CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

Current perspectives on how occupational therapists define their roles as facilitators of agency within the broader contemporary views on health promotion are introduced. Reference is made to the South African context. The pre-school developmental stage is identified as a critical stage for the acquisition of dispositions and skills, which constitute the foundation for agency and purposeful task engagement.

The research problem is introduced, highlighting motivations for the study and denoting its aims and objectives. Reference is made to preliminary investigations. The case study design is identified as the chosen form of inquiry. A framework for the process of research is laid-out. Boundaries and limitations of the study are specified, followed by clarification of the key-concepts of the study.

For the purpose of this dissertation children will be referred to as she, to streamline the flow of writing. Cross-references between chapters and cross-references within the same chapter (between previously discussed matters and new concepts) are indicated with the symbol $\circ$.

- A point denotes theoretical aspects.
- An arrow indicates insights gained from the research.

2. BACKGROUND

Contemporary viewpoints determine that health is not exclusively defined in the context of absence of physical symptoms, but also adjunct to the subjective sense of well-being. The World Health Organization’s definition of health was conceptualized as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being not merely the absence of disease or
infirmity (Constitution of the World Health Organisation, WHO: 1946). The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) flesht this definition out. Their resolution was formulated as follows: “To reach a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs and to change or cope with the environment”. This view states in essence that individuals must be able to be agentic in their lives. This understanding of agency as integrally part of well-being has underpinned occupational therapy since its conception as a health profession (Christiansen and Baum, 1997). To date, occupational therapists are challenged to adhere to these values as the profession embraces the challenges of the 21st century.

The poignant caption by Engelhard (1977:34), “the virtue of occupational therapy is engagement in the world”, emphasized the view of the link between occupational therapy as a form of facilitation of agency within the client’s environmental field. Agency emanated as a phenomenon, which the researcher wanted to learn more about.

In South Africa, unique in its historical and socio-political context, research on health promotion is compelled to address the needs of all its people. The Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA’S submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 10/9/97¹ and Dr R. Watson’s lecture to occupational therapists in private practice 1998) upholds this stance. Members are urged to engage in clinical inquiry, which addresses priority-needs of health promotion. South African occupational therapists, as all South African health-professionals, are challenged to develop health service delivery to all. Such services needing to be equated to the values, which were set out in the WHO perspectives towards promoting well-being.

¹ Submission of OTASA: Is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission committing the profession to keep members and students informed about basic human and health rights and alerting them to all forms of bias.
2.1 A VIEW OF AGENCY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In his inaugural address as the new rector of the University of the Western Cape, Professor Brian O’Connell asked the pertinent question:

“How do we get everyone to be in the game for South Africa’s future, on South Africa’s side”.

He cited John Nixon when he elaborated on the need to take charge and to embrace change consciously and actively, in short agentically.

“With respect to education John Nixon is emphatic about the role of agency. The deeper significance of learning lies through its forming of our powers and capacities in our unfolding agency. We acquire knowledge and through that knowledge, possibly, understanding so that we can interact with our world in all its complexity and change it. We are not victims of structure, we are much grander a creation or evolutionary organism than that. Structures have a significant, but not a detrimental influence and we must proceed as confident, focussed agents impacting on both our natural and social environments.” (Brian O’Connell: inaugural speech as rector and vice chancellor of UWC 22/3/2002).

The new rector in his inaugural speech expressed much better than the researcher could, her view on the necessity and importance of agency within the current socio-political context in South Africa.

2.2 AGENCY IN CHILDHOOD

Agency is influenced by the biological basis of each individual’s development and also by the environmental affordance to utilize the genetically determined potential within a particular socio-cultural setting.

2.2.1 CONTEXTUAL DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS

Infants are born into the world with a need for action. Occupational behaviour begins, according to Kielhofner and Forsyth (1997:104), “with an attraction to people and objects, and developmental progression centers on interacting with the material and the human world”. Through continued contact the infant acquires a disposition towards the world and a “common sense knowledge” about herself as an agent within her world.
Professionals from diverse perspectives (Winnicott, 1976; Oaklander, 1987; Whiteford, 2000) have endorsed the essentiality of increased positive contact with people and objects, in order to aid children in developing positive agentic dispositions. Children with poorly asserted self-dispositions present with diminished decision-making ability and respond to the world in a reactive and passive manner. Such children are often prevented from experiencing their full potential of well-being (Oaklander, 1978). Occupational therapists in their quest to enable agency are searching for ways in which the profession’s aim to promote well-being can be maximized.

### 2.2.2 INTRINSIC & EXTRINSIC INFLUENCES ON AGENCY IN CHILDREN

Agency is impacted upon by internal and external adverse factors according to Dawes & Donald (1994), who identified two major causes for adversity in childhood.

- **Firstly**, structural causes (for example poverty and being politically disenfranchised) were causal to adverse circumstances. Black children in South Africa historically lived in a society where the apartheid system precluded them and their families from social and economic advancement. The legacy of such a society has resulted in a range of deprivations.

- **Secondly** interpersonal causes such as antipathetic family contexts, illness and trauma were identified by Dawes & Donald (1994) as causal in childhood adversities.

The importance of understanding childhood in South Africa within the historical inequalities was fully acknowledged. Ramphele (1994: vi) postulated that “the redressing of hope” would enable South Africa’s black children to face the future with greater confidence. The scope of this dissertation as part of coursework-masters does not suffice to address such a complex issue.

It is hoped that this study will provide a glimpse on how agency manifests in a preschool child and possibly suggest a beginning point of insight on how agency in preschool children can be facilitated.
2.3 THE RESEARCHER AS A FACILITATOR OF AGENCY

The researcher has treated children who presented with difficulties in various domains of their lives since 1979.

A lack of agency (inability to make choices, indecisiveness, lack of personal drive, poor responsiveness or inappropriate reaction to the environmental demands expected of their age group) manifested as common denominator in many of these clients. A disposition lacking in agency often led to what De Gangi (2000, 114) described as “…negative coping-strategies with life’s demands”. Many of these children’s sense of agency and purpose in life had been changed through physical and functional impairments, by change in socio-emotional factors, or never had been developed due to lack of opportunity or internal blocks to utilizing opportunities.

Intervention approaches were aimed at integrating the treatment of the difficulties (caused by deficiencies in the performance areas) and facilitating children’s agency and self-determination, as basis for a holistic sense of well-being. The utilization of Gestalt playtherapeutic techniques appeared to be well suited to this objective.

2.4 GESTALT PLAYTHERAPY

Gestalt therapy is a technique whereby action choices are facilitated through increased awareness and therapeutic dialogue (Woldt, 1993). In the early 1980’s the researcher (then working at the child and family psychiatric unit at Tygerberg Hospital) was inspired by a book called “Window’s to our Children” by Violet Oaklander, the founder of Gestalt playtherapy. Oaklander had formatted Gestalt principles to be utilized with young clients. The researcher was able to deepen her interest in Oaklander’s approach during 2000, when participating in an elementary and advanced course in Gestalt playtherapy. This lead to her enrolling for the Masters Degree in Diaconiologie (Playtherapy).

The conjunctive application of paediatric occupational therapy approaches and Gestalt playtherapeutic strategies produced dynamic therapeutic results. Children’s sense of agency
appeared to be transformed after short-term interventions. The excitement about client responses and treatment outcomes led to the conceptualization of rigorous research whether agency was indeed facilitated and to share the insights gained with colleagues and interested readers.

3. MOTIVATION FOR CHOICE OF RESEARCH

The choice for this study was inspired by two determinants.

° Firstly, on a personal level, the choice of research was informed by the researcher’s definition of herself as an occupational therapist and her professional evolution towards becoming a playtherapist. This study was an attempt to highlight how these two identities gelled and facilitated each other.

° Secondly, on a professional level, the researcher was responding to a profound need in the profession for rigorous study and communication of professional insights.

Considerations to do this study included the researcher’s personal interests and biases, current trends in occupational therapy and the perceived compatible fit between the philosophical frames of occupational therapy and Gestalt playtherapy.

3.1 BRACKETING AND DETERMINING THE RESEARCHER’S BIAS

As part of the process of preparing for data collection and later data analysis, steps were taken to clarify the researcher’s intentions, to test her assumptions and to make biases and prejudices explicit.

An in-depth interview was arranged with an experienced qualitative researcher to focus on the inner journey, which qualitative researchers are experiencing while they are undertaking an exploration within their roles as therapists/researchers. This interview (tape-recorded for data evidence 3/3/02) proved a most rewarding experience highlighting the motivation for undertaking the study on a personal professional and practical level.
The researcher was identified as an intuitive practitioner, who integrated multi-dimensional strategies. Her difficulties in isolating single aspects of her intervention necessitated circumspection and discipline in handling the research question. Treatment strategies needed to be bracketed carefully to delineate the technique from the person of the researcher. Caution against over-inclusivity was indicated. The importance of a structured methodology to enable objective data capture and data triangulation was highlighted.

3.2 CURRENT TRENDS IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY THEORY

Occupational therapy theory on motivation, choices and agency has been well documented for adults (Helfreich and Kielhofner, 1993; Kielhofner and Forsyth, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1993; Christiansen and Baum, 1997). Little has been written specifically about agency in children excepting the research carried out by De Gangi (2000) regarding regulatory patterns in infants. Within the context of De Gangi’s perspective rooted in the theory of Sensory Integration, regulatory patterns referred to behaviours in infants, who presented with ongoing problems in sleep-, feeding-, self-consoling and mood regulations. De Gangi’s research forged a better understanding and the need for individual contextual approaches of treatment in paediatric occupational therapy. In this study, in comparison to De Gangi’s work, the focus on regulation was framed within the Gestalt therapeutic perspective on orgasmic self-regulation.

In paediatric occupational therapy a child’s sense of agency is central to most treatment scenarios. Fielder and Fielder (1978), Engelhard (1977) and Yerxa (1988) emphasized the importance of gaining self-actualization through doing. Absence of agency manifested in indecision and a lack of purpose. Passivity and reactive engagement in daily occupations resulted in negative beliefs about the self. Such perceptions were internalized and lead to self-defying dispositions where children dis-believed their own potential. Feelings of insignificance eventuated in a victimic identity according to Polkinghorne (1996). Such negative life positions resulted in a spiral of diminished utilization of opportunities for the development of performance skills (Polkinghorne, 1996; Reilly, 1974). To counteract negative beliefs about the self and to develop an agentic life position crystallized into a priority concern of occupational therapy treatment.
3.3 THE FIT BETWEEN GESTALT THERAPY & OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

The focussed approach in Gestalt therapy and the immediate departure point for treatment were attractive to the researcher within her occupational therapy identity.

The divergent theoretical framework of occupational therapy, embedded in dynamic systems theory, encompasses a bio-, psycho-, social-, multi-modal view (Matheson et al. 1997).

In Gestalt playtherapy, relevant immediate foreground issues are extracted and meaningful treatment was converged to a specific point (Doermann, 2000). Such focussed treatment-entry had positive implications on treatment duration.

An ongoing conflict of values and goals confronts occupational therapists, in their attempts to reconcile cost-containment with providing the best treatment equally to all (Engelhard, 1986; Parham & Fazio, 1997; Fondiller et al., 1990). Cost-effective and therapeutically sound treatment strategies are required. Gestalt playtherapy appeared to be time- and cost-effective. The sensitivity to the child-client’s internal locus of control was perceived as a compatible factor to the occupational therapy theoretical frame.

4. PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Medical Research Council (MRC) were approached to establish which studies were currently conducted in South Africa on preschool children. Focus areas that were identified at the HSCR and MRC centered on gender issues and Aids. Dr. C. Admins, Head of the Developmental Clinic at the Red Cross War Memorial Hospital stated that no research concerning agency in pre-school children had been carried out in South Africa to date. Ms. E. Ramagondo, the coordinator for paediatric occupational therapy at the University of Cape Town, and Ms. N. Smit, who coordinates paediatric occupational therapy at Stellenbosch University, were approached and asked for comments, both expressing enthusiasm about the study.
discussions were held with senior occupational therapists in the field of paediatric and mental health occupational therapy and with colleagues who had undertaken postgraduate studies, to explore the proposed topic in depth and for the purpose of peer-debriefing.

An occupational therapy expert was identified to act as a sounding board on theoretical matters pertaining to occupational therapy. Mrs. R. Galvaan, lecturer at the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University Of Cape Town, agreed to provide such input.

5. PROBLEM FORMULATION

Children express themselves through behaviour. Certain behaviours (like acting out) alert caregivers to take action. The very behaviours which sensitize caregivers and educators are an expression of the child’s attempt to regain balance in her world (Oaklander, 1997).

Children, who do not externalize their imbalance through behaviour in noticeable ways, are very often not identified as needing support and are not helped. Poorly defined beliefs about the self are internalized and influence the blueprint for life through introjections (Yontef, 1993). Such beliefs also often lead to a life position devoid of agency. The child’s subjective view of the self influences the way in which a life position evolves (Helfreich, Kielhofner and Mattingly, 1993).

Many preschool-children in South Africa present with a poorly asserted self-disposition. A lack of agency, passivity and non-involvement are often overlooked as a problem, because these behaviours are not disruptive to caregivers and educators. No research has been carried out to date on agency in pre-school children. These factors supported the researcher’s view that it was relevant and important to conduct and in-depth exploration on diminished agency in pre-school children.
5.1 **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to alert and inform the profession and to broaden insight about the following:

° Sensitization of paediatric occupational therapists to the appropriateness of ascertaining agentic behaviour.

° Affirmation of occupational therapists’ contextual understanding of the multilevel functioning of preschool children. A child’s experiences, self-expressions and agentic actions cannot be properly understood when stripped from the child’s existential reality.

° Provide insight into how the pre-school child’s experience of an agentic life position (to experience the self as capable and self-determining within age-appropriate parameters) could be facilitated through Gestalt playtherapy.

5.2 **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

This investigation was conducted with the aim to expose how self-discovery was facilitated through participation in Gestalt playtherapy, with particular focus on the agency behaviour of a single preschool participant.

The following four objectives were guiding the process of the inquiry:

5.2.1 To capture the participant’s baseline agentic functioning.

5.2.2 To identify the participant’s agentic responses (inherently given patterns and response patterns which were triggered through intervention).

5.2.3 To denote the therapeutic enablers of agency, which facilitated self-discovery leading to externalized agentic behaviour over the treatment period.

5.2.4 To capture post-treatment agentic functioning in order to ascertain whether shifts in agency were evidenced beyond the treatment room.
5.3 ASSUMPTIONS

The researcher wishes to make explicit the following assumptions she holds related to the phenomena of agency and pre-school childhood (in no particular order):

- Children, who positively resolve a developmental crisis (Table 1: Chapter 2 – Erikson) at an appropriate stage, are better equipped to cope with tasks, depending on the abstract personality quality pertaining to that particular developmental crisis, at later stages of their lives. The pre-school child’s developmental crisis concurs with the emerging personality strength of an individualistic sense of purpose (Erikson, 1982). The postulation put forward here would suggest that children who develop a sense of purpose at pre-school age are likely to be purposeful at later stages in their development as well.

- The sense of purpose is intrinsically linked to a life position of agency.

- Intrinsic and extrinsic factors have an impact on a child’s agency.

- Children who are able to regulate their own needs and wants and who are in self-contact are able to assume an agentic life-position.

- Children with an agentic life-position can make choices about their lives, are able to set themselves goals and know how to nurture themselves if they are faced with life’s adversities.

- Counterbalancing adverse factors in itself does not necessarily lead to agency. In certain cases the child is trapped in a position of diminished agency, which can only be resolved through intervention.

- Knowledge and insights gained on how a position of diminished agency is maintained will assist the profession to strategize how to deal with the pervasive incidence of children lacking in self-direction and agency.
6. **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Qualitative research is aimed to enter the phenomena to be studied with an open mind. Literature was comprehensively consulted before, during and after the implementation of data collection to inform the process of research and to enhance reflexivity. A review on the theoretical perspectives is summarized in Chapter 2. Literature was also consulted as a form of data-verification. De Vos (1998:48) suggests that the literature is consulted at the end of the study to link insights gained in the study with existing theory. He refers to this process as literature control.

7. **METHODOLOGY**

When researching children’s behaviour, responses need to be relevantly captured in a naturalistic environment. This could be best investigated by using a qualitative methodology (De Vos, 1998). Qualitative research is defined as a multiperspective approach to social interaction, aimed at describing, making sense of and reconstructing such interactions in terms of the meaning that the subjects attach to it (De Vos, 1998). Creswell (1998) emphasized that qualitative research was a form of inquiry, which explores social and human problems. The reader is taken into the multiple layers of the problem and the view of the voiceless (participant) is exposed. Mc Leod (2001:5) refers to this as: “the client’s life-story to be documented and related”.

The case study design according to Creswell (1998:249) is suited to conduct an in-depth study of a case (bounded system) within its contextual setting. The single case study required absolute clarity of the problem to be addressed to ensure trustworthiness. A single case study signifies the study of a single subject on a repetitive basis, according to Strydom (1998).
7.1 **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The single case study design was identified as the suitable strategy. Tellis (1997,1) proposed that this design was an ideal methodology for a holistic in-depth investigation. Robust procedures have been developed for the case studies by Yin (1993) and Stake (1995), to ensure that this research method could stand up to scientific scrutiny.

The process under investigation for this study was the implementation of Gestalt playtherapeutic techniques; the inherent operations Gestalt playtherapy were thought to facilitate self-discoveries in preschool clients. The issue to be explored was the emergence of agency, in a single pre-school child, who was identified as data-rich with regard to lacking agency. Multiple sources of evidence were used to ensure construct validity.

7.2 **BOUNDARIES AND RESTRICTIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

A case study design is structured around a bounded system. The selected “case” to be studied is analyzed within specified parameters pertaining to procedure, time and place.

- The case to be studied would be a single preschool participant identified through purposive sampling.

- Time frame - This study was limited to five sessions to be conducted within two months.

- Place – Multi-site investigation took place. The baseline behaviour and post-intervention behaviour was assessed at the participant’s preschool. Treatment took place in the researcher’s practice.

- Procedure - Data was collected around the facilitative process of treatment as well as the client’s response to the facilitation and expression of her agency. The procedural format was constructed in such a way that the process can easily be replicated.
7.3 STUDY POPULATION

The researcher’s regular referral network was utilized to identify a suitable participant. All preschool children referred to her for occupational therapy in the second term would automatically become part of the universe. Passivity and lacking in agency were core-criteria for purposive sampling.

8. DATA COLLECTION

Data capture was conducted in three stages around the objectives of the study:
° Firstly, data was gathered to establish a baseline of the participant’s agentic status.
° In the second stage of intervention the identified behaviour, which was investigated, namely agency, needed to be studied at regular intervals through multiple sources. Insights had to be deepened around the dynamics of agency and to ascertain shifts in behaviour. Data regarding enablers of agency, which facilitated self-discovery leading to externalized agentic behaviour over the treatment period, were also captured. Polster and Lynch (1981) and Strydom (1997) agreed that the single case study was well suited to repeated observation, to establish trends and monitor change.
° The third stage of data collection focused on post intervention data with regard to agentic status and the elicited behaviours were seen beyond the treatment context.

9. DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis was conducted in three phases:
° The participant’s baseline agentic status was analyzed.
° Once the baseline agentic functioning was established intervention was applied. Data analysis dealt with three phenomena during the intervention stage. Firstly, data was analyzed pertaining to the participant’s inherent agency responses, which were captured during the intervention. Secondly, data was analyzed around the explication of the
facilitative process (Gestalt playtherapy) which enabled self-discoveries and lead to shifts in the participant’s agentic responses. Thirdly, shifts that were brought about as a result of the intervention were analyzed.

Analysis of the post-intervention data concluded the process of data analysis.

10. TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOUR

Qualitative researchers need to ensure reliability. It was emphasized that the single case study inquiry requires stringent and disciplined handling to enhance truth-value, stepwise replication and triangulation of the findings. Krefting (1991) Tellis (1997) and De Vos (1998) suggested Guba’s model as the preferred strategy to be followed in qualitative research. A detailed description of the methods employed follows in Chapter 3.

A key-informant was appointed. This was an experienced clinical paediatric occupational therapist who had over the past 14 years acted as clinical supervisor to graduate students during paediatric service learning blocks. She was to scrutinize the videotaped treatment sessions, as well as the videos of the baseline and post interventions play observations and offer comments and identify codes of what she had noticed. She thereby became a participant observer and a separate analyst of the data. Her comments would be utilized to verify the researcher’s observations and to strengthen the conclusions that were drawn.

11. INTRODUCTION OF TERMS AND CORE CONCEPTS

Chapter 2 on theoretical perspectives provides clarification of Gestalt therapy and occupational therapy frameworks and readers are familiarized with the terminology of both perspectives. The researcher anticipated that readers might come from either a Gestalt therapeutic or an occupational therapy perspective and would welcome clarification.

The following key concepts required particular emphasis because of their importance to the study. They are presented in alphabetical order.
AGENCY - A psychological term, referring to the action orientation of humans. The occupational therapy theorists Cristiansen & Baum (1997) proposed that agency was linked to a person’s identity and was an expression of the self in relationship to people and situations in their environments. Coming from a psychological perspective, Bruner (1990) agreed that agency was the externalization of what man makes of his world, his fellow human beings and of himself. Bandura (2001: 2) stated: “Agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence is exercised, rather than residing as a discrete entity in a particular place.” Agency enables people to play a role in their self-development, adaptation and self-renewal with changing times. To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by ones actions and it reflects at the same time the individual’s inner stance in relationship to the world.

GESTALT - the word Gestalt is the German word for figure or creation (Deutscher Duden, 1973:302). The form or configuration cannot be derived by the summation from the parts and their relationships. A Gestalt therefore is more in its totality than the sum of its components, since the dynamics of its interrelationships cannot be defined by simply adding them up. Thompson and Rudolph (2000) maintain that Gestalt may refer to the physical structures, the physiological and psychological functions or symbolic units. Yontef (1993) refers to the meaning of Gestalt as configuration or set of patterns. Gestalt psychologists believe that organisms perceive instinctively whole patterns and not bits and pieces. To understand Gestalt, it is pertinent to realize that human beings are inherently predisposed to seek wholeness and not fragmented parts of the whole.

GESTALT PLAYTHERAPY - Schoeman (2000) coined the term of Gestalt playtherapy, which is essentially Gestalt therapy adapted for children. Oaklander (1978:53) refers to her approach in working Gestalt therapeutically with children as a “working model”. Schoeman adapted Oaklander’s method and for this study the considerations of Oaklander and Schoeman will guide the researcher’s clinical reasoning in the application of the technique. Base knowledge for Gestalt playtherapy is rooted in Gestalt theory as well as in theoretical perspectives, which embrace a wide range of playtherapy approaches.
GESTALT THERAPY - Gestalt therapy is a phenomenological/existential therapy technique, which treats what is subjectively felt in the here and now (Perls 1951, and Yontef 1993). Clients’ experiences are not interpreted, the client gains insight through therapeutic dialogue and deeper consciousness of awareness according to Doermann (1999). Clients are challenged to move from environmental support to self-support. “Gestalt therapy is the science and technique of the figure/background forming in the organism/environment field” (Perls Hefferline & Goodman 1952:248). This implies that client’s have to make choices informed through their phenomenological position. Gestalt formation is sought in order to regulate homeostasis around these experiences resulting in organismic self-regulation.

LIFE-POSITION - A theoretical construct referring to a person’s view on his own life, formed by in-depth psychological processes which incorporate internalized early childhood experiences, emotional responses and personality traits and cognitive integration (Polkinghorne, 1996). Life is perceived as a movement from past to future according to Kielhofner (1999), with the life position referring to a prevailing disposition at a particular time-clip within the process of becoming.

PRE-SCHOOL DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE - The name identifies this stage to be relevant for children before formal school entry and places them into the age-band of 5-6 years. The developmental stage where “the conflict and guilt comes to its crisis” (Erikson, 1982:77). Children in this stage of their development are characterized by a disposition of playfulness. Piaget (1977) referred to the cognitive development of the preschooler as the pre-operational stage. Language has developed and children learn to make sense of their world through the processes of seriation, classification and conservation. Logic and deductive thinking has not yet fully developed. Preschool children have developed all the sensory motor performance components which equip them to deal with their environment throughout their lives, but further refinement of skills is still necessary (Banus 1971).
SELF-DISCOVERIES - Recent developments in self-theory emphasize the self as a process. Self-discovery is an intense becoming aware of the own process (Polkinghorne 1996:299). Perls (1951:3) refers to the term as “an arduous process that is cumulative and ongoing, leading to an ever-evolving increased awareness of the self”. This awareness of one’s own needs in relation to the environmental demands forms the basis for authentic choices and agentic behaviour.

WELL-BEING - is the term, according to Christiansen & Baum (1997), to describe a subjective sense of overall contentment, thought to result in a positive affective state and life satisfaction. Greenspan (1989) refers to children’s inherent drive towards an affective state in order to feel connected and a sense of well-being. When well-being is experienced, children are able to construct new complex feelings and to give meaning to them. The word flow is used by Csikszentmihalyi (1991: 6) to describe the process of “achieving happiness through control over one’s inner life”. These perspectives agree that well-being is a subjective experience rooted in inner balance and a consciousness of positive affect linked to an internal locus of control.

12. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The participant and her parents needed to be informed about the research process before giving informed consent to take part in the study. The parents also needed to know about their right to disengage as participants. How treatment delivery was to take place after the completion in the case study needed to be clarified. Pseudonyms ensured confidentiality.

13. REPORTING DATA AND APPLICATION IN PRACTICE

The study was written up as a dissertation for submission to the Centre of Playtherapy and Training affiliated to the University of South Africa in partial fulfillment of the degree M. Diaconiologiae in Playtherapy. It is envisaged that the findings will be published in
professional journals representing the professions of occupational therapy and/or Gestalt therapy.

Oral presentations of findings will be delivered on request to professional bodies concerned with preschool children. The problem of lacking agency is a widely experienced phenomenon in the South African society, where adversities in childhood are so pervasive. It is hoped that the lessons learned in the study could make a small contribution in the planning and strategizing of health promotion programmes.

14. PROBLEMS WHICH WERE ANTICIPATED/ PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The nature of qualitative research to uncover multiple layers about the same process may elicit in the researcher a lack of specific and focused communication. It was hoped that the interview to frame the researcher's prejudice and the careful bracketing of the bounded system were instrumental in averting diffuse communication. When working with children there is always the dependence on the parent’s cooperation regarding regular attendance. It was hoped that the inclusion of a specific selection criterion to ensure the required commitment to bring the child for treatment would prevent poor cooperation.

15. FINAL COMMENTS

The following indicators were carefully thought about when deciding to follow through with this study:

° The fact that the preschool age is the developmental stage, where the sense of purpose is the pertinent life task, was viewed as significant. It was thought a highly appropriate age around which to investigate the phenomenon of agency. It was also acknowledged that very little if any theoretical writing existed about agency in preschool children. It was concluded that a study about agency of preschool children was merited.

° Techniques of Gestalt playtherapy were widely used according to anecdotal reports, but research reporting and publishing has been sparse around this therapeutic strategy over
the past five years. The strategies used are synergistic with base-techniques used in occupational therapy.

- The enthusiasm and support of supervisors and colleagues of the study combined with good treatment outcomes in practice were further incentives to pursue the inquiry.

In Chapter 2 the theoretical perspectives, which were explored during the preliminary literature review to provide an in-depth background on the study are introduced. Reference is made to the pre-school developmental stage, on theoretical views on agency as well as relevant frameworks pertaining to Gestalt playtherapy and occupational therapy.