention be successfully applied to disadvantaged pre-schoolers in a South African context? This problem will be addressed by undertaking an empirical

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

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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

1.7.1 Deducing a hypothesis

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

1.7.2 Testing the hypothesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

- If there is a notable difference between the level of emergent literacy that the experimental group have achieved when compared to their peers who attended a formal pre-school.
- If there is an improvement in the general intellectual functioning of the experimental group as a result of exposure to an informal literacy programme.

1.8 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

1.8.1 Mediation

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

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

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

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

1.8.2 Informal and Emerging literacy skills

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.8.3 Acceleration

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.8.4 Early Childhood Development

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

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

1.8.5 Special Educational Needs and Barriers to Learning

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.8.6 Contextual Disadvantage and Special Needs

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

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

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

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



1.9 PROGRAMME OF STUDY

- 1.9.1 Chapter two will focus on the nature of special needs in the South African context.
- 1.9.2 In chapter three cultural differences between a literate and illiterate culture with regards to literacy mediation in South Africa will be discussed.
- 1.9.3 Chapter four will involve a study of literacy-acquisition and a description of appropriate pre-school programmes as means of preventing illiteracy.
- 1.9.4 Chapter five will deal with an empirical investigation into the effect of an informal literacy programme on the development of emergent reading for pre-schoolers from a disadvantaged society and provide a conceptual framework for intervention.
- 1.9.5 In chapter six a summary of the research is presented, conclusions are drawn and recommendations regarding the outcomes of the research are made.

CHAPTER 2

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF SPECIAL NEEDS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The history of education for learners with ‘special educational needs’ and of education support services in South Africa, like much of the history of our country, reflects massive deprivation and lack of educational provision for the majority of people. The inequities evident in the areas of concern addressed by The National Commission of Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET, 1997) can be directly attributed to those social, economic and political factors that have characterised the history of South African society during the years of apartheid.

These factors have not only resulted in a lack of educational opportunities for learners who experience barriers to learning, they have also resulted in inequalities between provision for black and white learners, a highly inefficient and fragmented educational bureaucracy which has separated and marginalised these learners from the mainstream, as well as the provision of highly specialised services to a limited number of learners (NCSNET, 1997:21).

The nature of these inequalities will be addressed in this chapter.

2.2 DEFINING THE TERM 'SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS'

As mentioned in par. 1.3.1 the term 'special educational needs' came into use in the late 1960's as a result of increasing dissatisfaction with the terminology used, which classified handicapped children into ten categories according to their main handicaps. There was an increasing awareness of the prevalence of learning and other difficulties affecting children's progress and adjustment in ordinary schools (Gulliford & Upton, 1994:1).

Webb (1967) found that 16% of the children who passed through school during a certain time period needed, or were given, additional help on account of learning, behaviour or emotional problems. Because researchers had commented that the categorising of children according to their presumed major handicaps had become a restraint in planning special education, it was suggested that special schooling be reconsidered from the point of view of the actual needs of "handicapped" children (Rutter, Tizard & Whitmore, 1970:375).

The idea that was "deeply engrained in educational thinking that there are two types of children, the handicapped and the non-handicapped" was already rejected in the report of the Warnock Committee into Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (1978:37). This report states that "traditionally the former (handicapped) have generally been thought to require special education, and the latter (non-handicapped) ordinary education. But the complexities of individual needs are far greater than this dichotomy implies. Moreover, to describe someone as handicapped

conveys nothing of the type of educational help and hence of provision that is required."

Theories that explain the development and nature of these needs – not simply in terms of a child's particular disability, but in relation to everything about him, his abilities as well as his disabilities - were therefore required (Gulliford & Upton, 1994:2). This idea comprises a section within the total educational enterprise that is concerned with the education of learners who have handicapping conditions, exceptionalities or special needs.

Gwalla-Ogisi (1990:272) defines a handicapped child as follows:

"A child under the age of eighteen years and who, in the eyes of the director-general, deviates to such an extent from the majority of children in body, mind or behaviour that he:

- *cannot derive sufficient benefit from instruction normally provided in the ordinary course of education,*
- *requires education of a specialised nature to facilitate his adjustment to the community,*
and
- *should not attend an ordinary class in an ordinary school because such attendance may be harmful to himself or to the other pupils in the class, but is nonetheless educable and will derive sufficient benefit from special education."*

The search for an appropriate definition of special needs, however, continues. A definition given by Brennan (in Donald 1993:140) states: *"A special need exists when any disability (physical, sensory,*

intellectual, emotional, social or any combination of these) affects learning to the extent that special access to curriculum, a special or modified curriculum, or specially adapted conditions of learning, are necessary if the pupil is to be appropriately and effectively educated.”

Donald (1993:140) argues that this statement is only appropriate and acceptable in most developed contexts for identifying those with special educational needs. It is also reasonably liberal in the sense that it stresses the obligation of the system to adapt to the needs of the individual learner without removing him from the system. However, this definition is still problematic in a context like South Africa. The reasons for this are as follows:

- It matches the notion that the need is created due to a deficit **intrinsic** to the learner.

In South Africa it is questionable whether the majority of children with special needs have any **intrinsic** disability at all. The most extensive special needs are **extrinsic** to the children concerned and influence their capacity for learning (Kriegler, 1989:165). Where severe social and educational disadvantages occur, special educational needs manifest as the need for special educational support in the acquisition of basic educational skills that have been delayed or denied to learners through lack of access to, or inadequacy of, the existing educational system.

- It assumes that the degree and nature of the special learning need can be matched to curricular or other adaptations that might have to be made.

Where specialised personnel, psycho-educational instruments and physical facilities are lacking or inaccessible - as they are for the majority of South African children - a definition such as that of Brennan's has little practical value (Donald, 1993:140). It is impossible to act on a definition such as this and it does not help to define how many children have special educational needs.

- The definition further assumes that 'special educational need' refers to a relatively small section of the school-going population.

In contexts of widespread poverty and disadvantage as in South Africa, evidence indicates that **intrinsic disability** may be created at a much faster rate than is the case in more privileged contexts (Garnezy, 1991:422).

In the South African context some learners cannot derive sufficient benefit from 'normal instruction' because of handicapping conditions that preceded the instruction, and will need learning support if they are to succeed in the broad community.

The Education White Paper 6 (2001: 7) states: "*a broad range of learning needs exists among the*

learner population at any point in time, and that where these are not met, the learners may fail to learn effectively or be excluded from the learning system. In this regard, different learning needs arise from a range of factors including physical, mental, sensory, neurological, and developmental impairments, psycho-social disturbances, differences in intellectual ability, particular life experiences or socio-economic deprivation.”

Kriegler (1989) has also argued against the appropriateness of a model for ‘specific learning disability’ in South Africa where it excludes services to the majority of those who have special learning needs in the mainstream of education. It was believed that special educational need has little to do with the effectiveness of mainstream education. This was because of the assumption that children with special educational need are relatively few in number and special educational support has been seen as dispensable within the broader educational initiative. In order to challenge this sort of conceptualisation, educators in South Africa should rather describe special needs in terms of the origins thereof and rather also describe the different contexts in which ‘special educational needs’ seem to appear, so that the true nature and extent of special needs can be identified (Donald, 1993:140).

2.3 THE CONTEXT OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Warnock (1978:6) makes the following statement: *“We have been concerned, not only with the severely handicapped but with all those children who require special education in any form.*

The help may range from continuous support from specialist services, including an intensive educational programme in a special school for a child with severe and multiple difficulties, to part-time assistance from a specially trained teacher for a child with mild learning difficulties. It is perhaps useful to regard the range of special educational need as a continuum, where traditional definitions of special needs as well as more contextually relevant approaches are taken.”

Traditional identification of special needs focused on the individual alone and emphasised pathology and the intra-personal deficits that resulted in problem focussed practices. Attempts to identify the cognitive, motivational or behavioural factors causing underachievement, in order to correct the problem in these terms, do, however not constitute an adequate or sufficient model of intervention (Donald 1991:39).

Donald (1991), who has studied the nature of learning disabilities in the South African context, argues that identification and assessment should focus on a systematic analysis of a particular context, whether at the level of classroom, school or wider systemic context.

There is therefore a need to be generous in terms of providing for the special educational needs of a very significant numbers of learners, on the basis of the assumption that extrinsic disability is a widespread legacy of apartheid in South Africa that will take a generation and more to eradicate (Van den Berg & Naicker, 1996:30).

It is, however, important to identify these learners as they are mostly accommodated in ordinary schools and need special educational support and intervention. Reynolds (1989:130) suggests that children with special needs can easily be identified in an ordinary school setting because:

- They are not responding positively to the instruction offered in basic skills, e.g. reading
- Their social behaviour is unacceptable
- They are falling behind in learning academic subjects
- They may have significant physical limitations or major health problems
- English is often not their first language
- They are extremely limited in experiences that provide the background for formal education.

Where traditional views of special needs focussed basically on two categories of special need, namely individual learning disabilities and behavioural problems, there is also a need for understanding difficulties which are related to the educational and socio-economic environment in which the child functions.

It is therefore relevant to categorise barriers to learning in three main categories, namely: Individual barriers to learning; social, interpersonal and behavioural barriers to learning; and barriers to learning that are related to educational deprivation. These barriers will be described briefly:

2.3.1 Individual disabilities and difficulties as barriers to learning

Children with mild learning difficulties were traditionally seen as forming the largest group of children requiring some form of additional educational support in ordinary schools. Moderate learning difficulties were described as stemming from a variety and combination of causes which included mild and multiple physical sensory disabilities, an impoverished or adverse social or educational background, specific learning difficulties and limited general ability. They were seen as constituting “the largest group of children with special needs” (Gulliford, 1994:43).

Learners were identified as having specific learning difficulties if there was an unusual and unexpected discrepancy between some measure of general intellectual ability and their levels of attainment (Hammil, 1990:75). Most children learn to read, spell and write; some take longer than others do. Typically, the more intellectually able a child, the more rapidly will he/she will become literate. This is a well-validated prediction. However, a number of learners who would be expected to learn to read, fail to do so. Their failure is unexpected and unusual. As such, it is a cause of concern to parents, learners and professionals. This concern is also a reflection of tolerance or intolerance regarding individual differences between learners and their rates of progress, and standards of literacy. Although there is no universally accepted definition of specific learning difficulties, a child who fails to reach a level of achievement in, for example, reading that is predicted on the basis of measured intelligence, chronological age or grade placement in the absence of adverse exogenous factors, is often labelled as specific learning disabled or dyslexic, and is therefore regarded as having special educational needs.

2.3.2 Social, interpersonal and behavioural barriers to learning

Hammil (1990:83) mentions that the main limitation of the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities definition described in par 1.3.1 is that it does not specify the inclusion of social skills in the listing of primary learning disabilities.

When trying to understand the occurrence of emotional and behavioural problems in children, there is a tendency to assume that it is the learners who are at fault. The clear indication of the term 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' is that it is the learners who have the emotional and behavioural difficulties (Upton, 1994:96). From 1944 to 1981 the official term used in Britain to refer to these children was 'maladjusted', which together with other terms such as 'disturbed', 'disruptive' and 'psychiatrically ill' suggested that the child had the problem. These terms are understandable when adopted by teachers whose primary concern is to establish an effective teaching and learning environment in the classroom.

Reid (1985) and Cronk (1987) both explored the perceptions held by disruptive learners, and found that these learners often view their acts of disruption as rational and justifiable responses to poor teaching.

Galloway and Goodwin (1987:15) argue strongly in favour of the term 'disturbing': "*By definition,*

children who are called maladjusted or disturbed attract these labels because they have disturbed adults. The adult's disturbance may be at the level of frustration or anxiety at not 'getting through to' the child, or it may be sheer physical fear of violence. The term 'disturbing' implies recognition of the children's effects on adults while the terms maladjusted and disturbed are too often taken to imply psychological or social characteristics in the child".

This kind of thinking opens up the possibility of a behavioural problem being caused by participants other than the learner and, in particular, forces us to look at the role that poor teaching may play in the creation of such problems.

" Emotional and behavioural difficulties are manifest in many different forms and severity of behaviour. Children with these difficulties exhibit unusual problems of adaptation to a range of physical, social and personal situations. They may set up barriers between themselves and their learning environment through inappropriate, aggressive, bizarre or withdrawn behaviour. Some children will have difficulty making sense of their environment..." (Quotation in Upton, 1994:98).

Following this quotation, it is also stated that learners with emotional behaviour disorders are likely, by the time they enter a school or special school, to have developed a range of strategies dealing with day-to-day experiences that are inappropriate and impede normal personal and social development,

that make it difficult for them to learn.

2.3.3 Educational deprivation as a barrier to learning

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

The Inner London Educational Authority (1986), according to Kriegler (1996), carried out a four year longitudinal study of nearly 2000 children attending fifty junior schools. This study, however, indicated marked differences in attainments between social groups, and substantially lower reading achievements for learners from ethnic groups. Whilst the children may be moved to special settings as a result of low achievement, this feature persists across the contexts in which they may be placed.

In this study there was little evidence to support a need for qualitatively different forms of instruction. It appeared that such learners needed more teaching and accelerated exposure, not a different kind of teaching, than other learners. Accelerated exposure at an age younger, and at a rate faster than what is usually considered the norm is therefore the notion that will form the basis of intervention in

this research.

Related to the above mentioned contexts in which special needs appear, one can also divide the origins of special needs into three categories, namely: special needs caused by intrinsic factors, special needs caused by extrinsic factors, and special needs caused by a reciprocal interaction between intrinsically and extrinsically generated special needs.

2.4 THE ORIGINS OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

One of the reasons for studying the origins of special needs is that the identification of causal factors may open up the way for preventive measures (Molteno & Lachman, 1996:141).

There are some difficulties that arise in the building up of a profile of special educational needs within the field of communication, where there is an overlap of possible causes that are more likely to illustrate general area of difficulty rather than a specific one. It should be noted that some of the following characteristics might influence the way in which a child has difficulty in acquiring one or a combination of the skills of reading, spelling, handwriting and mathematics:

- visual, hearing or motor handicaps
- low intelligence
- emotional problems or maladjustment
- poor home/environmental circumstances

- lack of schooling, especially in the early years
- inappropriate teaching
- poor self-image with negative attitudes to learning to read
- parental pressures (Pumfrey & Reason, 1991:234).

The most frequent sources of special educational needs are difficulties in learning that hinder the development of literacy and numeracy skills needed in other areas in the curriculum. The sources of such difficulties may include slow cognitive development and slow language development. However, some children of average or even superior abilities may have marked difficulties in acquiring reading and writing skills. Emotional and adjustment difficulties may contribute to learning difficulties, sometimes as a result of unsettled home circumstances, sometimes as a consequence of feelings of failure (Gulliford, 1994:41). Mild sensory disabilities, speech and language difficulties, health problems resulting in absences and irregular scholastic attendance for other reasons are frequently additional factors.

Engelbrecht, Kriegler and Booyesen (1996:25) mention that at one end of the continuum are those with clear intrinsic deficits of a physical or neurological nature whose educational needs are usually for highly specialised educational resources and assistance. At the other end of the continuum are those with clear extrinsically created socio-economic disadvantages.

The three causes of special needs will be discussed next:

2.4.1 Intrinsically generated special educational needs :

Intrinsically generated special needs imply a deficit within the learner and relate to needs caused by:

- Hearing Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Intellectual Impairment
- Neurological disability
- Physical disability

In the Education White Paper 6 (2001:9) it is stated that the World Health Organisation has calculated that between 2.2 percent and 2.6 percent of learners in any school system could be identified as disabled or impaired. This estimation applies specifically to learners who form part of this group experiencing intrinsically originated special needs. An application of these percentages to the South African school population would project an upper limit of about 400,000 disabled or impaired learners.

Intrinsically generated special needs will not form part of this study since provision has already been addressed. In the Education White Paper 6 (2001:53) it is acknowledged that the Consultative Paper No 1 on Special Education (August 1999) proposes "...an implementation strategy that prioritises the upgrading and conversion of all 378 special schools and specialised settings and their inclusion

within new district-based support teams...”

2.4.2 Extrinsically generated special educational needs :

An extrinsically generated special educational need does not imply a deficit within the learner. The need is structurally and systemically created and results in the learners not acquiring basic educational skills.

Despite intact ability, the need for learning support is very real. These learners have for some reason or another not acquired adequate basic educational skills – especially related to literacy and numeracy - at a time in their development when this should normally have occurred (Donald, 1993:145).

“It is the fundamental relationship of these skills to all other dimensions of the curriculum and the inability of these learners to progress, or to be motivated to progress without these skills that creates the need for special educational support” (Adelman & Taylor, 1983 in Donald 1993:145).

It is possible for this support to be provided within the normal mainstream classroom. It is, however, **not** possible for these children to acquire these skills at a late stage of development in the same way as younger children might. This can also not occur in an overcrowded and under-resourced classroom with an under-qualified teacher who has no access to special educational support services or access to the required special methods and materials for presenting the learning skills. There is thus a need

for interdependence between improved general educational conditions and special educational support.

Causes of these needs are complex and various but basically comprise of the following:

- **Structural causes :** Shortage of schools and classrooms, high learner-teacher ratios, teacher under-qualification and lack of essential teaching materials and resources (Cooper, McCaul, Hamilton, Delvare, Moonsamy and Mueller, 1990:838)
- **Systemic factors :** Language of instruction and its relationship to early acquisition of reading skill; curricular content and a rigidly instrumental process of teaching (Thembala, 1986:75)

Statistical data, for example the Education White Paper 6 (2001), focus more on intrinsically generated special needs as described in par. 2.4.1. It is therefore difficult to establish the precise number of children who experience externally generated special needs, although there are a few indicators that suggest that the need is substantial.

The first indicator is the school **drop-out rate**. It was reported by the Research Institute for Educational Planning in 1991 that the major drop-out occurs in the first year of schooling - the critical

period for the acquisition of basic educational skills. If it is assumed that those who have dropped out in the first year of education are the least likely to have acquired basic educational skills, then we can assume that these are the children who will be requiring special educational support (Donald, 1993:146).

A second indicator in the range of special needs is school **failure rate**. Children who fail and have to repeat grades frequently represent those who have special needs that have not been met. Some of these may be children with intrinsic disabilities where there is a reciprocal interaction with extrinsic educational disadvantage. Given the high proportion of repeaters, particularly in the lower grades, it is likely that more children who have no intrinsic disability have a need that is generated by extrinsic educational inadequacies. The wide range of socio-economic factors have also contributed to the extent and severity of the problem.

2.4.3 Special educational need as a reciprocal interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors:

Donald (1993:149) states that it is particularly difficult to determine the incidence rates for mild mental handicap, speech and language impairment, specific learning disability and emotional and behavioural disorders. In disadvantaged social and educational contexts the reciprocal interactive effects of extrinsic factors complicate the matter.

Central to appreciating the need that is generated in this area is the notion of 'risk'. Children who

have even mild intrinsic disabilities are at risk of developing needs for special educational support. It is those with the **least** supportive and facilitative social and educational environments who are most likely **not** to cope and to need special help if they are to be effectively educated. Children with mild intrinsic impairment, who also suffer extrinsic social and educational disadvantages, are more likely to manifest with special educational need (Donald, 1993:149).

The development of special educational needs is increased, not only by the interaction between extrinsic socio-educational disadvantages and children's existing intrinsic disabilities, but also by those factors that have been shown to increase the risk of developing intrinsic disabilities (refer par. 2.5.1. and 2.5.2).

Donald (1993:141) mentions the fact that factors related to poverty as well as health and health-care access interact to produce disproportionately high incidence rates of disability and special educational need. In this regard it is stated in Summary Report on Poverty and Inequality in South Africa (May, 1998) that in measures of human development such as life expectancy, infant mortality and adult illiteracy, South Africa compares unfavourably with several other middle-income countries and therefore the number of children with intrinsic physical, cognitive or emotional disabilities can be a significant portion of the South-African school-age population.

The extrinsically generated special educational needs that were created under the system of apartheid are also reflected in the high drop-out rates, failure rates, and evidence of underachievement in

relation to potential in African education particularly.

The existence of this group together with the high incidence of intrinsic disability and the reciprocal interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors make up a total group of children with special educational need who are far from a small minority in the South African school-age population.

The marginalisation of special educational need as it has occurred in the past and as it may yet occur in the process of educational reconstruction in South Africa has to be challenged. (It is, however, not the aim of this study to challenge and redefine current practices, but to determine whether these needs can possibly be limited by educational involvement before formal school entry).

It is important to conceptualise the need as **context dependent** - generated as much through extrinsic socio-educational factors as through intrinsic disability; and as perpetuated and exacerbated through the reciprocal synergistic effects of poverty and socio-educational disadvantage. It is important to realise that the **extent** of special educational need in South Africa is considerably greater than in more advantaged socio-educational contexts, and, given the nature of this need, it cannot be marginalised from the concerns of general educational reconstruction (Donald, 1993:150).

2.5 RETHINKING SPECIAL NEEDS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In recent years there has been a major shift in thinking about the nature of special educational needs. This re-conceptualisation has taken place over a number of years and has involved a gradually evolving awareness of the limitations of the categorical system of special education. The socio-economic and educational disparities and structural inequalities generated by apartheid in South Africa have had a particularly devastating impact on the creation and reproduction of special educational need (Donald & Csapo, 1989; Donald 1992; Skuy & Partington 1990; Gwala-Ogisi, 1990).

According to Donald (1994:136) this is not merely a problem of individual pathology in South Africa - it is a reflection of the distortion of the social formation that has at its core the creation and reproduction of disadvantage. This aspect will be discussed in depth in chapter 3 when the specific nature and culture of the South African community is addressed.

The very notion of special educational need is therefore in itself relative and not absolute (Donald, 1994:137). It depends on how 'disability' is perceived and interpreted in a particular social context and on how 'need' is defined in relation to this. South Africa lacks the diagnostic services and reliable epidemiological data for the group for whom the reproduction of disadvantage is likely to create the highest rates of disability and special educational need. It also disregards the large group of children who have no intrinsic deficit as assumed under the disability definition but who are in fact structurally

'handicapped'. As a result of both structural and systemic inadequacies in the South African education system, these children have become educationally disadvantaged to the extent that they also have real special educational needs (Donald, 1994:138). Donald further mentions that this manifests as the need for special educational support in the acquisition of basic skills - especially numeracy and literacy - that have been delayed or denied to learners through lack of access to, or inadequacy of the existing educational system – whether at home or at pre-school centres.

It is difficult to establish the precise extent of this group, but it is undoubtedly reflected in indicators such as the high drop-out rate and failure rates in the early grades of African learners as well as in the numbers of socially and educationally neglected children generated in this society.

The following factors regarding special needs and disadvantage are especially prominent in the South African context:

2.5.1 Poverty, Health and Disability

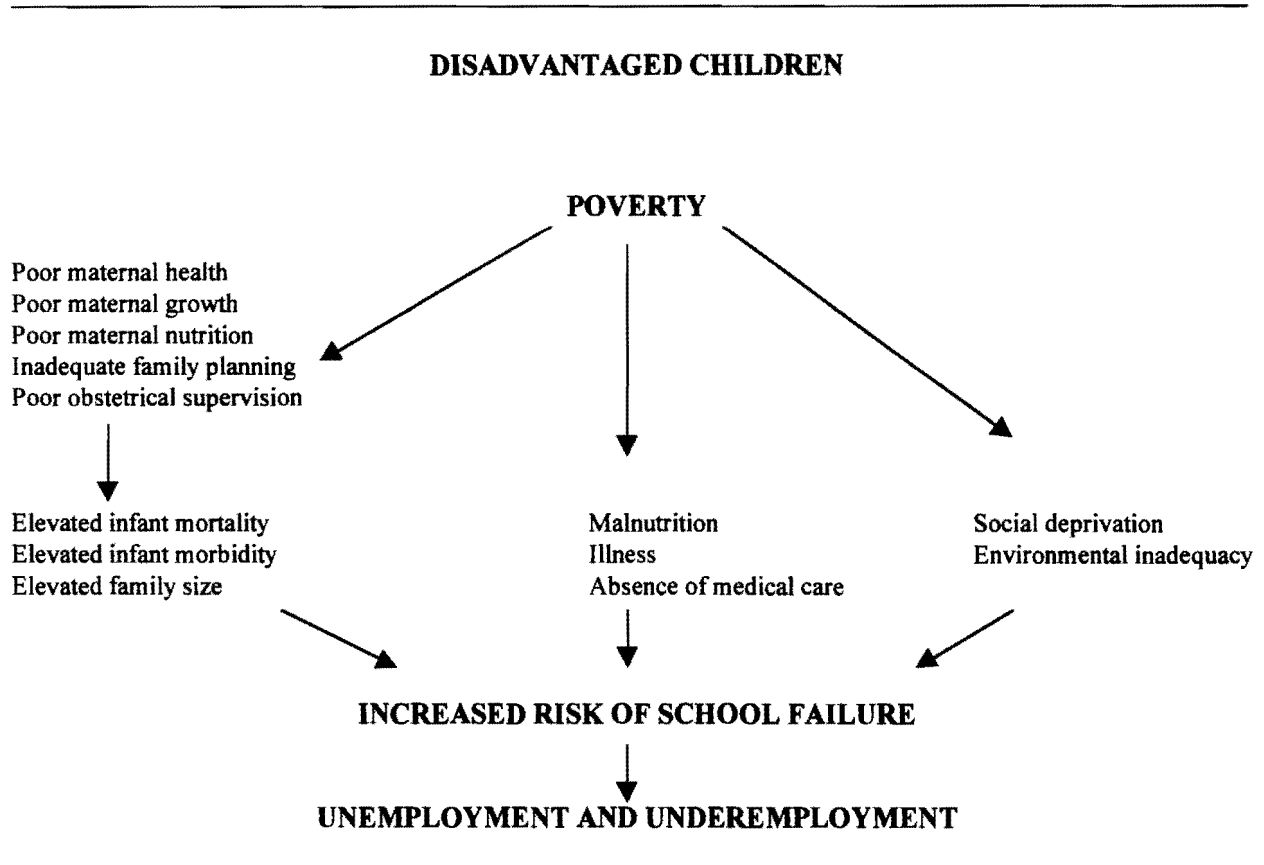
In the Summary Report for the office of the Executive Deputy President and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality (1998:5) it is stated: “ *Poverty can be defined as the inability to attain a minimal standard of living, measured in terms of basic consumption needs or the income required to satisfy them.*”

Statistics for 1994 suggest that between 35% and 55% of the South African population live in poverty. There is a high correlation between the level of education and standard of living. According to the White Paper for the Transformation of Health Systems in South Africa, Department of Health (1997) the poverty rate among people with no education is 69%, compared to 54% among people with primary education, 24% among those with secondary education, and 3% among those with tertiary education. There is also a high correlation between poverty and ill-health (Summary Report on Poverty and Inequality in South Africa, 1998). Poor people are more prone to health risks associated with malnutrition, disease and infection. Many health risks associated with poverty result in cognitive or sensory impairments that are likely to create special educational need. There is therefore a relationship between malnutrition and cognitive development that is of pervasive concern. This involves a synergistic interaction in which a variety of factors related to child nurturing and stimulation under conditions of poverty interact with and reinforce one another to create increased levels of risk for cognitive development (Richter & Griesel, 1994:80). Where cognitive development is affected, special educational need is likely to be created. Thus, given the extent of poverty and malnutrition in disadvantaged communities such as those in South Africa, higher rates of special educational need are created than in more developed contexts.

Garnezy (1991:419) in this regard presents a transgenerational model of poverty that was

documented by Birch and Gussow (1970):

DIAGRAM 1: A Transgenerational Model of Poverty: Its Consequences and Correlates



The model (diagram) illustrates the consequences and correlates of disadvantage and poverty.

These aspects are also related to the contextual setting of a particular community.

2.5.2 Contextual disadvantage and Educational deprivation

There is a long, and fairly depressing, history concerning the nature of environmental effect on the educational opportunities of children and the relationship of these to those students whose behaviour in school interferes with their learning and results in them being categorised as having special educational needs (Garner, 1994:105 ; Rutter & Madge, 1976; Essen & Wedge, 1982). This incidence was mainly caused by neglect of which the following can be said:

Many aspects of neglect are unintentional and closely related to social and economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, housing conditions, physical and mental health, family functioning and knowledge of child-care and control. Unlike other forms of child maltreatment, the identification of neglect is singularly focussed upon the **circumstances of the child's parents or caregivers**. Many children 'fail to thrive' as a consequence of neglect and/or abuse. These children often exhibit developmental delays which cause special educational needs (Hall, 1994:175).

In South Africa the theory of a 'learning disability' paradigm is partly derived from the value attached to intelligence and the belief in the magic of the IQ. Especially in South Africa the theory of specific learning disability, minimal brain dysfunction or dyslexia leads to doubtful identification criteria, ineffective intervention strategies, and, moreover, the exclusion of millions of children who have an equal right to special assistance. To exclude environmentally, culturally and economically disadvantaged children is to limit the type of special education service that these children may hope

to receive (Kriegler & Skuy, 1996:111).

It is estimated that as many as 50 percent of black and coloured South African learners are academically retarded, most of them suffering from the effects of environmental, socio-economic, cultural and/or educational deprivation (refer par. 2.5.1.). The special needs are therefore defined in terms of the presence of a barrier to learning rather than the existence of a handicapping intrinsic condition as has been the case previously. The principal benefit of this change has been awareness of **educational** needs and a focus on improving the quality of educational provision.

2.6 PROVISION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The pattern of racial inequality has applied with particular severity to the current inadequacy of provision for all coloured children with special educational needs. The NEPI report (1992:8) estimated that 40 percent of South Africa's school population fell into the category of having special educational needs at that time. Van den Berg and Naicker (1996:30) do not argue that special schools be set up for half the school population, but rather that the school has to be transformed into an institution that takes seriously the real disadvantages which so many pupils face. They are therefore arguing for the mainstreaming of special educational efforts within the basic school, with special schools being created for those with clearly observable conditions requiring special attention. There is a growing call to provide for special needs in regular classrooms. It is, however, important to consider the history of provision for special educational needs in the South African context.

2.6.1 The history of provision for special educational needs in South Africa

Previously the formalisation of special education in South Africa was instituted by the following acts that legislate special educational services: The Children's Act No. 23 1960; the Education Services Act No. 41 of 1967 as amended; the Coloured Persons Education Act No 47 of 1968 as amended; the Mentally Handicapped Act No. 18 of 1973; the Mentally Retarded Children's Training Act No 63 of 1974; and Education and Training Act No 90 of 1979 for Africans (Czapo, 1986:77;Gwalla-Ogisi, 1990:271, Nkabinde, 1997:5).

Both historically, and in terms of current educational initiatives emanating from the state, the issue of special educational need in South Africa has been relegated to the periphery of educational concern (Donald, 1993:139). In all departments of education the provision of specialised educational services has lagged behind the estimated need, and recent cut-backs and retrenchments have followed and exacerbated this pattern.

According to Du Toit (1996:5) the initial interest in special education was mainly in the education of blind, deaf and mentally handicapped children. The beginnings of special education in South Africa date as far back as 1863 when the first schools for visually and hearing impaired learners were established (Nkabinde, 1997:77). Dramatic developments in the field of medicine and clinical psychology during the twentieth century have, however, led to more and more categories of handicap

being identified, and separate schools were established for these groups. The main aim during this era was to remove the particular deficiencies of these children.

One aspect distinguishes the development of, and provision for special education in South Africa from that in other countries, namely the **extent of philosophical and political influences**. The white-black dichotomy has resulted in extreme disparities in the services rendered to the various population groups (Nkabinde, 1997; Du Toit, 1996).

During the first three centuries of colonialism, the foundation was laid for compulsory specialised education for white disabled children in separate schools with a clinical approach to education. Historically, special education programmes for non-white South African children with disabilities have been neglected (Nkabinde, 1997:76) Schools for disabled children of these racial groups were mainly established and controlled by churches. These children were also not expected to attend school and most of them stayed at home.

Before the seventeenth century South Africa was inhabited by nomads as well as several tribes and sub-tribes. In these early years extermination of the disabled was also practised in South Africa (Du Toit, 1996:8). Children who were unusual at birth were regarded as a bad omen and killed at birth.

The first schools were established during the period of Dutch colonisation (1652-1795). During this time it was practice to have separate schools for white and slave children. During British occupation

after 1806 a formal system of secular education was introduced and after the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910 state schools with free and compulsory education were provided for whites, but not for coloured children.

As elsewhere in the world, disabled children were not initially included in formal education, but from 1900 onwards the Department of Education became involved in special education and took on the responsibility when Act 29 of 1928 - the Vocational Education and Special Education Act- was promulgated.

In 1948 the National Party with its 'apartheid' policy came to power. Everyone was classified into four racial groups: whites, Indians, blacks and coloureds. Separate development was promoted by separate homelands assigned to Africans of the various tribal groupings. Special education for white children was quantitatively and qualitatively expanded. Initially, separate schools were established for children who were deaf, hard of hearing, blind, partially sighted, epileptic, cerebral palsied and physically disabled. Further investigations as to children with specific disabilities followed, such as committees of inquiry into the education of children with minimal brain dysfunction, autistic children and severely mentally handicapped children. Special schools for children with these disabilities followed (Du Toit, 1996:10).

While remarkable strides were being made in the field of special education for whites, educational provision for disabled children from other population groups developed much more slowly, leading

to severe discrepancies in both the quality and the quantity of such provision (Du Toit, 1996; Nkabinde, 1997).

Nkabinde (1997) refers to the HSRC (1987) report, **Education for the black disabled**, that documents on the exceptionally high incidence of disabilities in black population groups. This was attributed to detrimental factors typically operating in Third World countries and associated with poverty, lack of access to medical and health care facilities, ignorance, traditional birth customs, and so on.

Du Toit (1996:12) summarises the situation with regard to special education in South Africa towards the end of apartheid as follows:

- A fragmented specialised education system based on ethnic separation and discrimination on the basis of race and colour.
- Duplication and disproportionate allocation and utilisation, of facilities, professionals and services
- For whites there were also separate education departments for special and regular education, each with its own system of management, control and educational support.
- Separate schools for children with different categories of disabilities. Children with disabilities were channelled out of the mainstream into schools catering for such disabilities.

and welfare.

- Limited education support services that were disproportionately distributed across the different education departments. The more privileged sectors of society received the best services, while the most disadvantaged sectors had little or no access to support.
- A lack of trained professionals to fill posts in the field of special education and educational support services, especially in black education. Kriegler (1993) explains that the overall ratio of educational psychologists to pupils would remain at the ridiculous level of 1:12000, even after reorganising the skewed distribution.
- Disparities in per capita expenditure across different education departments, which were even more exaggerated in the case of special education. In 1987 African children constituted approximately 20 percent of the special school population, yet only received 12 per cent of the total school expenditure (NEPI, 1992).
- Unequal access to special education. Free and compulsory education was mandatory for all but Africans.
- Varying criteria for the admission and discharge of pupils.
- The use of varying terminology and categories of special education in different departments.
- A strong medical focus with clinically described admission criteria and a multidisciplinary approach.
- Severe discrepancies in the provision of special education for the different race groups, **with provision at pre-school level being almost non-existent for black and coloured**

disabled children.

- Extreme disparities between special education provision in urban and rural areas.
- Inadequately trained teachers, especially in black special education.
- A lack of equipment in special schools.

Supporting above-mentioned descriptions, the Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (2001:5) publishes findings by the Department of Education in February 1998. The central findings of the investigations revealed that *“specialised education and support have predominantly been provided for a small percentage of learners with disabilities within ‘special’ schools and classes; where provided, specialised education and support were provided on a racial basis, with the best human, physical and material resources reserved for whites; most learners with disability have either fallen outside of the system or been ‘mainstreamed by default’; the curriculum and education system as a whole have generally failed to respond to the diverse needs of the learner population, resulting in massive numbers of drop-outs, push-outs, and failures; and while some attention has been given to the schooling phase with regard to ‘special needs and support’ the other levels or bands of education have been seriously neglected.”*

Towards the middle of the twentieth century the clinical and individual approach to special education, however, gave way to a social and ecological perspective with the realisation that disabled children should be prepared to live within a social context. This perspective originated in Sweden and can be

defined as “making available to all handicapped people patterns of life and conditions of everyday living which are as close as possible to the regular circumstances and ways of life in society” (Nirje, 1979:231).

"We had a clear picture of all children tramping along a common educational road, towards a common destination of enhanced enjoyment, independence and responsibility, but encountering along the way obstacles of different degrees of severity. Our aim was to show that there was a continuum of difficulty in those obstacles but that children could be helped over them one by one and their progress measured by how far along the common road they could get" (Aubrey, 1994:32).

Engelbrecht (1994) indicates the need for a more contextually relevant and systemically sensitive approach to the practice of educational psychology. Van der Hoon (1994) also argues for locating educational psychology firmly within an eco-systemic worldview (De Jong, 1996:114). Beliefs such as these led to new trends regarding the provision for special educational needs in a South African context. This issue will be discussed briefly.

2.6.2 New perspectives on the provision for special educational needs

Today, a new way of thinking about special education has led to the policy of inclusion. Educating children who have “disabilities” together with their non-disabled peers is now

becoming practice (Du Toit, 1996:7). The influence of the early years is also widely acknowledged:

In the Department of Education's Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (1996:24) it is stated that "*the early years determine whether or not a child becomes a successful learner in and out of school. Therefore a more learner-centered approach will be adopted in the Junior Primary years*".

Policy proposals for the reconstruction of education support services in a new education dispensation for South Africa also strongly advocate a principle of holistic development which is health promotional, developmental and preventive by nature and is underpinned by contemporary eco-cultural, systems and constructivist theoretical positions (Lazarus & Donald, 1994). As Beeby (1986:41) argues: "... a new education programme does best when it rides the crest of a wave of social and political change".

The quality of education during the apartheid era was obviously unacceptable. Efforts during the eighties to upgrade the quality of black and coloured education and to bridge existing gaps were not accepted. After the first democratic elections for all South Africans in April 1994 a general feeling of optimism and commitment to improve life equality of all South Africans swept through the country (Du Toit, 1996:13). With regard to special education the following trends had already been recognised in the 1995 White Paper:

- The term ‘learners with special educational needs’ refer to all learners in need of educational support, it is learners whose special needs arise from intrinsic factors as well as learners whose needs arise from extrinsic (social, structural and systemic) factors.
- There will be a predominantly systemic-preventive approach to special education.
- Total mainstreaming of learners with special educational needs is the desirable long-term option. Progressive mainstreaming is the current viable option. The curricula will be designed as such that it gives scope to learners with greater and lesser abilities.
- Teachers should be adequately trained to "teach effectively in order to facilitate learning" (Committee for Teacher education Policy (COTEP) 1994:5).
- All school-going children should have access to educational support services.
- A national commission on special needs in education and training will be established to undertake a thorough needs-analysis and to make recommendations to ensure that adequate services are planned.

The Education White Paper 6 (2001:6) in this regard suggests that the key strategies required to achieve the vision of human rights and social justice for all learners; participation and social integration; equal access to a single, inclusive education system; access to the curriculum, equity and redress; community responsiveness; and cost-effectiveness are:

- Transforming all aspects of the education system,

- Developing an integrated system of education,
- Infusing of ‘special needs and support services’ throughout the system,
- Pursuing the holistic development of centres of learning to ensure a barrier-free physical environment and a supportive and inclusive psycho-social learning environment, developing a flexible curriculum to ensure access to all learners
- Promoting the rights and responsibilities of parents, educators and learners
- Providing effective development programmes for educators, support personnel, and other relevant human resources
- Fostering holistic and integrated support provision through intersectional collaboration
- Developing a community based support system that includes a preventive and developmental approach to support, and
- Developing funding strategies that ensure redress for historically disadvantaged communities and institutions, sustainability, and ultimately access to education for all learners.

2.7 SUMMARY

The Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (1996:25) states: *“Children's need for care, safety and protection, stimulation, education, nutrition and health are inter-dependent. An effective, good quality early childhood development program based on sound educational principles, requires an integrated societal approach to meet these needs.”*

The question of a service delivery model that is most appropriate for meeting special educational needs in South Africa is complex and requires much research and debate. The needs of those who are the most disadvantaged were not being met in mainstream or through special educational facilities. The children identified as educationally disadvantaged and in need of special educational support for structural reasons also fall into this group (Donald, 1992:148). The result is therefore a very large group of children with special educational needs whose disadvantages are reproduced in a system characterised by a lack of appropriate facilities where they are needed most.

Provision, however, does not regard only the individual whose need is special, but also the context, society and culture in which he lives. In order to facilitate preventive strategies in this context, the nature of the culture needs to be understood. This cultural context will therefore be addressed in chapter three.

CHAPTER 3

MEDIATION AND LITERACY ACQUISITION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

*"Is it a curse or a witchcraft
That makes me an illiterate
A person who cannot read or write
In these modern times?*

*Is it a curse or a witch-craft
That makes me deaf and blind
To these robots and road signs that give warning
In this fast moving world?*

*Is it a curse or a witch-craft
That makes me an unknowing parent
Who cannot help his poor kids
In this demanding world?*

*Oh! My Ancestors
Come and unchain me
From the world of books
That I may be free again and dance with joy."*

Bertha Noge in Pitse (1988:14)

The individual baby is born with inherited tendencies that fiercely drive the individual on in the growth process (Winnicott, 1986:144). This includes the tendency towards integration of the personality, towards the wholeness of a personality in body and mind, and towards object relating, which gradually becomes a matter of interpersonal relationships as the child begins to grow up and understand the existence of other people. All this comes from within the child. Nevertheless, these processes of growth cannot take place without a facilitating environment, especially at a young age.

A facilitating environment must have a human quality, not a mechanical perfection. Winnicott (1986:144) argues that if the facilitating environment is not good enough, then the line of life is broken and the very powerful inherited tendencies cannot carry the child on to personal fulfilment. According to Winnicott (1986:148), nothing that a person is capable of is due to himself; it was either inherited, or else somebody enabled him to get to the place where he is.

In the past three decades psychologists and educators have shown a growing interest in the cognitive development of infants and pre-schoolers (Wiechers, 1996:175). They have come to realise that the pre-school years are most important for the child's intellectual development. Beck (1986:18) states: *"all later learning is likely to be influenced by the very basic learning which has taken place before the age of five or six..."* It is therefore also likely that retarded performance could be caused by a lack of early learning.

McCandles (1964) contends that the pitiful situation of at least 85% of the mentally retarded is

attributable to stimulus deprivation, while Tarjan (1970) states that mild mental retardation is the most common form of handicap, and he attributes this largely to pedagogical neglect.

Feuerstein (1980) finds that a major inhibiting factor in respect of children with learning problems was poor pedagogical input during the child's first years of life. These children appear unintelligent and dull because they lack high quality 'early mediated learning experiences'. In his introduction to Feuerstein's book, Michael Begab (Feuerstein, 1980:xiv) says: *"In Feuerstein's conceptual framework, children from economically and psychologically impoverished homes perform poorly on intelligence tests and function generally at a low level because they have been denied appropriate mediated learning experience (MLE)"*. This type of deprivation - absence of adults in the child's life who can effectively focus attention and interpret to him the significance of objects, events and ideas in his social surroundings - is the root of most failure.

The most serious impediment to a child's intellectual maturation is therefore the ignorant or uninvolved parent or early caregiver (Wiechers, 1996:177). What one teaches can only be implanted on what capacity is already present in the individual child, based on the early experiences and in terms of the ever-widening circle of family, school and social life. Therefore the important role of mediation should be addressed.

3.2 MEDIATION

According to Feuerstein (1980:15), the development of cognitive structure in the organism can be conceived as a product of two modalities of interaction between the organism and its environment: **direct exposure to sources of stimuli and mediated learning.**

The first modality of learning as a function of direct exposure is consistent with the stimulus-response formulations of learning theorists such as Piaget (1966), who conceives of cognitive development as a function of the interaction between the organism and the environment.

The second modality, mediated learning experience, which is far less universal and is characteristic of the human race, refers to the way in which stimuli emitted by the environment are transformed by a 'mediating' agent, usually a parent, sibling or other caregiver. This mediating agent, guided by its intentions, culture and emotional investment, selects and organises the world of stimuli for the child. The mediator selects the stimuli that are the most appropriate and then schedules them. This process of mediation affects the cognitive structure of the child (Feuerstein, 1980:16).

Mediated learning experience, according to Feuerstein, can therefore be considered as the ingredient that determines differential cognitive development. In terms of this theory, the deficiencies responsible for retarded cognitive performance, of which literacy is an example, are conceived as belonging to the syndrome of 'cultural deprivation', which results in the development of 'special educational

needs' as described in chapter two.

In this sense, according to Feuerstein (1980:13), cultural deprivation is the result of a failure on the part of a group to transmit or mediate its culture to the new generation. It has been suggested that, not only are disadvantaged groups culturally deprived, but that the reason for both their disadvantage and their deprivation is the fact that they are also culturally different. This fact has important implications for the acquisition of certain skills for certain cultures. The following sections will therefore address the position of literacy with regard to the cultures it serves.

3.3 LITERACY AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ACT

Gardner (1991:38) argues that we differ from other organisms because we participate in a rich culture, one that has its own evolution over many thousands of years. Indeed we have no choice: we are as much creatures of our culture as we are of our brains, and therefore the environment and culture of origin play significant roles in the development of the child.

Literacy does not have the same value for all. The level of literacy that people achieve, depends to a certain extent on the uses of literacy in any specific cultural group and social setting - the availability of printed matter and other facilities, people's attitudes towards literacy, as well as the resources made available to people to become literate (Ellis, 1988:16). The culture that they grow up in may as such be the primary cause of their disability to achieve their real potential.

3.3.1 Cultural and contextual disadvantage - the origin of special needs?

In a population like that of South Africa there is a diversity of cultures with different values and norms amongst the people. These cultures vary to a great extent and this fact impacts on the literacy development of the members of these cultural groups, and on their adaptation to the society that they live in.

Kriegler (1990:72) in her argument about the dynamics of early parent-child literacy events describes some typical scenarios regarding the nature of the early mediation and its relevance for literacy acquisition and future success of the child. Two of these scenarios will be described in order to illustrate the differences:

Christine, already at the age of six months gave attention to books and book related materials (Heath, 1982). Her room had a bookshelf and was decorated with pictures and posters as well as toys and blankets that referred to the books she was familiar with and the characters in them. As soon as she started verbalising about the pictures in the books her parents expanded on her simple questions about the nature of things, to questions regarding the characteristics thereof.

From a very young age she played the role of 'question answerer' who had knowledge of

books (Heath, 1982:52). Objects and happenings in real life were compared, by her mother, to the objects in her storybooks. There was a constant reference between real life and the world of print.

Christine was often prompted to tell stories, and to relate real life experiences with her stories. Her parents asked her what she liked and did not like; her opinions were important and interesting to them.

Before she entered school she was already capable of telling a story or making one up. She was also aware of herself as being storyteller and as object of the telling. They often spoke about the uses of print in everyday life: street names, road signs, advertisements, instructions, menus, recipes, newspapers, magazines et cetera, and her bedtime story was the basis of the literacy activity of which a big part of her life consisted of (Heath, 1982).

Books and book-related activities played an important role in Christine's household. She was well-aware that literacy was important for success in life.

The pattern which is observable in Christine's household is repeated many times in the lives of children who are highly successful in literacy acquisition, school and in later life (Wells, 1986). The pattern of this child's informal education was such that the child entered school with a cognitive style that guaranteed scholastic success. **She was literate before she could read and had mastered**

certain meanings which are characteristic of a literate culture before she entered school.

Elias was born in a hut where nobody could read or write. There were no books, magazines or writing materials. Paper was being used to light the fire - not as a means of establishing meaning. His mother was so caught up in the everyday struggle to survive that she hardly had time to talk to Elias (Thirion, 1989). She did not regard herself as a "teacher" of children (See Feuerstein, 1980; Harkness, 1988; Heath, 1982). All she taught them was to do things which were essential for the functioning of the household. Communication with her children were mainly commands such as "Look after your sister", "Eat your 'pap' (porridge)", "Fetch the water". She was an 'executive mother' - whose task it was to control the activities of her children (Harkness, 1988).

She battled to send Elias to school but the tragedy is that what Elias learnt in school fell on deaf ears. He was not able to escape the illiteracy cycle. The reading and writing skills that he learned was hardly more than a layer over the illiterate cultural foundation.

And one day when Christine, as a medical practitioner, met the underfed Elias in the emergency unit of the hospital and handed him a prescription which he was unable to read, they were both aware of the gulf that separated them but could not comprehend what the core of the difference between them was: a bedtime story for the one, a bowl of 'pap' and 'biesmelk' for the other.

3.3.2 Literacy in a dual culture

Literacy cannot be neutral (Combrink, 1996:1) as it is always situated within a specific historical, social and cultural context. Reading is a constructive act. A reader does not extract meaning from a page but constructs meaning from information on the page and information already in his mind. Cultural literacy refers to the information already in the reader's mind. The reader who is not culturally literate, cannot really understand what he is reading, cannot be a participant in the discussion and cannot make necessary inferences (Combrink, 1996:1).

Culture, according to Combrink (1996:2), can be described as everything that people construct in social interaction, everything the people have done and are currently still doing. People inherit and construct culture. Culture is both the individual's and the group's whole way of life.

Childhood in literate societies therefore implies encounters with reading to some purpose, even if it is limited to identifying the names of people, towns and villages, streets, shops, foods and so on in the ordinary business of life in the home and neighbourhood. To children reading is what adults make of it for them in contexts where these same adults find it significant in their own lives, and such significance may include deliberate as well as incidental instruction of the young (Francis, 1990:17).

Literacy has now become an essential part of modern industrialised western society (Cleaver,

1988:270). Some people would even regard literacy as a basic human right. Illiterates in a western dominant society are therefore to a large extent victims of a social milieu where literacy is necessary in order to cope effectively with social order.

Industrial societies tend to create economies and social differences between advantaged and disadvantaged people. Lack of education produces poverty. A vicious circle can be set up for the disadvantaged so that they, as well as the children they must educate, remain victims of the social system in which they live.

Ogbu (1987:151) suggests that the identity and cultural frame of reference that the disadvantaged group had developed to cope with their subordinate relationship with the more advantaged group further reinforce the problems. Although the adaptation arose historically in response to the treatment of the disadvantaged by the advantaged group, it still persists. Reasons for this are for example:

- The barriers in opportunity structure and other forms of differential treatment of the disadvantaged continue and are perceived to continue in one form or another,
- Because of the way the schools have continued to treat the disadvantaged, and
- Because of the types of responses that the disadvantaged have developed to cope with their situation

The problem of illiteracy among the disadvantaged is part of the broader problem of low academic

performance and relates to the existence of special needs (Ogbu, 1987:151). Ogbu (1987:152) distinguishes between three different types of cultural and language differences which are at the root of the situation:

- Universal cultural difference: This refers to the transition from home to school, which, for all children involves adjustment to new behavioural requirements, social relations, style of language use or communication and style of thinking.
- Primary cultural/language difference: These are the differences that existed before the advantaged and disadvantaged population groups came into contact. If members of the non-dominant (disadvantaged) population group do not perceive the learning of a standard language (for example English) and the academic aspects of the school curriculum as threatening to their language, culture or identity, they will interpret school behaviour and practices for academic achievement as appropriate means to acquire literacy, as one of the means of future employment and self-advancement. With this attitude they will be able to cross cultural boundaries and do well in school.
- Secondary cultural difference: These problems arose after the two different population groups came into contact - where the one group dominated the other. The disadvantaged population group developed "secondary" cultural ways of coping, perceiving and feeling (Ogbu, 1987:155). The secondary cultural differences are often

differences in style rather than in content. These styles are part of an oppositional cultural frame of reference and the disadvantaged or non-dominant group equates this kind of learning with linear acculturation that is threatening to their culture/language, identity, and sense of security. Secondary cultural differences between blacks and whites arose in America after blacks had been involuntarily brought into the society as slaves, relegated to menial status and denied the chance of true assimilation. In South Africa where the black population was oppressed, they have developed new or 'secondary' cultural ways of coping, perceiving and feeling. They have developed a new cultural frame of reference in opposition to the cultural framework of their 'white oppressors', which means that, because of their oppositional frame of reference, they do not respond to learning standard English or Afrikaans, and this "attitude" tends to be often associated with the persistence of learning difficulties.

3.3.3 Mediation in a disadvantaged culture

Among culturally deprived groups, what is transmitted tends to be limited to those aspects to which the child is directly exposed by means of his sensory, perceptual, and motor behaviour (Feuerstein, 1980:37). This exposure is not a transmission in the sense of being mediated or interpreted to the learning organism, but direct exposure to sources of stimuli, which, when not present, adds up to a breakdown in cultural transmission.

Teachers and students from developing countries experience unique and specific problems originating from their socio-economic world. The socio-economic circumstances and lack of learning experiences are brought into the learning situation and therefore place enormous pressure and demands on the teachers to make their lessons successful (Thirion, 1989:386). Although teachers cannot control factors in their learners' life-worlds, they have to consider them in the teaching-learning situation and thereby contribute to the unloading of the field of tension resulting from them. The negative self-perception of the learners, that can also be the result of their lacking learning experiences and their socio-economic circumstances, can also be counteracted.

The task of the school is to educate and guide the learner in order to fulfil his rightful place in society (Thirion, 1989:386). The reaching of this educational goal differs from culture to culture, tribe to tribe and society to society.

If the socio-economic reality of most black or coloured learners is taken into account, it is obvious that it has a definite influence on the learning that takes place in school. A significant influence on the problems experienced by the disadvantaged learner is the occurrence of urbanisation. The vast concentration of people around towns results in inadequate housing and economic demands that force both parents to work, and, this has resulted in child-neglect and the declining of parental authority. The city child has become a mass person, estranged from his tribe and confronted with unfamiliar elements.

Certain groups may experience a transition from one established way of life to another and may attempt to obliterate their past. This occurs for example when a non-dominant culture perceives specific advantages as accompanying the dominant culture and decides that the past must be relinquished - often to the extent of rejecting previous cultural identification. Two characteristics of the cultures that impact on the learning acquisition are the oral tendency of the disadvantaged culture and the mediating reality that they find themselves in:

- Oral versus literate culture

The black population have a historically oral culture. Many educators argue that 'disadvantaged' children do poorly in school because they come from an oral culture. D'Angelo (1983:104) writes: "*Many students come from a 'residually oral' culture, a stratum within mainstream of society where oral modes of expression permeate thinking. They come from homes where speech is more widespread than reading and writing.*" What he suggests is that one possible reason for the decline in literacy might be related to the incipient or undeveloped forms of literate thinking in some of our students. The home situation of the disadvantaged also impacts significantly on their learning acquisition:

- The home situation of the disadvantaged

As some disadvantaged parents had not been exposed to the school reality as children, they lack interest and are unable to provide a stimulating environment that enhances learning. Some of these parents place little importance on education and do not motivate their children, or are unable to do so. Teachers in these settings also receive little appreciation for their inputs. Children are often left to themselves when doing homework and the absence of authoritative figures creates a false sense of independence. These children then find it hard to accept being prescribed to and commanded in the learning situation and some refuse to accept the authority of teachers (Thirion, 1989:388).

Children have a need to identify and associate with their parents. The absence of their parents and the influence of traditional practices and habits are frustrating this need. The child's traditional role as subordinate towards the teacher as authoritative figure causes passivity on the part of the child and can lead to inadequate interaction.

Thirion (1989:389) mentions that in some circumstances the children have already accepted the western practices and habits but are still taught by teachers representing the traditional society. On the other hand the child might not have accepted the western practices and is now being exposed to them in the formal school situation.

The culture-gap between the two groups may be so considerable that they are unable to find each other in the learning situation. Because black education in South Africa is based on western practices, many teachers feel that more attention should be given to the black culture in the learning situation, because: *"It is important that the tradition must not be left to die, it must be enriched. As part of one's culture, the child must be made to be proud of his culture. Culture is a heritage that has to be mentioned"* (Thirion, 1987:159). The lack of the traditional and cultural therefore, results in negative reactions which are related to radicalism and propaganda (Thirion, 1989:389). The children find themselves in two worlds, namely the traditional at home and the western in the school.

Confusion grows, and not only the cultururation but also the acculturation is delayed and the teachers find it hard to get through to the fundamentals (basics). These children lose perspective, and the reliability of the textbook, learning content and knowledge of the teachers is being doubted.

Disadvantaged children are also confronted with home duties like cleaning, cooking and care for the elderly, earlier in their lives, which sometimes results in them coming to school late or not at all. The children's learning time is thus often interrupted for tasks.

Other home affairs that affect the children are the financial position of the family, that may result in a lack of electricity as well as a lack of food and adequate clothing. Learners are sometimes unable to concentrate, have negative self-concepts, and start blaming the school and authorities for the suffering that they must endure to become literate.

The abuse of alcohol and domestic violence also cause an unfavourable learning atmosphere, and together with noise, home responsibilities, radio and T.V, overcrowdedness in the home, lack of lights, insufficient study-area, friends and poor parents leads to inadequate learning behaviour. They are therefore often unprepared, achieve low results and then become unmotivated and disinterested (Thirion, 1989:390).

Although disadvantaged children grow up in environments that are not favourable for excelling academically, they still need to adapt to the westernised culture, where much emphasis is placed on literate adequacy in order to fulfil their rightful place in society.

3.4 'CULTURAL LITERACY' - WHY IT HAS TO CHANGE

Christenbury (1989:14) refers to the term 'Cultural Literacy', that describes a familiarity with the dominant culture which insists that students - and the populace at large - need a body of general and specific knowledge to serve as a common touchstone among all. Hirsch (1987:xiii), who wrote a book on this topic, defines cultural literacy as that which one needs to "thrive in the world". Hirsch also regards poverty and illiteracy as the direct legacy of the current misguided educational system, and this intensifies what he and his supporters see as the urgency of the issue.

In South Africa literacy is a characteristic of the advantaged culture. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) stresses

the social origins of language and thinking and begins to conceptualise the mechanisms by which culture becomes a part of how each person thinks, learns, and relates to others and the environment.

If we live in a culture where a large proportion of the people are unable to 'thrive in the world' because of illiteracy, as a result of the difference in cultures, isn't it the task of the 'dominant' culture to educate them in order to fulfil their rightful place in society?

If educational psychology is to make any impact in terms of quality of instruction and issues of equity, its focus must be on preventative and development work (Kriegler, 1993:69), and therefore early education and its impact on literacy acquisition need to be addressed urgently.

3.5 EARLY EDUCATION AND LITERACY ACQUISITION

3.5.1 The quest for early intervention

All over Europe there is a spreading awareness that very young children, below the age of formal schooling, are capable of learning complex literacy lessons (Dombey, 1995:95). Scarcely more than a decade ago, it was widely agreed that children could not and should not learn to read before the age of six. In most of the countries of Europe this is the age fixed for entry into formal school, and the age at which formal literacy teaching begins. However, this last decade has shown us that the acquisition of literacy is not a straightforward rite of passage into the institutional world of school.

Instead it is a long and complex process that begins early, when very young children, who are far more capable than we used to believe, begin, in the world of the family and the environment, to understand and express themselves through the written word. This process continues to develop and to play a significant role throughout the long duration of education.

Becoming literate is not simply a matter of acquiring a value-free technology. Learning to read and write is now most fruitfully seen as the construction of linguistic meaning and the initiation into social practices. In the earliest stages of their entry into the written word children encounter more forms of language and new orders of meaning. As our views of literacy and literacy learning have become more complex, so we have seen the need for more complex and subtle forms of assessment. Although the educational systems in different countries vary, there are fundamental similarities underneath this variety. Many examples exist, that describe, not isolated successes, but fruits of shared strategies that really respond to the needs of all children, whatever their nationalities, their languages or their socio-economic background (see par 4.5 for a detailed description).

3.5.2 South Africa: The current situation

A study carried out by Kriegler et al (1993) in Venda revealed that of caregivers in disadvantaged societies, 53% had no formal schooling. 70% indicated that they never talk to their children about schoolwork, and 59% admitted that they never tell a story. These findings were disconcerting because the predictors of children's ability to benefit from formal education are primarily dependent upon the

quality and quantity of informal education at home, which should be able to do much to alleviate factors such as ‘cultural differences’ and ‘socio-economic status’ (Kriegler, 1993; Heath, 1982; Sternberg, 1987; Sulzby, 1988; Wells, 1986).

Kriegler (1993:76) states that children in disadvantaged and illiterate communities need better-than-average literacy instruction; they need an introduction to literacy that is so rich in story, language, print and books that their early disadvantage may be erased.

Kriegler (1993:77) further states that while the rest of the world is focussing on the importance of early literacy programmes (Cambourne, 1989; Clay, 1987; Heath & Branscombe, 1986; Strickland & Morrow, 1989) there is an ominous silence in this regard in the South African pre-school field. There are eight million pre-school children in South Africa who need early childhood educare, most of them poor, and half of them living in rural areas (Grassroots, 1991). As described in par 3.3.1, the disadvantaged are doomed to a life of illiteracy, unless they can be helped to break the cycle of illiteracy by means of mediation.

In order to address the special educational needs of the disadvantaged, it would be purposeful to first address literacy acquisition in its normal state and the mediating practices related thereto.

3.6 MEDIATING LITERACY ACQUISITION

Two contrasting theoretical explanations dominate the discussion on where a child's control of his native language, as well as literacy come from. Chomsky (1976) argued that it is the innate structure of the learner operating upon the specific organisation of whichever human language he is exposed to. An input of primary linguistic data is necessary, but, provided it contains a proportion of well-formed sentences appropriate to their situational context, the precise form of input does not significantly affect the course that learning takes.

The second explanation, by contrast, emphasises the role of the environment (also refer Feuerstein 1980). Observation across a wide range of language communities shows that adults, when speaking to young language learners modify their speech in the direction of syntactic simplicity and semantic and pragmatic redundancy in context. These features provide the child with what is, effectively, graded instruction concerning the formal structure of the language and the way in which form is related to intended meaning. Some degree of structural pre-adaptation to the task on the part of the learner is assumed, of course, but in this account the main burden of explanation for the course taken in acquisition falls on the input (Wells, 1986:17).

These theoretical accounts are mutually exclusive alternatives, with acceptance of either one requiring the rejection of the other. It is, however, important to notice that language is both system and resource. Language learning should be seen as a resulting form of interaction between an organism

pre-adapted to the learning task and an environment that to varying degrees facilitates the task by providing evidence that the organism requires. However, learning is also dependent on interaction in another sense, for it is participation in conversation that provides learners with opportunities to construct and test their representation of language, both as a system and as resource.

As educators we are concerned with the characteristics of both learners and their environments. But most particularly we are concerned with the way in which learners and their environments interact, for it is in that interaction that we, as parents and teachers, can best help children to realise their linguistic/literate and intellectual potential by adopting an interactional style that maximises opportunities for learning.

3.6.1 Literacy mediation at home

In the simplest, most traditional societies, education takes place largely within a family environment of young children. Often these families are extended, including assorted kin from each of several generations. In such traditional environments, it is assumed that children will follow in their parents' steps. From an early age children witness their elders fulfilling certain roles. Most learning occurs through direct observation, although such learning-by-watching will be punctuated on occasion by overt instructions, the invoking of specific rules, or explicit demonstrations of procedures that may not be readily observable (Gardner, 1991:121).

To children, reading is what adults make it for them, in contexts where these same adults find it significant in their own lives, and such significance may include deliberate as well as incidental instruction of the written words. Whether or not parents teach their children strategies to attack unfamiliar written words, much experience boils down to a straightforward meaningful connection between spoken and written words. This connection can be at the level of anything from a single word to a sentence or two, a short rhyme, or some other fairly simple written display (Francis, 1990:19).

As societies grow more complex, with valued skills attaining high degrees of intricacy, it is no longer possible for youngsters to master the requisite roles simply by 'hanging around'. Traditionally when the mastery of certain skills, such as literacy and numeracy, needed a more formal form of instruction in order to be acquired, the youngster was sent to a 'master' with whom he had no biological relation. This practice used to be called 'apprenticeships' and gave way to what is currently known as schools, where, among other aspects, literacy instruction is provided.

3.6.2 Literacy mediation at school

It was the need to instruct young persons, presumably boys, in the skills of literacy that gave rise to the first schools. A school, according to Gardner (1991:127), is an institution in which a group of young persons, rarely related by blood but usually belonging to the same social group, assemble on a regular basis in the company of a competent older individual, for the explicit purpose of acquiring

one or more skills valued by the wider community. The precise nature and extent of early schools remains hidden in prehistory, yet, on the basis of the many schools that have been observed in several cultures around the world, schooling generally began during the second five years of life. The entry to school was often marked by ceremony, for it was an event of significant importance for the community. But while the occasion might be joyous, the actual school regimen was strict, if not fear instilling (Wells,1986; Gardner 1991; Engelman 1992). Learners were expected to be obedient. They copied letters, number, etcetera, until they achieved perfection with them. At the same time they were expected to drill in the sounds of words, either on a letter-by-letter basis or by memorising important letter sequences within. Unger (1998:83) also argues that these learners were often forced to ‘march lockstep’ with other learners, and to learn in ways that were unnatural to them.

The mission of the early years of school is to introduce all students to basic literacy. Thereafter, there may be some form of grouping the students. The more able students will be directed toward disciplines that they can pursue at secondary and higher institutions, while the less able students will either cease school altogether or enter vocational or remedial tracks.

At schools there are clear milestones for progress, marked by recognition, privileges are given to those who excel in mastering the system, while sometimes embarrassment awaits those who, whatever the reason, are not able to master the system (Gardner, 1991:129). Learners can usually instinctively sense the areas in which they are not competent, and they tend to lose interest or avoid those activities (Unger, 1998:133).

Somehow the natural, universal, or intuitive learning, that took place in their homes or immediate surroundings during the first years of life, seems an entirely different order from the school learning that is required throughout the literate world. These practices even cause problems for children who have been exposed to literacy throughout their pre-school years. Disadvantaged children from illiterate families have even more reason to experience literacy teaching practices as alien and respond with anger, fear and resentment.

The 'conventional' view about teaching, therefore, might have contributed to children being alienated from the need to learn. It is useful to look at what these practices entailed:

3.6.2.1 Conventional mediating practices

The reading activities of decoding, comprehending and interpreting have traditionally been thought of as a series of steps in the reading process. For the most of this century the curriculum for the teaching of literacy skills in Britain, the USA and South Africa has been based on a number of apparently fundamental assumptions. These are that:

- Reading and writing are primarily visual-perceptual processes involving printed unit/sound relationships;
- Children are not ready to learn to read and write until they are five or six years old;

- Children have to be taught how to be literate;
- The teaching of literacy must be systematic and sequential in operation;
- Proficiency in the ‘basic skills’ has to be acquired before one can act in a literate way;
- Teaching the ‘basic skills’ of literacy is a neutral, value-free activity (Hall, 1987:2).

These assumptions control the way most educators deal with literacy. The following quotation of Goddard in Hall (1987:3) embodies them:

“Reading is first of all and essentially a mechanical skill of decoding, of turning the printed symbols into sounds which are language... We are intensely concerned that our children understand what they read, but the mechanical decoding skill must come first if we are to get them started properly. In the earliest stages of learning to read there is very little need for thinking and reasoning on the part of the child. What he needs is a little practice in mastering a decoding skill and the thinking will come along quite some time later.”

These kinds of assumptions did not contribute to make the teaching of reading and writing easier, neither did they resolve the problem of how to teach literacy. They only elevated the status of the teacher and indicated that literacy was a task for the specialist - not the parent (Hall, 1987:3). Whether teaching was based on phonic, alphabetic, whole word or sentence methods of reading instruction, certain matters such as the control of the manner and the rate of learning were in the hands of the teacher. Certain features, however, are not reflected in assumptions such as these, for

example:

- Becoming a reader and a writer are closely related events,
- Becoming literate might be a social process and be influenced by a search for meaning
- Pre-school children might actually have some knowledge of literacy
- Becoming literate might be a continuous process that begins very early in life
- In order to become literate a child needs to engage in literate acts
- Language and stories enhance children's understanding of literacy and text
- Knowledge that children have about literacy might be a legitimate element of their literacy development.

3.6.2.2 'Modern' mediating practices

Goodman (1980:31) makes the following statement: "My research has shown that literacy develops naturally in all children in our literate society." The following assumptions, which are rather different from the conventional beliefs about literacy, underlay this statement. These are:

- Reading and writing are cognitive and social abilities involving a whole range of meaning-gaining strategies.
- Most children begin to learn to read and write long before they arrive at school and do not wait until they are 'taught'.

- Literacy emerges as a response to the printed language and social environment experienced by the child.
- Children control their literacy learning in much the same way as they control all other aspects of their learning about the world.
- Literacy is a social phenomenon and is therefore influenced by cultural factors. The cultural group in which the child grows up will be a significant influence on the emergence of literacy (Hall, 1987:8).

The way in which children become literate can therefore be described by the word natural. This word may, however, imply some kind of maturational phenomenon or something that occurs as a result of biological programming. The real claim is actually that learning to read and write is learnt in the same way and to some extent at the same time as oral language. Children would not learn to talk if deprived of access to purposeful oral language use. Within such environments all kinds of people - adults, siblings and friends - help in their learning. This seldom takes place as a result of systematic and sequential instructional practices but is rather a consequence of playing and living with children. The same effects can be found in literacy development. Therefore it can be called natural.

Turner (1995:80), however, argues that children do not learn to read by accident, by inspiration, contagion or osmosis, or by being encouraged in attitudes that others deem socially desirable. He states that they learn to read by being taught and that reading is not a natural activity, but a set of gradually acquired component skills initially learned independently, but later integrated and

automated. Comprehension and mastery of syntax can be shown to depend crucially on phonological decoding.

Yule (1992:12) states the following: *“After their beginners had had two years of ‘learning to read without being taught’, the teachers were shocked to find that their grade two classes were full of non-readers, except for the children whose parents had ignored instructions and told their children how to read. So I found the teachers of seven-year-olds were rushing round trying to give their children phonics or ‘Letterland’ or anything, because most of the class had only around twenty common sight words.”*

The widespread argument for Whole Language has been that acquiring literacy skills is analogous to the acquisition - or development - of oral language. Turner (1995:89) further argues that reading is not a skill that spontaneously develops but that specific morphemes, and even language-learning strategies, are the product of teaching interactions and fine-tuning of maternal feedback.

Engelmann (1992:7) comments: *“The step-by-step teasing out of arguments which bear, today, on the teaching of literacy skills is far removed from the cavalier, global statements of yesteryear. The curriculum - the instructional programs and the details of how kids are taught - is the difference between failure and success. The difference is not the ‘global’ aspect such as ‘co-operative learning’ or ‘discovery’. The difference has to do with what the kids are doing, how they are using what they have been taught, and most important, how they*

receive specific skills, facts and operations that they are to use in applied situations.”

One can confront directly the primary reasons why school is difficult. It is difficult, first because much of the material presented in schools strikes the learners as alien, and the kinds of supporting context provided for pupils in earlier generations has become weakened. It is secondly difficult because students whose intellectual strengths lie in other areas such as the musical, spatial or personal spheres cannot readily master some of these notational systems. It is further difficult because these scholastic forms of knowing may even collide with the earlier, robust forms of sensory-motor and symbolic knowledge which have already evolved to a high degree even before the child entered school (Gardner, 1991:149).

The problems experienced by learners from the disadvantaged communities are in this regard even greater for they lack the exposure and support generally given by parents in a literate society. Therefore the means of preventing the difficulties and the existence of special needs of disadvantaged children will need to be addressed.

3.6.2.3 Differences between home and school mediation

At home children are active learners, constructing their knowledge of language from their experience of the language in use. As they learn their native language, they also use language to learn other things. There is no curriculum, of course. Most of the learning that occurs, happens spontaneously,

as problems arise in everyday activities and are resolved, often with the help of an adult, who serves as an additional resource of skill and knowledge. Then, at about the age of 6 years, children go to school, making a transition to a social environment which is very different from home. Two factors are particularly responsible for the difference: firstly, the large number of children assigned to the care of a single adult, and secondly, the curriculum aims that provide the framework for most of the activities that take place. Some 'culture shock' is inevitable, but, ideally, one would hope to see every effort made to ease the transition. Opportunities for interaction with an adult will of necessity be reduced but, when they do occur, one would hope that, with the benefit of professional training, teachers will ensure that these opportunities are as enabling as those that occur at home. Indeed, some educational theorists have claimed that, by comparison with many (particularly lower class) homes, schools should provide a much richer language environment, which can provide compensation for earlier linguistic deprivation.

However, Wood (1980) presents a systematic comparison of the language experiences of some six-year olds as they make the transition from home to school. It was established that, compared with homes, schools provide a significantly reduced opportunity for children to learn through talk with an adult. In those conversations that do occur, children also find themselves forced into the respondent role, their contributions for the most part only being valued if they contribute to the teacher's predetermined line of thought. The result is that they make less use of their linguistic resources than they do at home and have less opportunity to extend those they already possess. Compared with their experience at home, children at school play a much less active role in conversations. The same could

also be said for their experience with literacy. These results must make us question some of the claims that schools provide a linguistically richer environment able to provide compensation for children believed to be linguistically deprived at home (Wells, 1986:25).

Chapter 4 will deal with the issues of accelerating the literacy acquisition of the disadvantaged child and in preventing the occurrence of special educational needs.

3.7 SUMMARY

“Humans are creatures of the brain, but not solely so”(Gardner, 1991:38). Unlike all other organisms, we participate in a rich culture, one that has had its own evolution over many thousands of years. Indeed we have no choice; we are as much creatures of our culture as we are of our brains. From the moment of birth a child enters into a world that is rich in interpretations of meaning, all introduced by courtesy of the assumptions of the culture in which he happens to be born. The other humans in the world introduce him to physical satisfactions - warmth, food, and to psychological nutrients - love, conversation, humour and surprise. They expose him to language and demonstrate its uses. They present him with the artefacts valued by the culture, be it the technology like pens or computers, toys like rattles or dolls, art works like stories or songs, etc. Therefore much of the story of human development must be written in the light of cultural influences in general and the particular persons, practices, and paraphernalia of one's culture.

The culture in which a child is brought up also has important implications for the development of his cognitive structure and for the development of literacy competency. Childhood in a literate society implies that the child encounters many literacy-related activities, but the child who is brought up in a culture that does not emphasise the importance of literacy acquisition will find the formal school system demanding and alien.

It is therefore our task to equip disadvantaged learners with some literacy knowledge before they enter formal school. It is therefore also important to know how reading and literacy skills are acquired and how they can be presented to pre-schoolers to enhance confidence and promote academic success. These issues will be discussed in chapter 4.

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 PROGRAMMES 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 enrollees. 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.

CHAPTER 5

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH, DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS AND A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERVENTION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Within the context of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training's work (1997), it is now clear that 'special needs' in education refers to the needs or priorities which the individual person or the system may have, which must be addressed in order to enable the system to respond to differences in learner population, remove barriers to learning, and to promote effective learning for all learners.

In Chapter 2 of this research report the history and definition of the terms 'special educational needs' and 'barriers to learning' as well as their relevance in the South African context were discussed. This discussion forms a basis for acknowledging that the 'special educational need' situation in South Africa differs from that which was traditionally believed to be special educational needs, and is often extrinsically generated by aspects such as poverty, disadvantage and educational deprivation. In Chapter 3 the diverse culture in which the learner is situated, and which has an influence on the existence of special needs, is described. The chapter also emphasises the importance of literacy efficiency and mediated learning at early ages (refer par. 3.2 and 3.3). The NCSNET Public Discussion Document (1997) in this regard also confirmed that 'special needs' often arise as a result of barriers in the way the curriculum has been

presented, and it has therefore been agreed that, instead of referring to ‘learners with special needs’, we should refer to learners who experience barriers to learning. The lack of exposure to literacy and ineffective early educational practices have established themselves as important factors which cause barriers to learning, and it is the task of the educators and governing bodies to remove these barriers that continue to cause school failure for a majority of disadvantaged learners in the South African community.

In Chapter 4 of this research report it was mentioned that the focus should be on the development of literacy adequacy, with specific attention to the development of skills that will enhance reading acquisition for the young child. Early literacy practices were also documented that can aid the process of establishing effective early literacy programmes in the disadvantaged South African context.

In this chapter an attempt will be made to address the variables described in the preceding chapters, by means of an empirical investigation of a South African community that is characterised by factors related to disadvantage and educational deprivation, as described in chapters two and three. Insights gained from the study of different perspectives on literacy acquisition (refer par 4.3 and 4.4), as well as the study of different intervention programmes (refer par. 4.5), will serve as guidelines for the implementation of an early literacy programme for disadvantaged pre-schoolers in a South African community. The researcher will then attempt to describe the effect of an early literacy programme on the cognitive and literacy development of these disadvantaged pre-schoolers.

A conceptual framework will consequently serve as a means of combining the different aspects - disadvantaged learners, emergent literacy skills and teaching practices - in order to formulate guidelines for preventing the special educational needs resulting from disadvantage and educational deprivation.

5.2 THE RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

5.2.1 The research setting

The research was conducted in a community that meets the criteria for a disadvantaged and illiterate culture as described in chapter 3. Consequently a brief description of the actual setting:

Eersterust is situated in the east of Pretoria between Mamelodi and Silverton. It was declared a Coloured area in 1958, according to the Group Areas Act. The total size of the area is 590 hectares, and it has a population of approximately 55 000 people. There are, however, many people unaccounted for, as they occupy back rooms and informal dwellings on the plots of houses.

The houses mostly consist of four rooms that are shared by two families. There are many children living in Eersterust. Many adults are illiterate and there is an extremely high rate of unemployment and alcohol abuse that results in it being a poverty-stricken community. There are, however, areas where a higher standard of living is upheld.

In the low-income areas, such as Nantes, where this research was launched, the inhabitants receive food parcels from organisations like churches, child-welfare and other non-governmental organisations. Children also receive food from a feeding scheme at the school, and there are second-hand shops available at the Child and Family Care Society that sell clothes at a low cost.

There are six schools in Eersterust as well as many creches and day-care centres. Most pre-primary schools in Eersterust seem well-equipped. Children whose parents are, however, unable to pay for pre-schooling, spend their time roaming the streets during the day.

The mother-tongue language in Eersterust is Afrikaans. Although some parents prefer to send their children to English-medium creches and primary schools, the closest school to Nantes is an Afrikaans medium school. According to an informal survey done by the Education Aid Centre at this primary school in 1999, 45% of children aged between ten and thirteen cannot yet read or write. These findings are consistent with an article in *Beeld*, 8 October 1999, where it was mentioned that 60% of grade three learners are unable to count or read. This incidence is blamed on the fact that children come to school with no informal literacy experience, no parental involvement and no scholastic and homework support after school. It was therefore decided that this setting fits the criteria for contextual disadvantage and special educational needs as described in the previous chapters and could therefore be effectively used to determine whether any significant results could be obtained through intervention.

The research was launched in the beginning of the school year by means of visiting most of the pre-school institutions that were operational in Eersterust. According to the information gained

during these visits it was decided that the Nantes area was considered to be the most appropriate setting for the research, due to the low socio-economic status of the inhabitants. The area was also considered to be an appropriate location for the research as it contained a **child-welfare centre** called Mesada that could be used as a location for the research. At this centre a private **nursery school** is also run. The learners in the nursery school were used as the control group due to the fact that daily attendance would enable the researcher to conduct the pre- and post-testing with reasonable chance of finding the participants. Full co-operation was given by the principal and personnel of the school as well as by the personnel of the welfare centre, who welcomed any form of intervention or research in the community. The personnel of the welfare centre also allowed the researcher to make use of the facilities that were a convenient, although not perfect, setting in which the intervention could take place. The intervention therefore mostly took place in the large community hall that is equipped with two large tables and many chairs that could be used by the participants. Sometimes the hall was used for other purposes and another location was then made available.

5.2.2 Selection of participants

It was decided that the most appropriate participants will have to include those 5-6 year-old pre-schoolers who have so far had no formal pre-school experience, as these children will most likely be the ones belonging to unemployed parents who are unable to afford the cost of pre-school centres. All the learners in the nursery school that met the age criteria formed part of the control group.

The participants of the experimental group were obtained in an informal manner. Street canvassing in the Nantes area was used to invite children to take part in the programme. These children had to live near the welfare centre to make it possible for them to attend. A few adults were also asked to help locate and involve pre-schoolers who did not form part of any formal pre-school activities.

Because of the informal nature of obtaining participants, no specific number of participants could be anticipated beforehand. Some participants also terminated their involvement in the programme before it was completed and attendance was very irregular due to various individual reasons.

All in all a total number of 29 children formed part of the research, 14 of which were obtained in this informal street canvassing manner and who all formed part of the experimental group, and 15 children who formed part of the control group and were enlisted and attended the pre-school on a daily basis.

5.2.3 Aim of the research

The research was aimed at establishing whether emergent literacy skills could be accelerated in these pre-schoolers despite the obvious existence of barriers to learning – that is severe socio-economic disadvantage, and lack of early intervening services. These children's general exposure to sources of stimuli, such as literacy related materials, and mediated learning

experiences ranged below that of their peer group who had attended a formal pre-school since an early age.

The following aspects, that underlay the research, had important bearing on the results that were obtained, and also formed part of the qualitative and quantitative results, were addressed in the outcome of the research, as described in paragraphs 5.3 and 5.5:

- The availability, interest and consistency of the disadvantaged community to participate in an informal literacy development programme. Aspects such as the regularity of attendance, motivation and interest of parents, as well as that of the learners were also among the aspects that were observed.
- The socio-economic status of the community and the disadvantaged children's level of 'school readiness' or mental ages before and after the programme.
- The children's level of informal literacy knowledge before and after the programme.
- To investigate whether it was indeed possible to accelerate the disadvantaged learner's emergent literacy skills and 'reading ability' before entry into the formal school, even though the learner lagged behind in other aspects that related to school readiness.

- To establish whether mental age and socio-economic status are indications of the disadvantaged learner's ability to acquire emergent literacy skills at pre-school age.
- The effect of an informal literacy programme exclusively on the mental age of a disadvantaged child, compared to the effect of the normal pre-school curriculum of the control group on their mental ages.

The effects of the programme or non-involvement in the programme were based on the results that were obtained on the standardised and non-standardised media that were implemented. Although the individual circumstances of the participants, such as attendance regularity, home circumstances, attention span, influence from other learners, and parental motivation are acknowledged and were observed during the intervention, these factors were not considered during this research (refer par. 5.2.4.2).

The measuring instruments that were used for the research will be described shortly:

5.2.4 Measuring instruments

5.2.4.1 **Socio-Economic Deprivation (SED) Questionnaire, HSRC (1991)**

The aim of the SED Questionnaire is to determine a learner's index of socio-economic status, thus, the level of disadvantage, and this questionnaire is mainly used when the psychometric test results of a learner are interpreted. The questionnaire is completed by the test administrator who

consults the learner's teacher, or by means of indirect questioning of the learner and/or his parents, or by observation of the learner and his /her home environment.

If it is necessary to gather information for the SED Questionnaire from the learner's parents, it is explained to them that the data are gathered to ensure that the influence of socio-economic factors is considered when interpreting the results. All questions are answered, even if a calculated guess has to be made, although this last-mentioned strategy is only used in exceptional cases.

The scores obtained by this instrument range from 0 to 10. A score of 0 would indicate that no socio-economic deprivation is apparent, while a score of 10 or more would indicate severe socio-economic deprivation.

The questionnaire was implemented in Afrikaans. An English and Afrikaans version of the questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix A and B.

5.2.4.2 Group Test for Five- and Six-year olds, HSRC (1961)

“At the request of the education departments, The National Bureau of Educational and Social Research started research some years ago with a view to providing the necessary tests for measuring ‘ school readiness’... The concept ‘ school readiness’ is in itself a difficult one, but after a thorough study of the literature, the conclusion was reached that mental aptitude and the level of its development were the main determining factors of

progress at school and for this reason research in connection with the preparation of a test for its measurement was given priority” (HSRC, 1989:1).

The aim of this test was to determine the mental aptitude of the child and the level of development that is described by the term **mental age**. This aspect is traditionally regarded as the main determining factor of progress at school.

The Group Tests for Five and Six-year-olds and for Seven and Eight-year-olds were standardised for Afrikaans and English speaking children. The Afrikaans and English tests are identical. Provision was made for two ranges, namely one test for five-and-six year olds and another for seven-and-eight year olds.

Regarding the use of the test: *“it is the popular conception that an intelligence test gives an indication of a person’s ‘cleverness’ or ‘stupidity’. It must however be pointed out that every test has its limitations and that no test can tell us everything about a person. A test gives only a rough indication of the general level of a person’s intelligence, which is not the only factor that determines behaviour or success in any given sphere. The value of the test will be determined by the user who must interpret results in terms of other information concerning the testee such as his interests, personality tendencies, specific aptitudes, environmental influence etc. If used correctly, the test can be a useful instrument in rendering valuable information which cannot be obtained easily by other means with the same degree of objectivity, reliability and economy.” (HSRC, 1989:35)*

For the eventual calculation of norms a stratified random sample of approximately 4000 testees was drawn proportionately from the schools of the four provincial education departments. The object was to obtain a representative random sample of the total school population between the ages of 5 and 8 years in provincial lower and junior schools.

In 1991 the HSRC undertook a project with the aim of developing this group intelligence test for 7/8 year olds which would be more suitable for children of all the major language groups in South Africa. As a spin-off from the larger project norms could be determined for the Group Test for 7/8 year olds for all Afrikaans and English speaking learners, as well as for non-environmentally disadvantaged Afrikaans and English speaking learners. Due to the development of the Aptitude Test for School Beginners, the norms for the Five-to-Six year age group were not adapted. This was regarded as a limitation to the study due to the fact that no other group-test existed that could give an indication of the child's mental age or 'school-readiness'. The limitation lies in the fact that the test that was being used had already been developed in 1960 and did not provide different norms for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners. On examination of the test by the researcher, together with the teacher responsible for the pre-school that the control group attended, it was noted that only one item could be regarded as "culturally" alien to the testees (namely: What do you use when you go camping ? - a tent) but it did not influence the test results as it only formed part of the practice examples.

The purpose of the pre-test was therefore to obtain a general level of the testee's cognitive functioning that could be compared to the level of cognitive functioning at the time of the post-

testing. The Group Test for Five and Six-year-olds was considered the most appropriate measuring instrument for this purpose.

The following principles were followed during the interpretation of the test results:

- The test results were used with extreme care and only in conjunction with all other available information. The behaviour of the testees, their inability to comprehend certain tasks, their receptability to be influenced by other testees, et cetera, were also taken into account during interpretation (refer par. 5.2.3). No decisions or interpretations of far-reaching consequence were therefore to be drawn from this test alone.
- None of the tests or test results was made available to any other person other than the researcher and psychometrist, due to the fact that uninformed persons could easily misinterpret the results.
- The practical value of the test was to derive a basic impression regarding the mental age and mental development of the test population and a general idea regarding their behaviour in a formal learning setting.

The following sub-tests are included in the instrument:

- Subtest 1 : **Comparison.** A figure that is similar to the one given first, must be indicated. (13 items)
- Subtest 2 : **Mazes.** (10 items)
- Subtest 3 : **Verbal comprehension.** A drawing that corresponds with a verbal

description must be indicated. (6 items)

Subtest 4 : **Figure classification.** The figure that does not fit in with the others must be indicated. (5 items)

Subtest 5 : **Number comprehension.** Elementary number comprehension is tested on the basis of drawings. (6 items)

Subtest 6 : **Pattern completion.** A pattern must be copied by linking dots.

Each test consists of six sub-tests and the maximum raw score that can be attained is 50.

The standardised test makes provision for the conversion of raw scores to more significant scores. From the tables provided, raw scores can be converted to IQ's and mental ages. For the purpose of this research only the mental ages of the testees were documented due to the fact that the precise dates of birth of all the participants could not be obtained with accuracy. The mental age of the individual was determined and could then be compared with the average score of the particular group and results obtained by pre- and post-testing could also be compared. In this way it could be determined whether the child compared favourably, unfavourably or normally with his age group.

5.2.4.3 Informal Reading and Writing Readiness Checklist

The informal reading and writing readiness checklist is a non-standardised questionnaire that was set up for use at The University of Pretoria and gives an indication of a learner's level of emergent literacy skills in a qualitative manner. The researcher modified the checklist somewhat

by means of allocating points to the different categories, so that a quantitative score of emergent literacy could be deducted. The results of this test give an indication of the children's knowledge regarding print and print-related activities before and after the intervention.

The questionnaire consists of eight sections that relate to emergent literacy skills (refer par. 1.8.2), which are:

- A. Recognition of **three-dimensional objects** in two-dimensional forms (5 marks)
- B. Awareness of **books** and how they are used (4 marks)
- C. Awareness of **print-vocabulary** (12 marks)
- D. Awareness and application of **phonemes** (10 marks)
- E. **Lexical** awareness (5 marks)
- F. Awareness of **syntax** (3 marks)
- G. Motivation, **interest** and attitude to literacy (4 marks)
- H. **Writing** skills (7 marks)

The questionnaire was conducted by the researcher with each child individually to establish his or her informal literacy awareness before and after the programme was conducted. A raw score out of 50 could be obtained and was, for the purpose of the research, converted to percentages.

The general application of the above mentioned instruments involved the pre- and post-testing of the experimental and control groups and a comparison of the scores obtained, which enabled the researcher to draw conclusions.

5.2.5 Gathering of information

The research was launched at the beginning of the year. The initial involvement of the researcher consisted of the assessment-procedures. The Group Test for Five-and Six-year olds was conducted first. This test was administered by the researcher in groups of five learners per group. A nursery school classroom was used for this purpose. It took two days to complete this assessment, after which the Informal Literacy Questionnaire was conducted with each participant individually. Information that was needed for the SED Questionnaire was obtained by means of interviewing the parents of the learners who formed part of the experimental group, and by interviewing the teachers or principal of the learners who formed part of the control group.

The Group Test for Five-and Six-Year olds, as well as the Informal Literacy Questionnaire was again conducted after the intervention had taken place. The time frame between the pre- and the post-testing was seven months.

The implementation and scoring of the standardised instrument (Group Test for Five- and Six-Year Olds) were done by the researcher according to the guidelines in the manual and the results were verified by a registered psychometrist. The assessment procedure also served as a means for the researcher to get to know the participants, to establish the size of the group who would have to be managed during intervention and in order to prevent distractions and/or different instructions being given to the testees. The specific test that was used is not widely known by

many psychometrists and was intensively studied by the researcher. The results of the testing will be described shortly:

5.3 INFORMATION GAINED FROM THE ASSESSMENTS

5.3.1 Socio-economic status

Because chronological age is not the only criterion for school readiness, as mentioned by Osborne and Milbank (1987:93), it is important to establish the socio-economic status of the learner when intervention is to take place. This is because differences in home and family background can profoundly affect the rate of cognitive development, so that by a given age a child from a socially advantaged home is more able to benefit from education than his socially disadvantaged peers. For this reason it is important to gain insight into the socio-economic status of the participants in the research. A brief description regarding the socio-economic status of the participants in this research will therefore be given shortly:

Of the experimental group, consisting of 14 testees, 42,86% (6) of the testees obtained a SED score of 10 or more, indicating severe socio-economic deprivation. Two or 14,29 % of the testees obtained a score of 9; another two testees (14,29%) scored 8; one testee (7,14%) scored 7; another one testee (7,14%) scored 4, while another two testees (14,29%) obtained an SED score of 3 which still indicates the existence of socio-economic deprivation. The experimental group obtained a mean score of 8 on the SED Questionnaire.

The status of Socio-Economic Deprivation of the experimental group is illustrated in Figure 1:

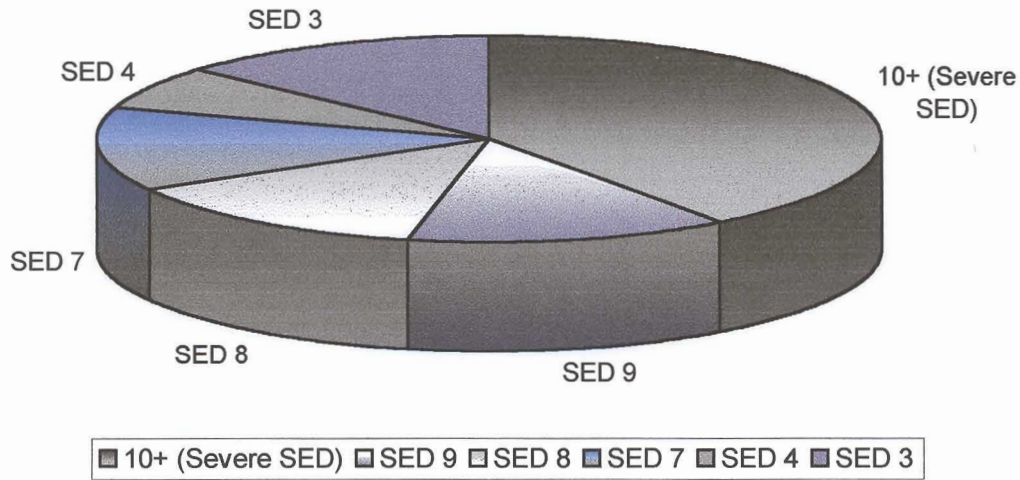


FIGURE 1: The status of socio-economic deprivation of the experimental group

What is relevant to the learners' exposure to literacy related activities, as was established in question three is the fact that only 50% (7) of the learners who formed part of the experimental group had a parent or parents that had completed standard six. Although 92,8% (13) of these participants' parents indicated a positive attitude towards scholastic education, none of the parents of the experimental group indicated that they owned any hardcover books and 85,7% (12) mentioned that no magazines or newspapers were ever read in the household. It is therefore clear that a majority of the adults in this community can be regarded as illiterate, and that early childhood development practices do not form part of their daily lives.

Of the control group only 6,67% or one of the testees obtained a SED score of 10, while another 6,67% (1) scored 5, another 6,67% (1) scored 4, another one (6,67%) scored 3, while 13,33 % or two testees scored 2, and 20% or three testees scored 1 while 40% or six of the testees obtained a SED score of 0, indicating that the majority of learners in the control group could not be regarded as socio-economically disadvantaged. The control group scored a mean of 2 on the Socio-Economic Deprivation Questionnaire.

A graphic representation of the Socio-Economic Status of the Control Group can be viewed in Figure 2:

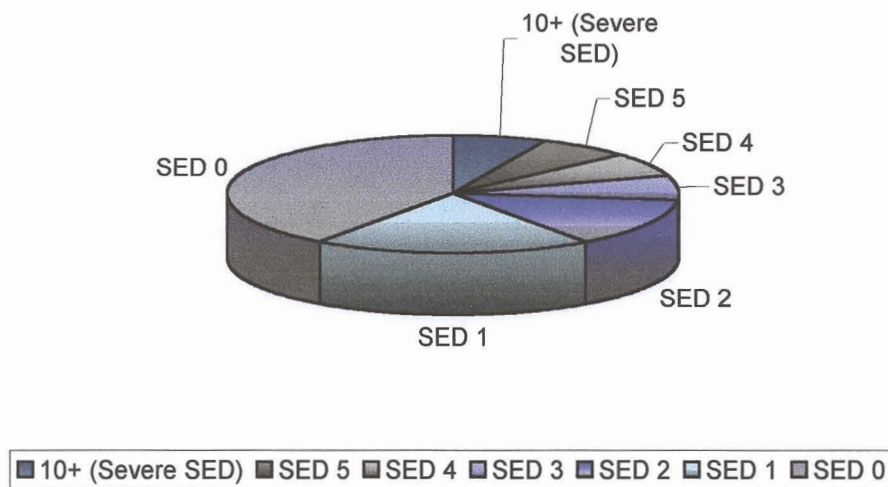


FIGURE 2: The status of socio-economic deprivation of the control group

Of the control group, only 1 (6,25%) of the parents did not have a standard six certificate. 43,8% (7) indicated that they did not have hardcover books in the household, but 87,5% (14) indicated that newspapers or magazines were being read in the household on a regular basis. All the

parents of learners in the control group indicated a positive attitude towards scholastic education, as was also confirmed by the fact that their children attended a pre-school on a regular basis.

Figure 3 gives a comparative illustration regarding literacy-related aspects of the Socio-Economic Deprivation Questionnaire as was mentioned in par. 5.3.1:

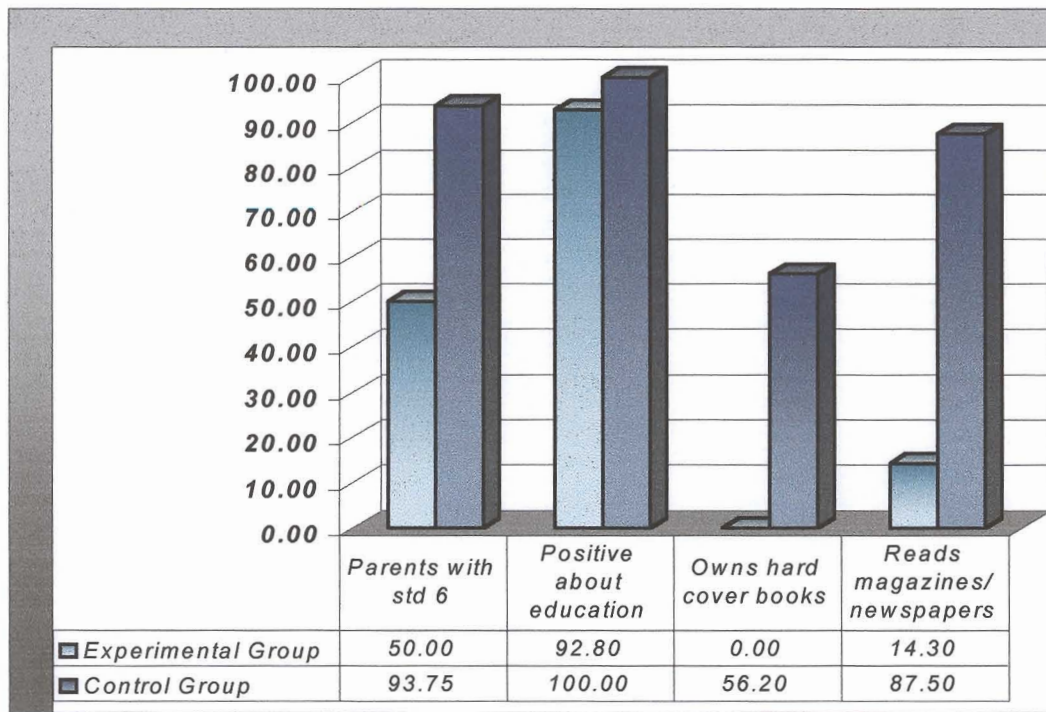


FIGURE 3: A comparative illustration regarding literacy-related aspects of the Socio-Economic Deprivation Questionnaire

5.3.2 Mental ages

The experimental group obtained a mean mental age of 5 years 0 months on the Group Test for 5-and 6-year olds, while the control group scored a mean mental age of 5 years 4 months.

Although the test was administered in a controlled environment, certain normal child behaviour such as the shouting of answers, copying and guessing could not be prevented. It is therefore important to regard the results obtained on this instrument with caution. It is however also important to note that because of these factors the results obtained may only indicate higher scores, meaning that the real mental ages could be even lower.

During the administering of this instrument it was apparent that the learners in the experimental group lacked basic knowledge of more formal scholastic conventions such as listening skills, disciplined behaviour, et cetera.

5.3.3 Informal literacy knowledge

On the Informal Literacy Questionnaire the experimental group scored a mean of 9 points (18%) out of a maximum of 50. The control group achieved a mean of 14 points (28%) on the Informal Literacy Questionnaire.

An item-analysis revealed that the experimental group, consisting of 14 participants, were able to identify three-dimensional objects that were presented two-dimensionally with reasonable ease, but indicated a complete lack of knowledge regarding the other aspects of literacy, for example

only 7 participants (50% of the testees) indicated that they knew how to open a book; none of them knew that a story was told by the words; they had no knowledge of the print or phonemes; they did not know what the alphabet was; and 4 participants (28,6%) indicated that they did not like stories, while the other 10 participants (71,4%) indicated a positive concept of stories. 9 participants (64,2% of the experimental group) indicated that no one has ever read them a story. None of the participants of the experimental group were able to write their names or any part thereof.

The control group consisting of 15 participants were also able to identify pictures of three-dimensional objects, 7 of them (46,6% of the testees) indicated that they knew how to open a book, 3 participants (20% of them) knew that a story was told by the words; 4 of the testees (26,6%) also indicated knowledge of letter symbols; 1 participant (6,6%) could recite the whole alphabet, while 3 (20%) of them were able to recite a part thereof. Four of these participants (26,6%) indicated some knowledge of words, sounds and sentences, while 9 participants (60%) indicated that they liked stories and would like to learn to read. Twelve participants (80%) of this group also indicated that stories were read to them on a regular basis. The control group also indicated somewhat better writing skills such as writing letters, 4 participants (26,6%) could write between 1 and 4 letters, and another 4 participants (26,6%) were able to write more than 4 letters. Two participants (13,3%) could write their names completely while 6 participants (40%) could write their names to some extent. One participant (6,6 %) was able to indicate the capital letter in his name.

Figure 4 gives an illustration of the pre-test scores obtained by the experimental and control groups on the eight aspects measured by the Informal Literacy Questionnaire:

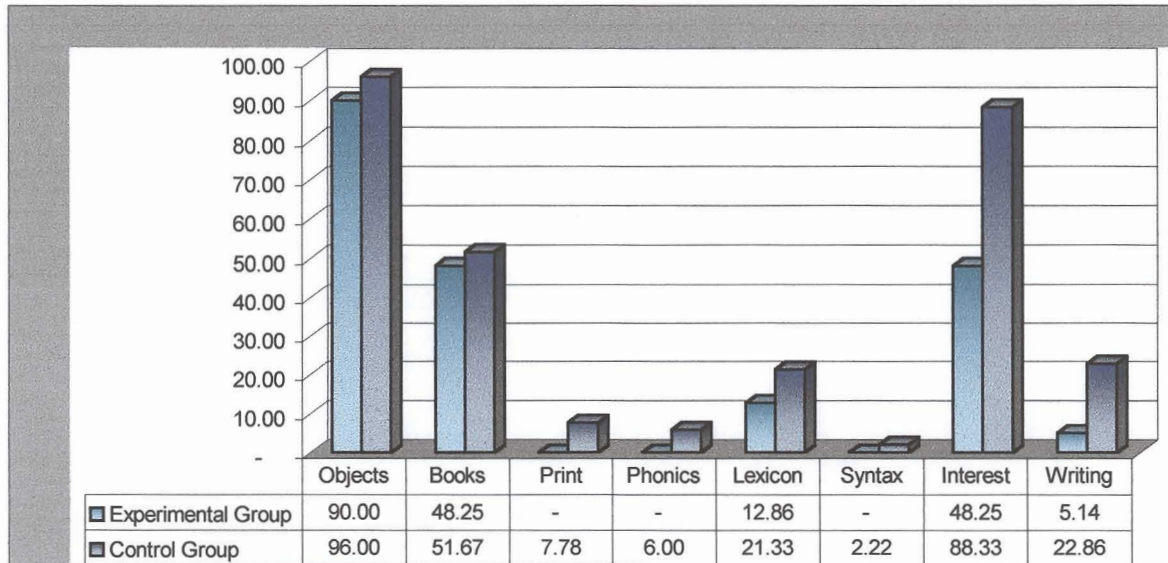


FIGURE 4: Pre-test scores obtained by the experimental and control groups on the eight aspects measured by the Informal Literacy Questionnaire

When the two groups were compared, it was apparent that the experimental group who indicated severe socio-economic disadvantage, also lagged behind their peers regarding mental age as well as informal literacy knowledge, even though the emergent literacy knowledge of the control group also seemed to be lacking. This is due to the disadvantaged nature of the area in which the research was conducted. It is therefore likely for backlogs to appear, especially for the learners who formed part of the experimental group, when formal schooling starts.

The above mentioned data regarding the participants aided in the planning of the intervention that followed shortly after the assessments.

5.4 DESCRIPTION OF INTERVENTION

5.4.1 Materials used and types of text

A small selection of materials was used during this intervention programme. A graphical version of the **alphabet** was initially introduced and applied to the wall of the premises that were mostly used for the intervention. Every learner was issued with five ‘ **Letterland** ’ **booklets** containing the different **phonics** and **letters** of the alphabet, accompanied by writing, reading, and colouring exercises.

Each learner was also supplied with a **scrapbook** for the means of written exercises, pasting of letters and pictures, writing of words or letter symbols, et cetera. **Plastic letter symbols** were also available.

Newspapers, magazines, and a large variety of **storybooks** formed part of the available materials as well as **scissors, pencils, crayons** and **glue**. The specific texts that were chosen were such that they enabled the learners to read successfully with practice. This meant that they were easy to understand and included many repetitive phrases. Examples of these texts included among others “The Gingerbreadman” and “Three little pigs”. These stories were completely new to the participants in the programme.

5.4.2 Duration of intervention

Although it was initially anticipated that the programme would be completed within four months, many factors influenced the duration of the intervention, for example weather conditions, school holidays and personal circumstances of the participants and their families.

The intervention was, however, completed in forty sessions, which ranged between March and September, and excluded the assessment periods. The duration of each session was half an hour to one hour long, but never longer than an hour. These intervention sessions were conducted three times a week for the first month and twice weekly thereafter. Twelve sessions were conducted in the month of March, four sessions in April, eight sessions in May, eight sessions in June, and eight sessions in August.

It was apparent that more regular sessions were needed in the beginning of intervention since the concepts were still very new to the learners. The new concepts could be better reinforced with attendance three times a week. After the first 12 sessions it became apparent that the learners were well-aware of what was expected of them and only two sessions were necessary to master a new concept. One session per week was therefore used for the introduction of a new letter or concept, while the other session was used for reinforcement and skill practice.

Re-evaluation was again conducted in September and October, in order to establish whether any significant changes regarding the mental ages and the emergent literacy skills had occurred due to the intervention that had taken place.

5.4.3 Lesson content

The **alphabet** was read to and with the learners on a daily basis. Because much focus was placed on reading as an enjoyable activity a new **story** was read to the learners almost every week, although they often preferred to hear a story that had been read to them previously. Each week a new **phonic** or letter-name was introduced by means of an association with a suitable picture and story. **Word exercises**, where the learners were expected to identify the letter-names in words, were also implemented daily. The learners were sometimes expected to circle the appropriate letter in a word and sometimes to cut out the words in which the letters appeared from newspapers or magazines. **Writing skills** were practised in their scrap-books by means of pasting on an over-sized drawing of the relevant letter and copying the letter, and later on the words that contained the letter, on the opposite page. The learners were encouraged to join in the reading, where specific attention was given to letters and words, as well as to phonemic awareness, so the children could develop a conscious understanding of the fact that spoken words are composed of identifiable sounds. Instruction in blending sounds into words, and working with word patterns (for example bed, met, hen) was also provided.

5.4.4 Instructional activities

The instructional activities were based on Vygotsky's proposal of four developmental steps as described for to instructing literacy concepts. As described in par. 4.4.1. these four steps weave together language, literacy and play activities through mediation by the researcher /teacher. An

important aspect regarding instructional practice is to support and guide learners through the changing levels of competency toward new learning and literacy development.

The first step was natural involvement, in which the researcher provided opportunities for the learners to explore literacy activities and events. Learning tasks that are embedded in everyday activities were part of this step – this is situated learning. A realistic task that was meaningful to learners enabled the researcher to observe how the learners explored, what they were interested in and how proficient they were naturally. For the purpose of this research the children were involved in hearing the alphabet daily and connecting it with the beginning letters of their own names, as well as the names of their classmates or parents, and that of objects known to them, for example Coca-Cola, Simba, Kellogg's, Butterfield, etcetera. They were also introduced to story-reading as part of their exposure to the advantages of literacy efficiency.

The second step was mediated learning, in which there was support or assistance by the researcher. The researcher guided the learner's participation in new activities. A learning environment in which learners could try out their skills under tutelage was established. The learners were helped to become self-directed learners by using the instructional approaches of modelling and coaching. As new procedures were introduced, the researcher modelled the process to be learned and then coached the learners as they tried out the techniques. During this research the researcher for example read the story while the learners followed, sometimes stopping on a short word of which the letters were known, and sounding it out according to letter-name correspondence, and then blending the sounds into a word. Triangulation was

difficult to achieve, since most of the learners were living with relatives, many of whom were unable to assist them in the learning process.

The third step involved an external activity, or child-directed learning and practice with the aid of props and occasional coaching by the researcher. The learners were, for example, given the opportunity to build their own words with plastic letters and then attempted to read them. They were also given the opportunity to try sounding out words by themselves. As children practised and realised how to use varying strategies, they gained self-confidence and independent control of concepts, and the researcher could then arrange varied opportunities for working independently and in collaboration with peers. The learners were also encouraged to build words and could attempt to read each other's words and classify the words as sensible or non-sensible. They were also given the opportunity to explore with word-writing in the same manner.

The fourth step, internal or independent activity, occurred when the learners could link learned concepts to other related concepts, test out general principles, and operate without the help of the researcher, and so begin to have an internalised process of thinking, reasoning and solving problems. Eventually learners were enabled to carry out tasks unaided and to achieve a general understanding of procedures and underlying concepts to a varying degree. In this research the learners spontaneously started sounding out letters and blending them into words, or they were taking the initiative of reading stories by themselves. Once again triangulation was difficult to establish, since very little parental support could be given.

Although these steps are mentioned as separate activities, they were actually implemented on a continuous, daily basis, and occurred simultaneously, depending on the specific need and developmental level of each individual learner, as was apparent to the researcher during the intervention.

5.5 INFORMATION GAINED FROM POST-TESTING

5.5.1 Mental ages

On the Group Test for 5-and 6-year olds, both the experimental and the control groups showed improvement on all six items of this test. The experimental group obtained a mean mental age of 5 years 9 months, indicating improvement of 9 months between the pre- and post-testing, while the control group scored a mean mental age of 6 years 0 months, indicating improvement of 8 months between the pre- and post-testing.

The experimental group had received no formal schooling or exposure to the skills (mostly perceptual) tested by this test during the period of intervention. Improvement of mental ages can therefore be ascribed to normal maturation that took place during the intervention period as well as to improvement of general test behaviour regarding more disciplined behaviour and an increased ability to follow of instructions.

5.5.2 Informal literacy knowledge

On the Informal Literacy Questionnaire the experimental group scored a mean of 35 points (70%) out of a maximum of 50. The control group achieved a mean of 18 points (36%) on the Informal Literacy Questionnaire. Some of the participants dropped out during the period of intervention, while some were away for a long period of time. At the time of the post-testing 12 participants of the experimental group remained, while 11 of the control group had remained.

The experimental group indicated significant improvement on the Informal Literacy Questionnaire. Ninety one percent of the participants were able to indicate how a book should be read. Ten of the participants (83%) knew that the story was told by the words, while 16% (2) still indicated that the story was told by the pictures. Significant improvement was also observed on print-related activities. The participants of the experimental group indicated a clear knowledge of where a story starts, 16% (2) were able to indicate a word and read it, while 66% (8) of the testees were able to read a word indicated to them by the researcher. Although only 8 % (1) of the participants were able to identify and read a sentence, 41% (5) of the participants were able to read a sentence that was indicated to them by the researcher. Six of the participants (50%) were able to read more than 10 letters, while 41% (5) were able to read between one and ten letters. Only one participant of the experimental group was not able to identify any letters. Sixteen percent (2) of the participants were able to recite the full alphabet, while 25% (3) were able to recite more than 10 letters, and 50% (6) could recite between 1 and 10 letters of the alphabet. Only one participant (8%) did not demonstrate any knowledge of the alphabet.

There was also a significant improvement in the participants' abilities to apply their phonemic knowledge – for example 100% (12) of the participants were able to identify the first letter of a word, 58% (7) were able to replace phonemes, and 58% (7) could identify rhyming patterns. Only 33% (4) were, however, able to identify the middle sound of the word “cook”. Although the participants (100%) were all able to distinguish between words- and non-words, 10 of the participants (83%) did not improve in their ability to use words, for example to form two words from the word “storybook”, and they were also not able to identify whether the word “train” or “locomotive” was the longest. Eight of the participants (66%) were able to read words from a list, while 25% (3) were able to identify and read more than ten words from a book. Only 8% (1) of the participants were unable to read any words. Syntax awareness of the group improved by 50%, but the learners were not able to indicate when a capital letter should be used, and did not indicate knowledge regarding punctuation. All the participants indicated a strong preference for reading-activities, 83% (10) indicated that they wanted to learn to read, and 66% (8) indicated that stories are read to them at times. There was a significant improvement in the participants' ability to write: 83% (10) were able to write more than 10 letters; 50% (6) were able to write out their names in full; 75% (9) could identify the capital letter in their names, and 25% (3) were able to write more than 10 words, while 50% (6) were able to write between one and ten words correctly.

At the time of the post-test four of the participants of the control group had left and eleven of the participants had remained. Slight improvement regarding informal literacy knowledge was apparent at the time of the post-testing, but this could possibly be ascribed to some stimulation they had received at their homes. The control group performed somewhat better on most items of

the Informal Literacy Questionnaire. The best improvement was found on the items that indicated their knowledge of numbers and their abilities to write their names.

Figure 5 gives an indication of the results obtained in the different categories of the Informal Literacy Questionnaire when the pre- and post-testing scores of the experimental group were compared.

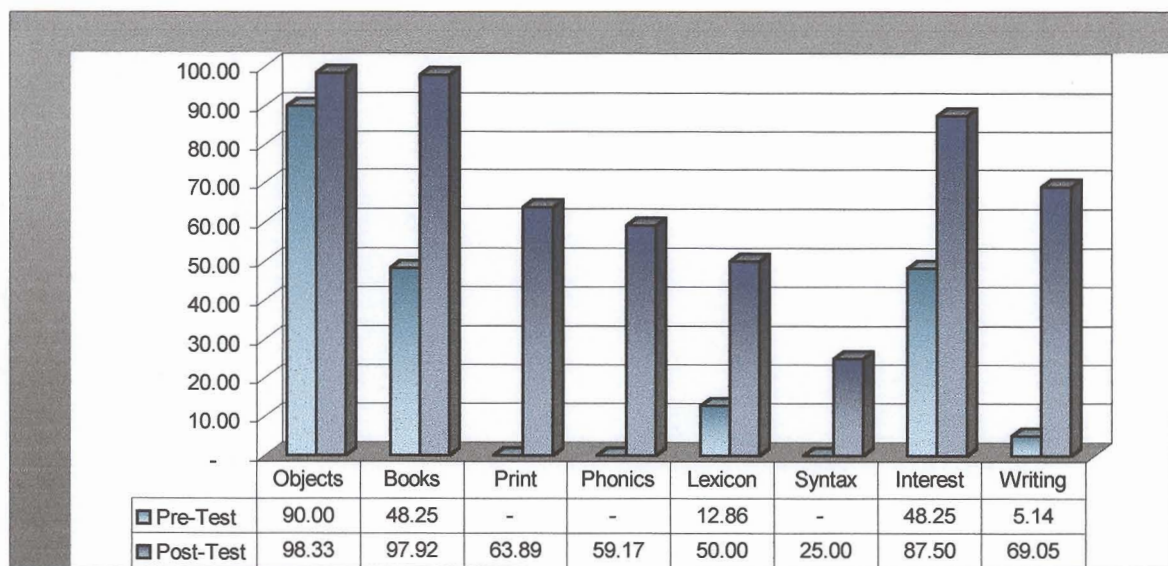


FIGURE 5: Illustration of the pre-and post-testing scores as obtained by the experimental group on the Informal Literacy Questionnaire

Regarding a comparison between the informal literacy knowledge of the experimental and the control groups, a considerable improvement on the part of the experimental group was significant. The control group only performed better than the experimental group with regards to their knowledge of numbers, their ability to identify which word was the longest of “train” and

“locomotive”, their abilities to write their names, and in the regularity that stories were read to them. Six (54%) of the learners who formed part of the control group were able to indicate that a story was told by the words, 36% (4) could identify more than six letters, 27 % (3) were able to recite the whole alphabet and 36% (4) were able to identify the beginning sound of a word. Fifty four percent (6) of the participants were able to write their names correctly, and 63% (7) were able to indicate the capital letter in their names. Four (36%) were able to identify more than 6 letters, but none of the control group were able to arrange a sentence correctly.

A graphic representation of the differences between the experimental and control groups appears as in Figure 6 below:

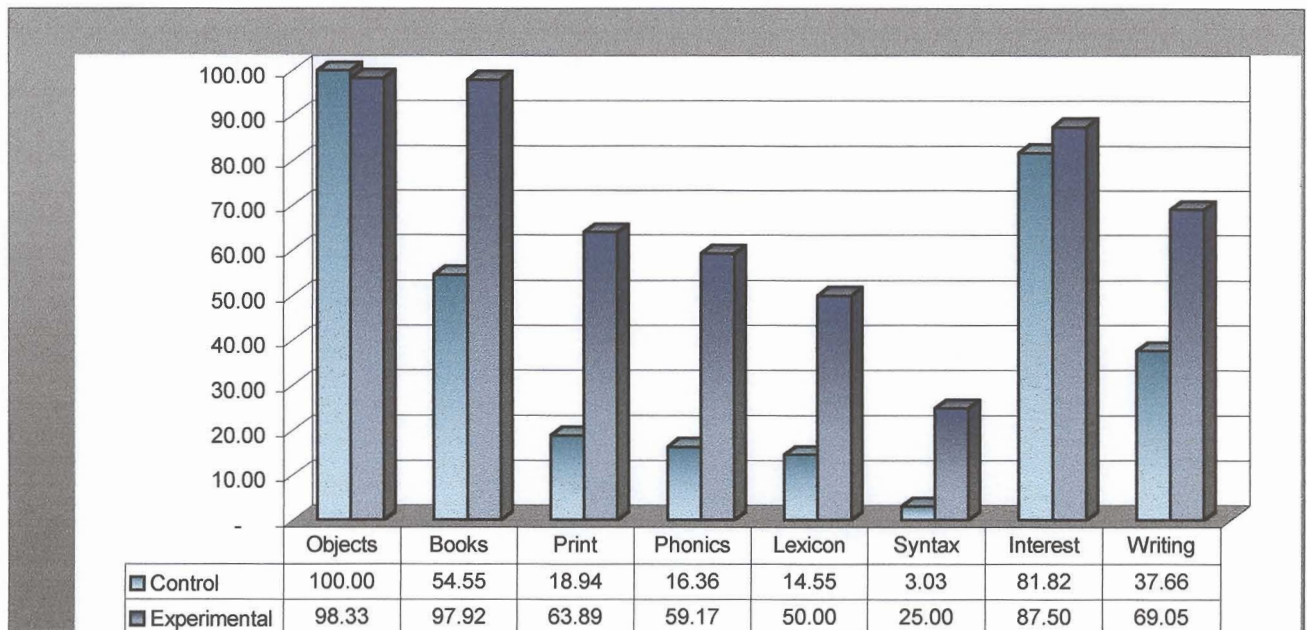


FIGURE 6: Comparison between the experimental and control groups on the post-testing of the Informal Literacy Questionnaire.

5.5.3 Correlative Information

According to the Spearman Correlation Coefficients no significant correlation (0.06330 / 0.8621) existed between the levels of informal literacy knowledge and the mental ages of the experimental group at the time of the pre-test. At the time of the post-testing, however, there was a significant correlation (0.80123 / 0.0053) between mental ages and performance on the informal literacy questionnaire. These findings can probably be ascribed to an increase in maturity and discipline that was achieved during the period of intervention. The lack of formal schooling experience that the experimental group was exposed to before the intervention could possibly have contributed to guessing and trial- and error-answering styles during the pre-testing.

The control group, however, indicated a higher correlation (0.75515 / 0.0072) between the mental ages and the level of informal literacy knowledge on the pre-test, while the correlation was less significant (0.37443 / 0.2566) at the time of the post-testing. This can be ascribed to the fact that the learners in the control group gained in mental maturation at the time that the intervention was conducted with the experimental group, but did not develop much regarding their level of informal literacy knowledge due to lack of exposure to the more formal literacy concepts.

According to the Pearson Partial Correlation Coefficient the socio-economic status of the experimental group indicated no significant correlation with their informal literacy knowledge, as indicated by the Informal Literacy Questionnaire at the time of the pre-test (-0.11248 / 0.7733)

and the post-testing (0.7006), indicating the value of informal literacy exposure despite the lack of informal literacy exposure and guidance at home-level.

The Spearman Partial Correlation Coefficient indicated a negative correlation (-0.56068 / 0.1163) between mental ages and level of socio-economic deprivation, of the experimental and the control groups, indicating that the lower the socio-economic status indication on the SED questionnaire, the higher the mental ages were. This fact also indicates the influence of early stimulation on the cognitive development of learners.

The Spearman Partial Correlation Coefficient also indicated significant correlation (0.61623 / 0.0772) between the regularity of attendance and the mental ages of the experimental group.

Due to the significant gain in emergent literacy skills of the experimental group, as was apparent during the post-testing, a conceptual framework might serve as a guideline for similar intervention practices. Such a framework will therefore be presented shortly.

5.6 A PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVENTION

What is clear from a variety of studies, is the important role that parents play at home in enabling young children to develop as readers (Campbell, 1995:127). Children who learn to read before arriving at school have the advantage of an interested adult with time to devote to them at the stage when they were interested in reading - either to read to them, talk with them, or answer their questions. That view is extended because literacy is increasingly being recognised as a

socio-psycholinguistic activity in which that term emphasises the importance of the adult-child interaction as well as recognising the thought and language processes (Teale & Sulzby, 1989).

In this research it was confirmed that children from disadvantaged homes where parents are illiterate, lag behind their peers regarding cognitive skills and literacy knowledge (refer par.5.4.2). Most of them did, however, display the learning potential to benefit from literacy-related exposure and guidance (see par. 5.3.3), despite already existing backlogs in their cognitive development. It can therefore be assumed, according to the results obtained through the intervention, that disadvantaged learners will benefit from an early literacy programme before they make their entry into the formal school system.

Confirming the above finding, Clay (1991:56) mentions that, although many factors are important for successful achievement in reading and writing, for example oral language, visual perception and motor behaviour, children can be helped to expand their foundational learning in these areas at the same time as they begin to work with reading and writing. **Therefore, the absence of a prerequisite level of readiness such as the skills tested by traditional school readiness tests (refer par. 5.2.4.2) does not imply that opportunities for the presentation and acquisition of emergent literacy skills should be delayed.**

These research findings confirm the fact that a child's social background is a powerful determinant of the efficiency with which he acquires certain skills, but maintain that successful learning can be actualised despite a lack of early exposure, when children are guided correctly at a pre-school stage. The framework that is therefore presented in this research can thus greatly

contribute to eradicating delayed or inefficient literacy acquisition where it had not previously been likely for disadvantaged children who were experiencing barriers to learning.

5.6.1 Objective of the proposed framework

There is neglect in the provision for learners with special educational needs. (refer par. 1.6), and these children will progressively be moved into ordinary learning contexts. The difficulties experienced by these learners are, however, often the result of lacking educational opportunities and disadvantage in the early years (refer par. 3.6.2). The lacking opportunities and disadvantage constitute what is currently referred to as ‘barriers to learning’, and cause the children to experience the formal school system as alien and difficult, as confirmed in par. 1.2: The lack of educational opportunities in the early years has severe negative effects on the scholastic performance of a child. In the South African context many children are deprived of opportunities that would enhance successful performance on an academic level, and many children enter the school system with no emergent literacy skills.

The socio-economic and educational disparities as well as structural inequalities that were generated by apartheid in South Africa had a devastating impact on the educational system and contributed to a large extent to the creation of special educational needs. The suggestion was also made in par. 3.3.2 that the disadvantaged populations’ difficulty to acquire literacy adequacy limited their opportunities to find jobs or other positions where literacy efficiency is required.

In terms of the new Constitution of South Africa it is therefore the long-term objective of this framework to meet the educational and developmental needs of all children. Referring to the Government Gazette of the Republic of South Africa, Vol 377, Cape Town, 15 November 1996 which is quoted in par. 1.4 of this research report, the framework can aid in **consigning to history the past system of education** and provide education of progressively higher quality for all learners, and, in doing so **lay a strong foundation for the development of all children's talents and capabilities** which will contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of the society. This framework can also aid in **protecting and advancing the diverse cultures**.

In order to meet the above mentioned objective, it is imperative that provision be made for intervention at a young age. As mentioned in par. 1.4, it is common knowledge that retarded cognitive performance persisting beyond childhood is an irreversible condition. It is also evident that insufficient exposure to literacy related activities contributes largely to poor cognitive and academic performance in the formal school system.

It is therefore the immediate goal of this framework to provide guidelines for intervention that could enhance the literacy experiences of disadvantaged learners in the pre-school in order to prevent the occurrence of academic failure in the formal school.

In order to achieve this, the aspects mentioned in par. 1.8.2 regarding emergent literacy skills will be addressed, namely: Knowledge of **books**, knowledge of **print**, **phonemic** awareness,

lexical knowledge, knowledge of **syntax**, knowledge of **writing**, as well as motivation, **interest** and attitude.

5.6.2 Components of the framework

Reed, Webster & Beveridge (1995:170) state that literacy should be understood in terms of mediation and the roles played by educator and pupil in creating what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

“The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the ‘buds’ or ‘flowers’ of development rather than the fruits of development. The actual developmental level characterises mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterises mental development prospectively” (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

In the framework presented in this research the zone of proximal development refers to the emergent literacy skills. These skills have to be conveyed by means of a mediator/teacher who guides, supports, motivates, instructs and facilitates the disadvantaged pre-schooler’s literacy acquisition by means of incorporating instructional events with developmental trends in order to prevent the development of special educational needs caused by barriers to learning. A graphic representation of this framework is the following (Figure 7):

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR LITERACY ACQUISITION

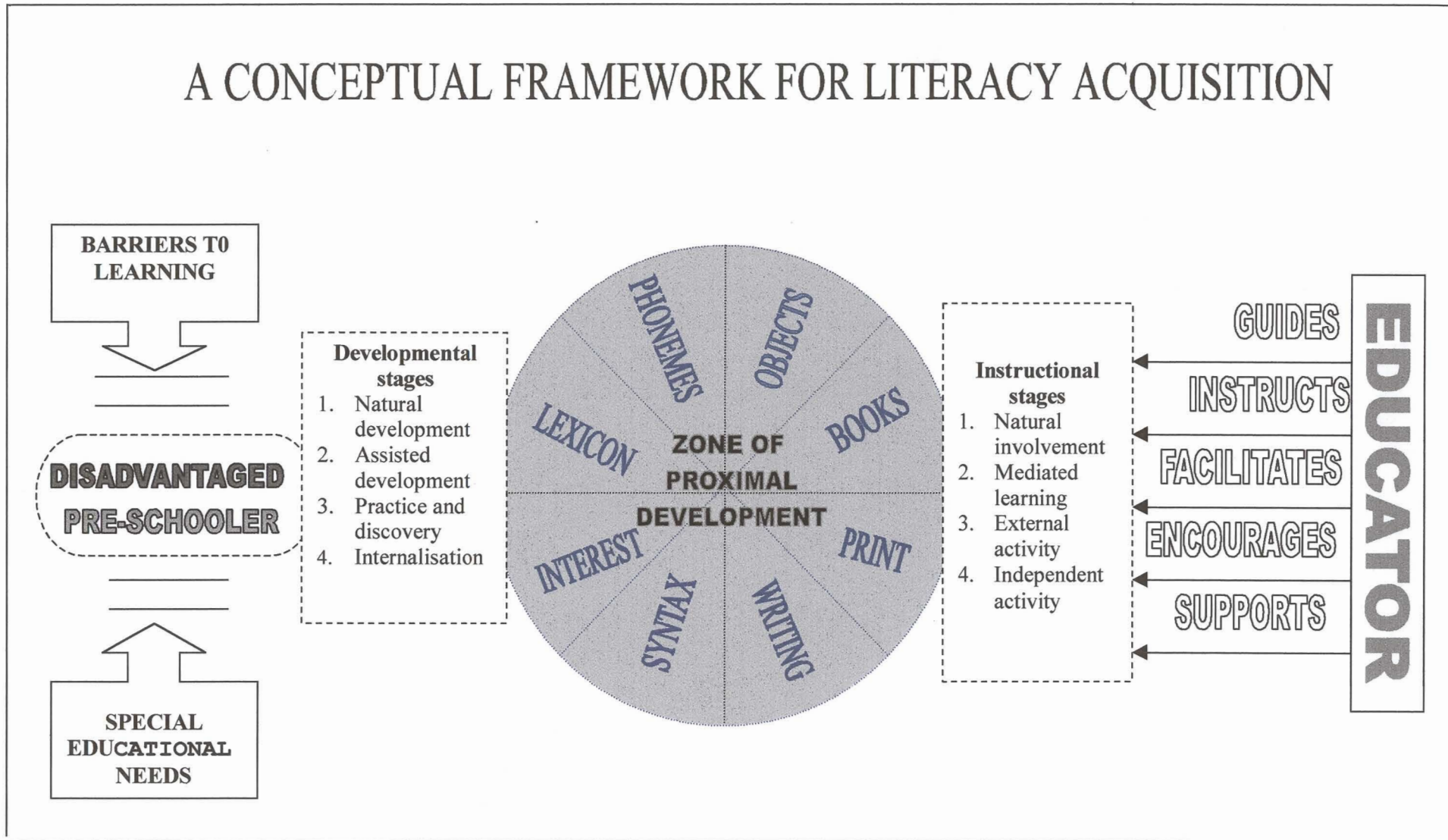


FIGURE 7: Conceptual framework for literacy acquisition

The importance of the type of interaction between adult and child, or between peers, in which mental development is actualised through mediation and proximation, or sharing and closeness, should be understood. The importance of examining achievement 'prospectively' in the learning encounter, rather than after it, is recognised. The role of the participating components will be discussed shortly:

5.6.2.1 Role of the educator

Reed, Webster and Beveridge (1995:172) devised a model regarding the practice of teaching with a view to systematically studying teachers' underlying conceptions of literacy. The model that is described by Reed, Webster and Beveridge (1995:171) gives a systematic representation of teachers' underlying conceptions of literacy that incorporates aspects of assessment, resource management, adult intervention and classroom organisation that could selectively be applied to a framework for teacher involvement.

Two ortho-diagonal dimensions provide the framework of the model. The vertical axis is concerned with the level of mediation, control, structure or management exercised by the teacher. The horizontal axis is concerned with the level of initiative, engagement, collaboration and active involvement enjoyed by the child in the learning process.

Tabel 1 as illustrated in Reed, Webster and Beveridge (1995:172) is consequently represented to illustrate **adult-child proximation through literacy learning**:

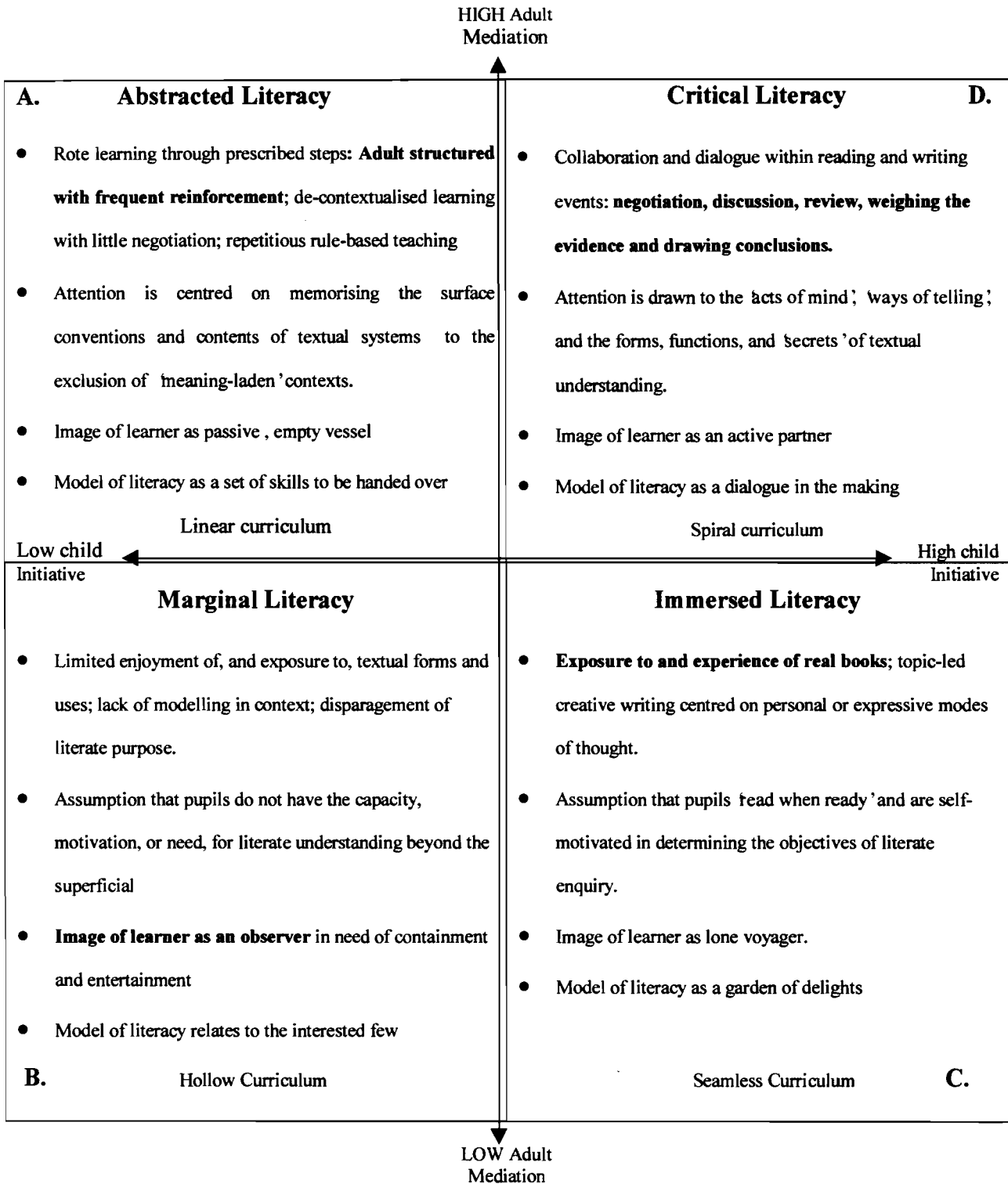


TABLE 1: Adult-child proximation through literacy learning

The value of acknowledging this model in the search for effective teaching practices for disadvantaged pre-schoolers, lies therein that none of these quadrants as a whole can serve as a guideline when working with disadvantaged pre-schoolers, although valuable insights can be deducted from each quadrant. In this regard, therefore, the researcher advocates that intervention should be **high in teacher management with frequent reinforcement**, as described in quadrant A, due to the lack of mediated learning at early ages. Some aspects of literacy should, however, be **gradually absorbed** by means of natural involvement and observation as described in quadrant B. A wealth of resources and materials such as books to furnish a **rich and stimulating environment** should be provided and the learners need to be **immersed in a wide range of written forms and genres**, as described in quadrant C. Finally, as described in quadrant D, the adult should **review** with the child how and why a task was tackled, what has been learned and what can be carried forward to the next task. These aspects described in quadrant D are consistent with Vygotskian (1983) descriptions of developmental processes or effective teaching or learning (Reed, Webster & Beveridge, 1995:173). (Refer par.4.4.1 and 5.3.4.)

Therefore the educator's role is important in terms of providing a print-rich environment in which literacy can be learnt (**facilitate**); being available to aid the child in what he or she is attempting to achieve (**support**); moving the learning along in particular ways when needed (**guide**); providing some direct teaching when the child requires information (**instruct**); and letting the children know when aspects of his/her learning are successful (**encourage**).

The Above mentioned interaction can be actualised when any content or curricula, such as the emergent literacy skills that were addressed in this research report, are involved that form the zone of proximal development. In this research report the zone of proximal development refers to the emergent literacy skills that are lacking for the disadvantaged pre-schooler due to educational deprivation, and this will be discussed shortly:

5.6.2.2 Emergent literacy skills as a zone of proximal development

It was stated in par. 2.5 that as a result of educational disadvantage a large proportion of the South African population have special educational needs. The special needs and disadvantage relate among other factors to lack of exposure to emergent literacy knowledge. In par. 1.7.1 it was stated that literacy involves knowledge regarding the letters of the alphabet and how to use them, but that it also involves attitudes, assumptions, and expectations about writing and reading. These concepts are included in the term ‘interest’ that forms part of the framework, and are enhanced by early exposure and knowledge of other aspects such as letter names, book-conventions, writing skills, et cetera, as well as by the value of these skills in one’s life. These aspects form the ‘zone of proximal development’ that was referred to in this research.

An important aspect of this model of intervention will therefore be exposure to emergent literacy skills and the building of early intervention procedures that will aid in the prevention of special educational needs for learners who experience barriers to learning.

The following aspects are therefore included (refer figure 7): Concepts about **letters and letter sounds**, concepts about **words**, and concepts about **text**. Included in these concepts will be the aspects that were assessed by the Informal Literacy Questionnaire, namely recognition of three-dimensional **objects**; knowledge of **books**; knowledge of **print**; **phonemic** awareness; **lexical** awareness; awareness of **syntax**; motivation, **interest** and attitude, as well as **writing** skills.

The concepts that are named in the above paragraphs are of particular concern to a large population of the South African community who experience barriers to learning in terms of educational deprivation, as described in par. 2.3.3. The learners that need to be included in this model will therefore be discussed shortly.

5.6.2.3 Learner participation

It is argued in this research that, if the learner enters the formal school setting with adequate informal literacy skills, he will be less likely to develop special educational needs later on.

Chronological age is not the only criterion for school readiness - differences in home and family background profoundly affect the rate of cognitive development, so that by a given age a child from a socially advantaged home is more able to benefit by education than his socially disadvantaged peers (Osborne & Milbank, 1987:93; Feuerstein, 1980). **It was however established in this research that, despite lack of literacy-related experiences at an early stage and despite backlogs related to his performance on the test for “school readiness”, it has been demonstrated that it is possible to accelerate the disadvantaged learner’s**

emergent literacy skills in order to send him to school on an equal footing with his more advantaged peers who were likely to have attended a formal pre-school institution.

In par. 2.2 it is stated that “a special need exists when any disability affects the learning to the extent that any or all of special access to curriculum, special or modified curriculum, or specially adapted conditions of learning, are necessary if a pupil is to be effectively educated” (Donald, 1993:140). In South Africa, however, some learners cannot derive sufficient benefit from instruction because of handicapping conditions (barriers to learning) in their environment that precede instruction, such as poverty, lack of educational support and inadequate informal literacy experience. As reported in Donald (1993:140): “...the predictors of the child’s ability to benefit from formal education are primarily dependent on the quality and quantity of informal education at home...”

A framework of learner intervention will therefore have to include those learners who lack in educational opportunity and informal literacy education at home. As stated in par. 3.4, by Kriegler (1993:69), the focus should be on preventative and developmental work. This implies that an effective model of intervention will have to include learners that match the following criteria:

- **Pre-school learners aged between five and six, who will enter the formal school by the following year. Because literacy acquisition is a long and complex process that begins at a very early age for learners that are exposed to it (Refer par. 3.5.1), there is**

no reason to postpone literacy learning until the child enters formal school at the age of six or seven.

The most important argument in this research is therefore that intervention is most effective if it comes early in a child's school career – or even before (Pikulski, 1994:35). Slavin (1996) argues that the focus on correction rather than prevention continues in spite of much research evidence that suggests early intervention is most effective. It is also argued in this research (refer par. 4.2) that if the learner enters the formal school setting with adequate informal literacy skills, he will be less likely to develop special educational needs later on. For this reason an effective, successful model will have to provide for five- and six-year olds that are likely to enter the formal school situation the following year.

- Learners from **disadvantaged homes** that lack informal literacy support and experience. In par. 4.5 it is stated that an overwhelming proportion of “at-risk” learners are from economically disadvantaged, single-parent homes from coloured communities. These learners have a high probability of academic failure and of eventually dropping out of school.

Special needs mostly develop in the midst of severe social and educational disadvantage have operated, and as stated in par. 2.2, these special educational needs manifest especially as the need for special educational support in the acquisition of basic educational skills that have

been delayed or denied to learners through lack of access to, or inadequacy of, the existing educational system.

"The Department of Education's intervention in the field of Early Childhood

Development must be seen as an important and essential innovative thrust in establishing a proper foundation for children's later learning and at the same time constituting an essential bedrock on which the new education and training system will be built" (Interim Policy of Early Childhood Development, 1996:14)

5.7 SUMMARY

"The few children who cannot read and write worry us, because they are exiles from the society of child learners in school and are threatened, by parents, teachers and other adults, with exclusion from the wider social world outside school if they fail to become literate" (Margaret Meek in Deford, Lyons & Pinnel 1991:75)

In the disadvantaged community of Eersterust it was apparent that although the parents lacked the skills and means of exposing their children to literacy related activities, they indicated a strong need for their children to learn to read, and encouraged them to partake in the research-related schooling that was provided.

The learners, who formed part of the experimental group, and who were regarded as socio-economically disadvantaged according to the Socio-Economic-Deprivation Questionnaire,

performed poorer on the Group Test for Five- and Six-Year olds and on the Informal Literacy Questionnaire than their peers in the control group at the time of the pre-test. According to insights gained in chapters two and three of this research report with regards to the experience of barriers to learning and cultural deprivation, it can be predicted with a certain amount of validity that special needs could develop when these learners make their entry into the formal school system.

The purpose of this research was to establish whether these learners' acquisition of literacy knowledge could be accelerated by means of mediation, as was described in par. 5.2.3 and par. 5.3.

In par. 5.2.3 it was also mentioned that subsequent goals were set during the period of intervention. The experimental group indicated acceleration of their emergent literacy skill acquisition, that removes a clear barrier in the way of the learning that will take place in the formal school situation. The researcher therefore also advocates early literacy exposure for pre-schoolers at risk of developing special educational needs due to socio-economic disadvantage and educational deprivation. The framework that is presented in this research (Refer par. 5.6.2 and figure 8) can form the foundation of early intervention that can remove the barriers to learning.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The South African Schools Act (1996) ushered in a new era in the field of general education in South Africa and embodies the principles in the Constitution and the white papers on education and training. At this stage in the deliberations of the NCSNET / NCESS it is recognised that the act provides important mechanisms to realise the vision and principles proposed in the NCSNET Public Discussion Document (1997:32). However, it also contains gaps and weaknesses that may have implications with regard to restricting the rights of learners who experience barriers to learning and undermining the development of an integrated education system. These gaps and weaknesses primarily pertain to educational structures that are in place to accommodate the vast amount of learners at risk of experiencing special needs due to contextual factors (refer par. 2.4.2), as well as to the systems, methodologies, and preventive strategies that can meet the needs of these children.

One of the key features of the new Act is the assertion of the right of equal access to basic and quality education for all learners, without discrimination in any way. No learner may therefore be denied admission to an ordinary school on any ground, including the grounds

of disability, language or learning difficulty. This is the first step towards a single inclusive education system for South Africa.

The fact that provision for learners with ‘special needs’ is no longer contained in separate statutes, is already an indication that education for learners who experience barriers to learning is no longer seen as part of a second or separate system in our law.

The Act thus embodies the constitutional right to equal access, the right to claim learning support in order to access the curriculum, and the right of parents to choose. This implies that compulsory exclusion of any learners has effectively been abolished.

While these provisions are significant in addressing previous barriers to learning and providing for the realisation of basic rights, it is important to recognise that the manner in which ‘special education need’ is defined and dealt with in the Act remains premised on limited historical understandings of what constitutes ‘special educational needs’ (NCSNET, 1997:33). It is on these grounds that continuing initiatives in the area of education should continue and be monitored. It is therefore with special concern for Early Childhood Education and for the lack of early educational experience that causes ‘special needs’ that this research was launched. A summary regarding the findings will consequently be presented.

6.2 SUMMARIES

CHAPTER ONE: General orientation, Problem formulation, Research methodology and Plan of study

A statement regarding the eradication of illiteracy introduces this research. The Interim Policy regarding Early Childhood Education in South Africa (1996), however, states that up to 1996 only between 9% and 11% of all South African children from birth to six years have had access to public or private early childhood development facilities (only one in eight Indian and Coloured children and one in sixteen African children).

The lack of education in the early years has severe negative effects on the scholastic performance of a child. In South Africa many young children are deprived of opportunities that would enhance academic success, and these children are then often labelled as having 'special educational needs', which in this research specifically relates to problems regarding literacy acquisition. Because these 'special needs' refer to such a wide range of problems one cannot exclude from intervention those learners whose 'special needs' arise out of contextual disadvantage and educational neglect.

Despite the clear existence of educational neglect and disadvantage, the aim of this research was to establish whether emergent literacy skills could be developed during a short period of intervention for these pre-schoolers at risk.

Chapter one therefore presents a hypothesis regarding this problem, and also describes the anticipated experimental design and clarification of the concepts that are relevant to this study. Lastly, the anticipated programme of study is presented. The following summary of the other chapters will provide a brief overview.

CHAPTER TWO: The Nature and Extent of Special Needs in a South African

Context

The history of education for learners with ‘special needs’ and of education support services in South Africa indicates massive deprivation and lack of provision for a majority of people on the basis of a literature study. It was argued that the current definitions of ‘special needs’ were inappropriate and unacceptable in a South African context, due to the fact that the special needs that existed were not intrinsic to the learners, and because the definitions of ‘special needs’ referred to a minority of the school-going population, which is not the case in the South African context. In South Africa ‘special needs’ therefore has to be described in terms of the factors that result in ‘special educational needs’:

In this regard it was confirmed that individual difficulties and disabilities can be considered as barriers to learning, as well as social, interpersonal and behavioural factors, and furthermore educational deprivation has a particularly unfavourable influence on the acquisition of emergent literacy skills.

It is therefore also consented that special needs develop due to factors intrinsic to the learner, factors extrinsic to the learner and factors that are the result of a reciprocal interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In this regard specific mention has to be made of the notion of 'risk'. Children who experience mild intrinsic disabilities are at risk of developing special educational needs. However, children who have the least supportive and facilitative early educational environments are likely not to cope if no learning support is given at an early stage. Although this new thinking about special education has led to a policy of inclusion, the culture in which these special needs develop needs to be acknowledged and addressed. This context is described more fully in chapter three.

CHAPTER THREE: Mediation and literacy acquisition in a South
African culture

In the past three decades psychologists and educators have come to realise that the pre-school years are most important for the child's intellectual development. Feuerstein (1980) found that a major contributing factor that causes learning problems is poor pedagogical input during the first years of life, which confirms Wiechers' (1996:177) statement that the most serious impediment to a child's intellectual maturation is the ignorant or uninvolved parent or early caregiver. The parents or caregivers are called mediators whose task it is to organise and present stimuli for the child. Cultural deprivation, however, results when the mediators fail to transmit necessary content to the new generation.

Literacy forms part of the content that needs to be presented by caregivers. In a South African context, however, either literacy does not have the same value for all, or some cultures were deprived of opportunities to become literate and are unable to provide the necessary resources for their children to become literate. Despite many factors that can affect the learning and literacy acquisition of disadvantaged learners, it is still the duty of society to equip them to excel in a literacy-dominated western society. Existing culture gaps can, however, make teaching difficult. Added to differences in cultural priorities, are also handicapping home-conditions that the disadvantaged groups are often confronted with such as home duties, unfavourable learning conditions and the absence of parental guidance and care. Where the rest of the world is therefore focussing on the importance of early literacy programmes, there has until recently been much silence in this regard in the South African pre-school field. It is also apparent that the formal school system tends to alienate children from a need to learn.

What is therefore needed, is research with regard to literacy acquisition and early literacy practices that can be implemented in order to break the cycle of illiteracy.

CHAPTER FOUR: Breaking the cycle of illiteracy through accelerating the acquisition of informal literacy skills in disadvantaged learners at risk of having special educational needs

The focus on correction rather than prevention continues, in spite of research evidence that suggest reading failure and illiteracy are preventable for all but a very small percentage of

children. Programmes for the prevention of learning and reading problems are also very effective when compared to the cost of remedial efforts, retaining pupils, and placement in special education programmes. “Educators therefore need to invest in children at an early age so that they can have the opportunity to enter the school on an equal footing with other children and learn from the start that they can be successful” (Wasik & Karweit, 1994:54).

In order to develop intervention strategies for the development of early literacy practices, one has to take note of theories regarding the development of reading ability of which three are described in this chapter. The Reading Readiness perspective advocates that reading development occurs as a result of maturation, and that educators should ‘wait’ until a child is ready to learn to read, before the required instruction is given. The Emergent Literacy perspective on the other hand argues that literacy develops naturally when a child interacts informally with literacy concepts. Vygotsky, however, advocates that literacy acquisition occurs through natural and cultural development. Natural development refers to the organic growth and maturation of the child, while cultural development relates closely to the mediated learning theory of Feuerstein that was discussed in chapter 3. This theory also advocates that reading instruction need not be delayed, but must be supported by a teacher who acknowledges the difference between the completed and expected level of literacy development – it is the Zone of Proximal Development. *“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 developmental achievement”* (Vygotsky, 1978:90).

Many programmes exist and are being implemented in other parts of the world. These programs are also discussed in chapter 4. The insights gained from studying these programs include the idea that although one-on-one tutoring is the most powerful form of intervention, at-risk students can, however, make progress by means of very small group instruction. The theory is also advocated that letters, words, and phonemes should be included in a whole language approach. Repeated reading is an effective instrument for introducing books and print conventions. Therefore repeated reading of books, phonemic skills, word identification skills and writing skills should all form part of an early intervention program. A consequent program of intervention was developed for the purpose of this research. The research implementation is subsequently in the next paragraph.

CHAPTER FIVE: Empirical research, discussion of the results and a proposed framework of intervention

The research was conducted in a community that meets the criteria for a disadvantaged culture that were described in chapter three. Twenty-nine learners participated in this research – fourteen who formed part of the experimental group, and fifteen who formed part of the control group.

Both groups were assessed by means of standardised and non-standardised measuring instruments that indicated their levels of socio-economic deprivation, mental ages and

levels of informal literacy knowledge. The experimental group was then exposed to a forty-session intervention period and the effects thereof were again measured by means of above-mentioned instruments. The main finding of the research indicated that it was indeed possible to accelerate the disadvantaged pre-schoolers' development of emergent literacy skills despite persisting backlogs in some skills that are generally measured by school readiness tests. The experimental group indicated clear progress regarding informal literacy knowledge as measured by the informal literacy questionnaire. The significant assumption confirmed by the results of this research is then that the absence of a prerequisite level of readiness, such as the skills tested by traditional school readiness tests (refer par. 5.2.4.2), does not imply that opportunities for the presentation and acceleration of emergent literacy skills should be delayed. Rather, contextual settings that promote the development of special educational needs, need to be identified so that emergent literacy development can be promoted.

As a result of the above mentioned findings a proposed framework of intervention was consequently presented. This framework provides for the eradication of special needs and for the removal of barriers to learning by means of an intervention strategy for educators. The educator instructs, guides, facilitates, encourages and supports the disadvantaged pre-schooler towards literacy efficiency by structuring instructional stages according to developmental stages, while at the same time working in the zone of proximal development – these are emergent literacy skills.

6.3 CONTRIBUTING CONCLUSIONS

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 suffer from the effects of environmental, socio-economic and educational deprivation, and are likely to experience ‘special needs’ when entering the formal school system. Equalising opportunities and access should therefore be provided for these children.

Provision for these children has so far been insufficient as these children form such a large part of the school-going population. If educational psychology is going to make any impact on the equality of learners entering the formal school system, it is imperative that intervention takes place at an early age.

Since all 5/6 year olds will eventually find themselves in a Reception Year, no reason exists why intensive involvement in an informal literacy programme should not be implemented for learners from disadvantaged communities. Although on a small scale, in this research, it was established that much benefit is gained by introducing disadvantaged learners to informal or emergent literacy concepts, despite the lack of skills tested by traditional school readiness tests. The recommendations made in this research report do not deny the limitations imposed by the limited extent of the research regarding the size of the research population. The research results and consequent recommendations are,

however, a culmination of the well documented South African context (refer chapter 3), the resulting existence of special educational needs (refer chapter 2), the study of other intervention programmes (refer chapter 4), the outcome of this research (refer chapter 5), and the continuation of an urgent and extensive need for early intervention strategies.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

“The changing nature of South Africa requires the distribution of all human, physical, and educational resources. The establishment of the new order demands fresh visions and offers the opportunity for innovative changes.” (Nkabinde, 1997:75)

In par. 4.2.1 it is stated that there are two requirements 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 findings into success for young children.

6.4.1 Recommendations for policy makers:

Recently the policies regarding the reconstruction of education and especially ‘special education’ in South Africa have indicated a strong focus on mainstreaming. This fact brings to mind the inadequacy of provision for a large number of learners experiencing ‘special needs’. The general curriculum and policies regarding special needs have,

however, focussed on learners with clearly noticable disabilities, while provision for disadvantaged learners at risk of developing ‘special needs’ as a result of poverty and educational neglect is still being marginalised, although it is clear from much research that this aspect does not pertain to a small number of children (refer par. 2.5.1).

Learners often present with ‘special needs’ before the advent of formal schooling. At-risk learners are also easy to identify as they generally come from impoverished backgrounds. The advantages of early identification, assessment and intervention of ‘at-risk’ learners are well documented. Where severe disability is not the causal factor in delayed development, learners should have the right to demonstrate that they have the potential to benefit from ordinary education before alternative placement is considered. Some acknowledgements in this regard have already been made:

“The transformation with regard to the provisioning of ECD services has created high expectations amongst the communities”. (Interim Policy on ECD,1996:19)

Due to the discrepancies between the home and the school and negative schooling experiences, the vast majority of children from impoverished neighbourhoods lack emergent literacy knowledge. There is, therefore, a need to provide these learners with equal opportunities and access. Educational policy should therefore advocate that these children need **better than average pre-school literacy introduction.**

There is a strong need for educational support services and policies to focus on prevention rather than cure (refer par. 4.1). Because education support services have previously

strongly emphasised individual needs and individual intervention, a shift should be made where the **cultural context** needs to be acknowledged, and the focus placed on **preventative** learning support. Given the extent of contextual and social causalities of special needs, a holistic approach needs to be taken, which includes curriculum design that promotes among other aspects the acceleration of emergent literacy skills as preventative measure.

As the Reception Year will be the first introductory year of an integrated four-year Junior Primary programme, the policy for ECD provision can therefore focus more strongly on emergent literacy skills for learners from impoverished communities. It is also strongly suggested that a specified curriculum for the introduction of emergent literacy skills is included in the policy regarding the Reception Year Programme. The issue regarding proven, reliable and replicable means of turning research into success for young children will now be addressed:

6.4.2 Recommendations for educators and educational practices

Unless preventive goals and practices become an integral part of the educational process in South Africa, there is little hope of transforming educational outcomes to a margin where success is evident - especially in the disadvantaged communities.

In order to achieve this, a shift regarding early educational practices is imperative.

In this regard it is important to address the roles of the parents or primary caregivers, the pre-school and elementary school teachers, the specialised educational supporters such as educational psychologists, as well as the specific design of an appropriate curriculum.

6.4.2.1 The role of the parent

As mentioned in par 3.3.3, many parents in disadvantaged communities were never exposed to the school reality as children, or were exposed to negative schooling practices. These parents need to be guided by educators to fulfil a supportive and encouraging role regarding schooling and literacy related activities. It is therefore important for educational support services to become part of the contextual setting and community in which risk factors are prominent.

Training for parents should be conducted through community centres where specialised personnel can address integrated issues and follow a holistic approach. Issues such as health, literacy, career and social development therefore need to be addressed. Parents should be educated to facilitate when their children are still very young, and be informed regarding early interventive practices. They must be empowered to provide social environments and to model behaviour that will promote learning and literacy development. The parents should be motivated to participate actively and even become involved in the same learning programmes as their children.

Garnezy (1991:423) states that high achieving learners have their roots in the family. Parents should therefore be motivated to conduct learning promotive behaviour such as the following:

- Initiate frequent school contact.
- Expose children to stimulating and supportive educators.
- Establish clear, specific boundaries and serve as the dominant authority.
- Avoid conflict between family members.
- Engage in achievement training activities with their children.
- Exercise firm, consistent monitoring and rule enforcement.
- Provide ample nurturing and support.
- Model favourable behavioural patterns.

Parents should also form an integral part of any assessment processes and be informed regarding the outcomes of assessments. The content of findings and the implications thereof need to be shared and explained to parents.

The parents should also become active participants in advocating the rights of their young children to have early literacy exposure where they are unable to provide it.

6.4.2.2 The role of the teacher

A shift towards a preventive approach will imply that all educators fulfil the special role of preventative educational supporter. Where literacy-related activities had in most

disadvantaged communities been reserved for school-going learners, there needs to be a shift towards a more literacy oriented pre-school phase. The pre-school teacher needs to have knowledge regarding the basic emergent literacy concepts that the learners need to be exposed to. Enjoyment and interest in literacy-related materials and activities should also form an integral part of everyday activities. Teacher training in these aspects can be acquired during formal or informal teacher training.

Pre-school and/or reception year teachers should on the other hand be skilled to recognise conditions such as educational disadvantage and the consequential lack of emergent literacy knowledge, so that accelerative measures can be taken. Identifying these learners will imply that these teachers should be able to recognise health, poverty, and social factors that could cause the development of special educational needs. These teachers should then be equipped with preventative programmes that could be implemented during normal school hours. Included in this role will need to be the support of parents or other care-givers and this support should relate to all aspects of child development, that include health, literacy, moral, and other favourable educational practices.

Teachers will then be equipped to recognise problems and provide screening for possible referral, as well as be able to implement interventive and preventative strategies as advised by more specialised educational services and personnel.

6.4.2.3 Specialised educational personnel

Specialised educational supporters such as remedial teachers, psychologists, social workers and health personnel will need to fulfil the important role of eradicating potentially dysfunctional contextual outcomes. The roles of these personnel will best be served when they are working at centres in the community. These services should include the design and development of preventative programmes that could be applied to a whole community. Appropriate measures would also need to include among others health-care, emergent literacy skills and social development. Provision in this regard also needs to include specialised services such as assessment, diagnosis and interventive procedures.

Specialised educational personnel should be empowered to designate alternative placement for learners with problems that had not been addressed or solved by the implementation of preventative strategies. Special support should lastly include the training and guidance of the teachers that were mentioned above.

Training for these specialised services should focus on an integrated approach. Such an approach would equip the personnel with skills for an integrated curriculum design and for the design of interventive programmes. It would also include consultative skills, skills for contextual analysis and skills to provide in-service training to teaching staff. As teachers and educational psychologists will soon start serving internship years, valuable services such as aid to pre-school learners, as well as parental and teacher guidance can be rendered.

6.4.2.4 Curriculum design and early educational practices

Central to accommodating diversity in the South African context is a flexible curriculum and policy of assessment that acknowledges socio-economic disadvantage and resulting special needs. Because disadvantage creates a very significant barrier to learning, the curriculum needs to be designed to include measures that will prevent special educational needs.

The content of learning programmes, the medium of instruction, the teaching style as well as the materials used should provide opportunities for disadvantaged pre-schoolers to enter the formal school system on an equal footing with their more advantaged peers. Literacy accelerative practices should therefore form part of the new curriculum and ECD services.

Regarding the style of teaching and learning, the Draft Discussion Document (1997:21) states that children learn best when they are playing, when they are actively involved in making their own discoveries, when they are having fun, when they are healthy and safe, when they are encouraged to be creative and when they are interacting with others. It is acknowledged that skills, knowledge and attitudes are the main component outcomes of learning. These ideas should also be applied to literacy support and to the development of an appropriate literacy curriculum and intervening strategies for **disadvantaged pre-schoolers**.

Insights gained from the study of various intervention programmes (refer par. 4.6) also suggest that intervention is most effective if it occurs before entry into the formal school. Small group instruction can be applied and learners' attention should be focussed on letters, words, and phonemes. Learners should also learn to blend sounds into words. Repeated reading should form an integral part of instructional activities in order to introduce books and print-conventions.

Because many children actually begin to "read and write" (refer par. 1.8.2) long before they arrive at school, lacking early opportunities and lacking emergent literacy skills should serve as an indication that intervention is needed. The early identification of children who are likely to experience barriers to learning, as well as recognition of the principle of early intervention, should therefore form a significant part of curriculum design and educational practices.

Even before compulsory schooling, continuous assessment, not only of pre-school individuals, but also of contextual settings, should be administered. The outcome of such assessment should then be a description of learner and system needs and should form the basis for intervention. Lacking literacy skills should also be regarded as a cultural phenomenon and handled accordingly. The same principles should apply for the labelling of special educational needs.

6.4.3 Recommendations for further research

The ANC (1994) made mention of a ‘whole school review’. This indicates that continuous educational research and change need to take place at schools and in the wider contextual setting. Included in such research should be the reviewing of organisation development theories, that is “*a planned and sustained effort at school self-study and improvement, focussing explicitly on change in both formal and informal norms, structures and procedures...*” (De Jong, 1996:115).

Further research should aim at developing an integrated educational approach with the main aim of preventing the occurrence of special needs that is the result of inadequate early learning experiences and contextual disadvantage. Different models of parental guidance, teacher training and training for specialised educational services in a contextual setting need to be researched in order to develop a systemic model of intervention. Contextual models of intervention would best be served in community centres. Community-based services therefore also need to be researched in order to find an appropriate model that would serve an integrated approach that is health, learning and socially promotive in a South African context.

During this research a strong need for contextually and culturally relevant assessment devices became apparent. The development of such instruments is therefore essential in order to provide preventative measures, and this requires the appropriate research.

Other aspects that also need to be considered for future research purposes are, for example, the longitudinal effect of early literacy exposure for disadvantaged pre-schoolers and the **long-term academic consequences** of early intervention.. Addressing adult illiteracy, the development of early numeracy skills, children learning in a second language and the accommodation of the physically handicapped, for example, can simultaneously be incorporated in such research projects.

It is further recommended that this research design be duplicated with a larger population of pre-schoolers when they enroll in a compulsory Reception Year and internship-years for educators are implemented. The possible use of this framework for accelerating the acquisition of all three “R’s” should urgently be researched. This researcher strongly advocates that all learning and research be conducted in a way that is fun and is natural, emphasising learning that is meaningful and enjoyable.

6.5 CONCLUSION

When Maxine Greene (1986:23) wrote about teaching in an article titled ‘How Do We Think About Our Craft’, her words captured what is believed to be an important achievement which was strived for and achieved through the findings in this research:

“Through our own attending and the going-out of our own energies, we are able to break the bonds of the ordinary and the taken-for-granted, to move into spaces never known before. And that is what some of us, considering our craft, want for

those we teach: the opportunity and capacity to reach beyond, to move towards what is not yet.”

The reconstruction of the education and training system has the vision of transforming the educational legacy of the past into a democratic education system that will contribute to the development of literate, creative and productive human beings, leading productive, self-fulfilled lives in a country free of violence, discrimination and prejudice. Lifelong education, training and development opportunities must be created, empowering people to participate effectively in all processes of a democratic society (Interim Policy of Early Childhood Development, 1996:15).

TEACHING THE YOUNG SHOULD BE THE BEGINNING

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APPENDIX A



APPENDIX A

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Testee's name and surname: _____

School: _____

Tester: _____

Date: _____

	Yes	No
1. Is there at least one hot water tap in the pupil's <u>home</u> ?		
2. Does the pupil usually live in a <u>home</u> where at least one of each of the following types of rooms are available under the same roof for the use of the family: <u>Bedroom</u> ; <u>living room</u> ; <u>kitchen</u> ; and <u>bathroom</u> ?		
3. Has at least one of the <u>parents</u> passed at least Standard 6?		
4. Does the pupil usually sleep in a room with not more than two other people present?		
5. Is electricity and/or gas available in the pupil's <u>home</u> ?		
6. Is the pupil free from severe physical and/or mental abuse?		
7. Does the pupil receive adequate medical, dental and health care?		
8. Does the pupil usually have at least two meals a day?		
9. Is the pupil usually adequately clothed?		
10. Is there a flush toilet in the pupil's <u>home</u> ?		
11. Is there a fridge in the pupil's <u>home</u> ?		
12. Are there more than 20 <u>hardcover books</u> in the pupil's <u>home</u> ?		
13. Does at least one <u>parent</u> read at least one new newspaper or magazine a week?		
14. Does the pupil usually receive a present from his/her <u>parents</u> on his/her birthday?		



APPENDIX A

	Yes	No
15. Is the attitude of the pupil's <u>parents</u> towards his/her schooling positive or at least neutral?		
16. Is there a radio and/or TV set in the pupil's <u>home</u> ?		
17. Do the pupil's <u>parents</u> own a car, or other four-wheeled motorized vehicle?		
18. Does the pupil own <u>toys</u> worth in total more than R 50?		
19. Does at least one of the pupil's <u>parents</u> hold a position with <u>pension benefits</u> , or is at least one of the <u>parents</u> self-employed and making his/her own provision for a <u>pension</u> ?		
20. Does the pupil have his/her own bed to sleep on?		
21. Does the pupil usually sleep in a <u>bedroom</u> at his/her <u>home</u> ?		
22. Is the pupil free from abnormal fear and/or hostility towards his/her <u>parents</u> , peer group and/or teachers?		
Total number of NO answers		

CONVERTING THE NUMBER OF **NO** ANSWERS IN THE SED QUESTIONNAIRE TO A SED INDEX (f)

Number of NO answers	SED index (f)
0-2	0
3	1
4	2
5	3
6	4
7	5
8	6
9	7
10	8
11	9
12+	10



APPENDIX B



APPENDIX B

INFORMAL READING AND WRITING READINESS CHECKLIST

NAME _____

DATE _____

a. RECOGNISING 3-DIMENSIONAL OBJECTS

4. Ball	0	1
5. Car	0	1
6. Fruit	0	1
7. Book	0	1
8. House	0	1

b. KNOWLEDGE OF BOOKS

9. Hand closed book upside down to child, and ask “How do you read a book?”

Turns the book right and opens it		2
Turns book so the title is the right way		1
No or wrong response		0

10. Ask which part tells the story

Words		2
Pictures		1
Doesn't know		0

c. KNOWLEDGE OF PRINT

Ask the following questions about the book

11. Show me where the story starts		0	1
12. Can you identify any letters(0; 1-5; 6+)	0	1	2
13. Can you show a word and read it ? (None; Show; Show & read)	0	1	2
14. Can you show a sentence and read it?	0	1	2
15. Show me the next page		0	1
16. Show me a number	0	1	2
17. Show specific letters (0, 1-5,6+)	0	1	2

APPENDIX B

d. PHONEMIC AWARENESS

18. Can you say the letters of the alphabet?

Recite all in correct order			3
10 Correct letters (any order)			2
Less than 5			1
None			0

19. What is the first letter of cat	0		1
20. What would the word be if you put "b" instead of "c" In cat?	0		1
21. What sound is in the middle of "cook"	0		1
22. What other word sounds like "cat" ?	0		1
23. What rhymes with "log"	0		1
24. What is the last letter of "cat"	0		1
25. Say another word that starts with the same letter as "rat"	0		1

e. LEXICAL AWARENESS

26. Can you show a word and read it	0	1	2
27. Which is a word? "ing" "cat" or "er"		0	1
28. Can you make shorter words from storybook?		0	1
29. Which word is the longest ? "train" or "locomotive"		0	1

f. AWARENESS OF SYNTAX

30. Re-arrange the following words to make sense ("cat, the, sits")	0		1
31. When do you write a capital letter?		0	1
32. How do you know when a sentence is complete?		0	1

g. MOTIVATION, INTEREST AND ATTITUDE

33. Do you like stories (no, a bit, lots)	0	1	2
34. Would you like to learn to read?(yes, no)		0	1
35. Do your parents or someone read stories to you?		0	1

h. WRITING SKILLS

36. Can you write any letters (0; 1-9; 10+)	0	1	2
37. Can you write your name?	0	1	2
38. Show me the capital in your name		0	1
39. Can you write any words? (0; 1-5; 6+)	0	1	2

