

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND MAIN CONCEPTS

A considerable body of literature exists with references relating to the continually changing environments of organisations of our era. The occupational therapy profession is not immune to this changing environment in the delivery of services to its client groups. In order to ensure the appropriateness of service delivery, it is essential to keep track of these changes, analyse them carefully, and plan accordingly (Shakleton & Gage, 1995). For its survival, occupational therapy may very well be dependent on its ability to act quickly and effectively in response to changing needs, as stated by Cromwell (1984). Pouliden and Oke (1990) also emphasise the need of the profession to be pro-active and plan accordingly, and state that by being pro-active, occupational therapists will ensure that they continue to play valued, ongoing roles amidst ongoing changes.

Due to the dynamic environment in which services are delivered, service delivery models are continually evolving (Vestal, 1995) and therapists therefore have to continually reflect on principles for best practice (Dunn, 2000). Dunn warns against the continuation of traditional practices purely because services have always been delivered in a particular way. She calls on therapists to be creative and innovative, while basing their practices on current knowledge and evidence.

One of the fields that is characterised by continual changes, is the field of early intervention. This specialised field refers to intervention at an early stage in the life of the child. It is a field shared by a number of professions that may all have different intervention approaches. Occupational therapists working within this field in South Australia are currently experiencing pressures to meet the demands of both the environment and their client groups in terms of the continual provision of high-quality as well as appropriate services. Although early intervention is supported by government policy as a service priority, several factors make its implementation problematic. In the development of appropriate services, the

literature provides therapists with international trends in early intervention service delivery that may serve as a framework for considering new developments.

It is within this context that this project, which aims to investigate the changes occurring in the field of early intervention in South Australia, was undertaken. For the purposes of this study, early intervention is defined as the paediatric intervention services provided by occupational therapists. The term “paediatric” is used due to the developments that are still occurring within the broader field of paediatric service delivery, and the accompanying undefined age and population groups currently being serviced within the field of early intervention. The project attempts to capture participants’ perceptions regarding early intervention service delivery both before and after exposure to a program orientated towards facilitating change.

Managers of early intervention services in occupational therapy were selected as participants based on the critical roles they play in facilitating change in organisations as problem solvers and change agents. In addition, managers play a coordinating role and are valuable sources of information regarding service delivery. For the purposes of this study, occupational therapy managers are considered to be occupational therapists in senior capacities who deal with the provision of services to children. Managers participated in a change-orientated program, not only to provide them with an opportunity to acquire information, but also for internal personal processes of change to occur. These aspects form the basis for change and may result in the implementation of organisational change.

1.2 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The chapters that follow provide an in-depth description of particular aspects of the study: Chapters 2 and 3 provide the literature background for the study, with Chapter 2 focusing on current practice and challenges in the field of early intervention service delivery. Chapter 3 discusses the facilitation of change in service delivery and the basis of a program aimed at facilitating change. In Chapter 4, the research design and methodology are provided.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion on the results and findings of the study. The discussion is concluded in Chapter 6 with an evaluation of the study and recommendations for future practice and research.

1.3 ABBREVIATIONS USED

A limited number of abbreviations are used throughout this thesis, with some occurring in direct quotes from participants. The definitions of the abbreviations are: Occupational Therapy (OT); Occupational Therapists (OTs); Early Intervention (EI); Focus Group (FG).

1.4 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

This chapter provides a brief overview of the main elements of the study and the discussions that follow in the next chapters. Chapter 2 consequently provides a detailed layout of the current trends and practices in early intervention as the basis for this study.