

Positive functioning: Exploring its relevance for disability and intervention

J Bornman PhD

Associate Professor, Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication, University of Pretoria.

L Almqvist PhD

Senior lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, Mälardalen University, Sweden.

Over the past decade the rehabilitation field has seen many changes with the move away from the medical model which focuses on the identification of problems and the “fixing” of these problems or ailments. The limitations of the medical model became increasingly clear as the issues surrounding human rights and social inclusion moved to the forefront of rehabilitation issues. The implication of the adoption of the social model is quite extensive in that it helps interventionists to explore ways in which individuals with disability can be more effectively included within the broader environmental context. This model clearly necessitates a different approach to intervention, as it requires that we should be able to identify the necessary processes underlying daily living as a framework for assisting individuals and families to function more effectively within these activities. Positive functioning, therefore, can be seen as an umbrella term for all those approaches that focus on general functioning and it acknowledges the importance of exploring strategies to assist individuals and families to accommodate diversity within their everyday lives.

The narrow focus of intervention on “*the disability*” or “*the problem*” has thus paved the way for including other aspects of functionality and ability that already exist within the child’s and family’s environment. It is therefore timely to have this special edition on positive functioning, which represents a different perspective from the traditional problem-focused approach.

For interventionists who aim to improve children’s well-being, it is therefore appropriate to study what children actually do when they act in their everyday environment with familiar partners. Consequently the importance of using daily functioning as a background for understanding issues in intervention with children is emphasised in this special edition. Furthermore, parents’ decisions on how to use available contextual and personal resources to enhance functioning are also of critical importance. For interventionists this involves choosing approaches and strategies for providing appropriate activities and interactions to promote full engagement in activities for all children.

However, all social problems should be viewed as complex, and therefore there is no single solution that “*solves*” a problem. The nature of social phenomena is such that a diversity of approaches is necessary to reflect the reality of daily living.

This special edition includes two sections. The first article deals with issues of positive functioning by describing intervention as a systemic approach and therefore providing the background for understanding the complexity of issues impacting on the outcomes of the interventions. This is followed by an article on engagement, participation and flow which constitute some of the basic concepts to the approach of positive functioning. Without the ability to engage and participate, social inclusion remains a vague chimera.

The subsequent two articles focus on the role and importance of the family. The first looks at how families problem-solve, and takes the stance that interventions that enhance families’ competencies and maximise their control in the rehabilitation decision-making process are more beneficial in the long-term. Another way in which families can be supported, namely through expanding and strengthening

their social networks, follows. Finally, the broader environment is addressed, when intervention practices for pre-school children who need special support are described in the context of the first world (Sweden) and of a developing country (South Africa). In this article the similarities and differences between the two contexts are highlighted and the authors conclude that both countries are in a transitional phase, which calls for all interventionists to participate actively in creating natural learning opportunities that are culturally relevant and accessible to families and young children in need of support.

In the second section the focus is on studies that included some fieldwork to augment the theoretical papers presented in the first section. How does one operationalise positive functioning in terms of intervention strategies? Clearly this is a challenging question as there are various ways in which intervention can be approached. The first study in this section focuses on the importance of understanding strategies for giving children access to assessments and evaluation processes at school by using eye gaze rather than speech as a response mode. This study found that there was no significant difference in the children’s accuracy during the testing task between using eye gaze and a spoken yes/no response. Typically developing children were the subjects who participated as a first step in investigating the application of this modification in children with severe disabilities.

The second study describes how teachers can be assisted to enhance their communication with preschool children in their classrooms. Understanding the process of participation and engagement seems pivotal to developing opportunities for teachers to increase their effectiveness in reaching all children in the classroom. Only by understanding the process of classroom interaction can interventionists become meaningful consultants and supports for teachers in dealing with children with barriers to learning in the classroom.

The last research article deals with disability stake-holder’s perspectives regarding social development. This is an increasingly important topic as more and more researchers focus on mainstreaming disabilities within the broader socio-economic developmental framework. No longer can we focus on disability as a separate issue. It alludes to the challenges that face the South African disability sector, and argues that disability organisations should become more focused on talking to other stakeholders in the field of social development jointly to set in motion an inclusive vision of development and alleviation of poverty in our country.

This special edition puts together some of the research outputs that formed part of a research collaborative project between the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (CAAC) at the University of Pretoria (South Africa), and the CHILd programme at the Mälardalen University (Sweden) under the leadership of Prof Erna Alant (CAAC) and Prof Mats Granlund (CHILd programme).

From June 2003 to December 2006, the National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa in collaboration with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) funded this project to explore issues surrounding positive functioning in intervention. The project provided staff and post-graduate students from both institutions

with the opportunities to visit and to collaborate with each other. The project culminated in a three day research symposium on Intervention and Positive Functioning, which was held from 27 – 29 September 2006 at the University of Pretoria. Staff members and students involved in the project delivered papers at this symposium.

Against this background and because of the emphasis that occupational therapists place on positive functioning in the course of their work, it is a pleasure to publish these articles in this special edition of the *South African Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Finally, it was an honour to be involved in editing this special edition. Special acknowledgement goes to the funders of the project (NRF/SIDA)

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Juan Bornman: juan.bornman@up.ac.za

Lena Almqvist: lana.almqvist@mdh.se