Chapter 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

This study illustrates one pre-school child’s story of self-discovery and transformation and the unleashing of her agency.

The case data enlightens occupational therapists (and others) on how an agentic life-position was enabled and how Janet’s agency led to her greater sense of wellness. This is pertinent for the profession of occupational therapy. Christiansen (1999:547) put this poignantly: “The ultimate goal of occupational therapy is well-being”. The criteria for well-being as aspiring a state of physical, mental and social wellness, achieved through identifying and realizing aspirations, to satisfy needs and to change or cope with the environment. These aspirations and needs were fulfilled in the story of Janet’s enhanced agency.

Increased awareness, the realization of her unique needs and greater coherence about events and people in her life promoted a chronologically meaningful understanding. She connected with her inner self and her world and discovered ways of expressing herself and to engage in developmentally appropriate occupations which filled her with satisfaction and wholeness. Yontef (1993) asserted that people’s experiences as a united whole are more than the sum of its parts. The central plot in Janet’s story was her discovery of her being, doing and becoming.

Before the phenomena that emerged in this study are reviewed it is deemed necessary to identify the limitations and strengths of this study in relationship to the initial research proposal.
2. LIMITATIONS OF SINGLE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

The major limitation of single case study research is that results cannot readily be generalized. Acknowledging this as a shortcoming, it is the researcher’s opinion that this case study is offering a starting point for occupational therapists to understand the relationship of lacking agency in pre-school children and the method of enabling agency through Gestalt playtherapy as a suitable procedure to address this problem.

In a single case study, when investigating a client’s response to treatment it is essential that the behaviour to be studied (agency) as well as the intervention strategy (Gestalt playtherapy) are explicitly framed. This ensures that behavioural responses can be properly compared to other incidences of the same participant (Strydom 1998). A properly bracketed design can then be replicated and used for other participants in the same way, to draw up a number of vignettes around the same phenomenon to enable broader generalization.

The importance of clearly delineating the roles of researcher and practitioner is emphasized by Strydom (1998), as it can be difficult for the same person to represent both roles objectively. When establishing the researcher’s bias for this study it was ascertained that this very aspect was to be handled with circumspection. By adhering strictly to the methodology it was attempted to link theory and practice in ways which ensured a high degree of neutrality. The fact that the key-informant became a participant observer by viewing the treatment videos and a separate analyst by looking at categories of behaviour ( Chap. 3:3.6) and the rigorous peer review were further steps to deal with this challenge.

2.1 CONSIDERATIONS ON HOW REPRESENTATIVE JANET WAS OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN LACKING IN AGENCY IN SOUTH AFRICA

While it may be speculated that Janet is not particularly representative of South African pre-school children, the following facts are more enlightening:
2.1.1 STUDY POPULATION

It is appropriate to consider how suited Janet was to stand proxy for pre-school children in South Africa. It was initially feared that a single participant drawn from a referral network in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town might not yield as data-rich a participant as needed for sufficient depth to discover rich data. The majority of children in South Africa are not attending a pre-school which offers the occupational opportunities offered by pre-schools in the Southern Suburbs and for that matter the school where Janet’s referral had come from. It may be theorized that a participant identified from a referral source in a marginalized area where many risk factors prevail would offer greater possibilities for rich data.

The criteria set out for purposive sampling were an undertaking to identify a data-rich participant beyond pre-conceptions relating to geographical and socio-political considerations. It was hypothesized that all the possible participants would potentially offer data-rich information applicable within the broader Cape Town context. Fourie (2002) refers to Toch (1996) when she encourages researchers to abandon traditional ways of defining environments that highlight structural outside perceived features, in preference to using phenomenological approaches.

2.1.2 WIDELY APPLICABLE CONTEXTUAL ASPECTS

Janet had inconsistent contact with a primary caregiver in her early childhood. This is a reality for vast numbers of children who are born to mothers who are unable to fulfill their maternal occupational role and who indeed have not reached their full maturity nor completed their education. Such young mothers then often have difficulties to fulfill their developmental, educational or vocational roles as well as their relationship roles within their family of origin as well as with the father of the child. Christiansen & Baum (1997, 56) state in this regard: “When persons cannot fulfill roles to satisfaction, either because of deficits in ability, the conflicting demands of multiple roles or unclear role expectations, dysfunction is present. Such disruption of the roles of daily living, termed ‘occupational
performance dysfunction’ constitutes the appropriate type of problem for occupational therapy intervention”.

It appeared as if in early infancy already, Janet’s contact with people and objects was not allowing the development of a positive agentic lifeposition. It would be fascinating to find out about the life circumstances of the other possible participants that were not selected and to compare their lifestories to the story of Janet. The criterion for distinctly diminished agency had prevailed in two other possible participants. The reason why Janet was ultimately selected as single participant was largely determined by her suiting the language criteria which were not met by the other two data-rich possible candidates (Kaashif and Nalini $\text{Table 3, Chapter 3}$).

2.2 ADVANTAGES OF THE CASE STUDY DESIGN

Comments regarding single case studies express concern that the results cannot be generalized. Tellis (1997) refuted this criticism, highlighting how applicability in single case study research can be promoted. The following steps were taken into account for this study.

° The selection criteria through purposive sampling ensure that the single participant with the closest match to the selection criteria is likely to yield rich data. The selected participant is standing proxy for a larger universe of possible participants. Janet was the data-richest candidate closest to the selection criteria. Creswell (1998) reiterates Tellis’s view and states that in the case study methodology, purposive sampling of data-rich or “extreme cases” is recommended to yield abundant data. Generalizations in ‘extreme’ cases are likely to be most expedient.

° The single case study design was identified as a suitable methodology for a readership with specific base knowledge about aspects of the study. Tellis (1997) argues that a harmonious relationship between expected readers and the case study itself is common and that the data often resonates experientially with the readers and thereby facilitates a greater
understanding of the phenomena under investigation. In this case study it is anticipated that possible readers have knowledge and interest in playtherapy and paediatric occupational therapy. This case study provided rich material for contemplation and debate for readers from both perspectives and insights gained could be fed back to a broad possible client-body.

° The suitability of a single case study design is propagated by Strydom (1998:148) who argues that this method is “a do it yourself” procedure and thereby likely to keep costs down. He proposes this method to be used for exploratory studies to identify if the topic of study is worth pursuing further. The data in this study shed some light on enabling agency in a preschool child and new leads for further study crystallized.

° A single case study methodology allows the researcher to handle the research question in a disciplined and scholarly manner since the variables can be easily controlled (Strydom 1998). In the case study of Janet the researcher was able to adhere rigorously to the methodology, which strengthened the trustworthiness of the study (Chapter 3:2.4.6)

° The single case study design enhances goal-directedness in the client and in the therapist. De Vos (1998) encourages therapists to think more scientifically about their clients’ problem-areas and their lives to strengthen clinical reasoning around the interventions. Outcomes can then be evaluated against appropriate standards. Strydom (1998:148) argues: “We change ourselves in the process of helping our clients to change and in the process of changing ourselves we change our profession, staffing it with people who not only want to help but know how to help”. The intense reflection and immersement with data on Janet’s agency contributed considerably to the remarkable shift in agency, which was evidenced. The key informant (last interview 1/10/02) highlighted this: “When we (occupational therapists) focus so intensely on a problem and scrutinize the client’s and our own responses so thoroughly, treatment outcomes are at their best. Then we can make things happen”.
3. AGENCY

People who operate from a position of agency are able to intentionally make things happen according to Bandura (2000). He emphasizes major shifts in recent developments on psychological and psychosocial theories. These new perspectives refute a cause and effect stance and underscore current thinking on how people can influence their own behaviour. This paradigm is rooted in the supposition that conscious living is the very substance of mental life that makes it not only personally manageable but also makes it worth living. Bandura (2000: 3) proposes: “Without a phenomenal and functional consciousness people are essentially higher-level automatons undergoing actions devoid of objectivity or conscious control. Nor do such beings possess a meaningful phenomenal life or a continuing self-identity, derived from how they live their life and reflect upon it.” It is this view which encouraged the researcher to share her findings of Janet’s transformed agency with the profession of occupational therapy and other interested readers.

3.1 AGENCY FOR SOUTH AFRICA’S CHILDREN

In South Africa, the population statistics indicate that 15% of the country’s population (6.5-million children) distributes into the age-band of six years and younger and 2.4% (1.03-million children) are five years of age, according to the Statistics South Africa, October Household survey (1999). It is also a known fact that the current socio-political realities do not always provide a comfortable fit between the needs of children and their environments. It is considered appropriate to reflect on the insights gained about agency during this study and ascertain its relevance for the children of South Africa.

The pertinence to facilitate agency on as broad a basis as possible is acknowledged. The researcher believes that agency should be established at the stage when this is developmentally most suited to enable goal-directed task involvement (Erikson, Chapter 2: 2). In order to make a more informed plea in this regard it is important to reflect in some depth on the lessons learned in this study of Janet’s unleashed agency.
3.2 AGENCY AND CHILDHOOD

Since not much has been written about agency for children, the researcher had an opportunity to explore new territories. The researcher reviewed various well-grounded theoretical perspectives of the pre-school developmental stage and the development of the ego as well as the literature on agency (Chapter 2: 2).

3.2.1 DEVELOPMENTAL AND OCCUPATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Agency was found to be the expression of a person’s being, doing and becoming (Chapter 2: 3.2.3). Agency was not a stage or a function, but a process. Developmental theory has been primarily formulated around stages and categories of behaviour, specifically related to a particular life period. Within the developmental frame, the foundations for purposeful and self-directed agency are in place at the preschool-stage of development (Erikson, 1982). Preschool children are still limited in their understanding of cause and effect and reasoning ability due to their incomplete cognitive development (Piaget, 1977). With regard to sensory-motor function and material management all the basic patterns are in place necessary for goal-directed task engagement (Knox 1997).

The researcher responded to the different underlying views on human behaviour, which informed the study as follows. By utilizing knowledge from the developmental perspectives she underpinned her understanding of “the spiraling upward and outward moving process of agency” (Fourie 2002) in relationship to Janet’s phenomenology, within the time-clip of her pre-school developmental status. It is considered that this inter-linking of knowledge from various developmental perspectives in embracing five-year old Janet’s emerging agency worked well. To date no contention on the scaffolding of these two rationales was found, but it is expected to elicit discussion and indeed the researcher would welcome considerable debate around this approach.

The Gestalt view of the child’s ego function as a process within an individual’s phenomenological field in the here and now is synergistic with the above-mentioned understanding of agency in children.
3.2.2 AGENCY: EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC ADVERSITIES

The literature review correlated adversities in children’s lives with the way adaptive behaviours of such children developed. Adversities constituted risk factors. It was clear, that currently Janet’s circumstances were not adverse and yet she was not able to experience agency. Fourie (2002) highlights the importance of enabling coping strategies for individuals living in poverty. In the conclusion of her research on a woman living in poverty she states: “It is my contention that, should one factor be singled out as an overriding indicator for study by occupational therapists, it is the sense of agency”.

For Janet having been placed in a situation devoid of adversity with ample occupational opportunities was not enough to enable her agency. In order to become agentic she needed rigorous active intervention. The researcher thought this to be significant. The fact that the research findings of one single participant are limiting and not allowing extrapolation to wider groups, cannot diminish the pertinence for occupational therapists to focus on two concerns about children’s agency.

° Firstly, occupational therapists need to consider whether and how an increase in occupational opportunities is suited to promote agency in children. This is deemed significant within the understanding that “occupation is the principal means through which people develop and express their identities” (Christiansen, 1999:547).

° Secondly, when children are unable to be agentic, despite the existence of occupational opportunities (or in the absence thereof), how can agency be instrumented beyond the self-barriers that exist in such children?

A good-enough environment in early childhood is crucially important in children’s life. When looking at childhood issues in South Africa with lacking or inadequate relational and occupational opportunities for so many children as an aftermath of the historical inequalities, some initiatives have already been put in place to redress the shortage of

1 The work of Winnicott (1964); Cole (1993) and Eklund (2000) is acknowledged.
occupational opportunities for children in disadvantaged communities. The question arises what is done about the relational issues. Must a profession, which is so committed to promote well-being as ours, not ponder on the need to develop strategies whereby these very issues are further explored, debated and acted upon?

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study sheds light on the importance of understanding one child’s contextual circumstances in order to facilitate age-appropriate agency. In-depth understanding of Janet’s context contributed to the insights that were gained. Janet’s “extreme loading” of diminished agency (chapter 1.3) led to conclusions which could provide themes for further study.

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is considered that the findings are relevant for the profession of occupational therapy and are suited to guide further insights. The following ideas for further investigation transpired:

- An investigation whether lacking agency in pre-school children could be a window for deep-rooted personal problems in pre-school children (chapter 1.2.2 and 6.1).
- An evaluation on the suitability of the intervention strategy of Gestalt playtherapy on a larger study population.
- An investigation if occupational therapists could utilize Gestalt playtherapy as a method to facilitate self-discoveries in other contexts (adolescents, teenage mothers, youth involved in risk behaviour).
- To study the accord between poor attention habits caused by intra-personal factors and attention problems rooted in sensory processing opens doors for another possible inquiry (chapter 5: 2.2.2).
- Investigating the suitability of this approach for children living with a disability.
4.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Contributing on the level of health promotion by informing programme developers of preschool programmes of the importance of an agentic life-position for children.
- Developing strategies whereby teachers and caregivers could become more attuned towards identifying lack of agency and through early identification of these problems hopefully to prevent children from viewing themselves as victims and introjecting negative self dispositions.
- Development of a guidance and empowerment programme for parents whose children are lacking in agency.
- Exploring ways in which lack of agency can be prevented for instance in target groups like teenage mothers.

4.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SINGLE PARTICIPANT

The conclusion was reached that Janet personally had benefited from participating in the Gestalt playtherapeutic intervention. Her self-discoveries truly metamorphosed her agency. In her father’s words “Janet is a changed child. She is so special”. The new agentic posture was evident in her world at school and at home. One concern emanates whenever treatment has been transformative beyond expectation in such a short time span, namely, will such progress be maintained? The following steps were taken to monitor this question:

- The researcher set up a structure whereby she checks up on Janet’s overall development and her performance in monthly intervals with Janet’s teacher and Janet’s mother. In the discussions held in August and September both mother and teacher confirmed that Janet had fully maintained her agentic stance. It is envisaged that this support will be withdrawn at the end of the school year of 2002.
- The researcher is considering the possibility of conducting a new investigation, a longitudinal follow-up study, for ongoing data collection on Janet’s agency over an extended period. This would require a number of ethical and logistical steps as registering such a proposal with an ethical committee and obtaining consent for such a study from Janet’s parents.
4.4 SYNERGY: GESTALT THERAPY & OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Having witnessed the transformation in Janet’s agency raises confidence that in a short period of intervention (2 months), much personal growth has been facilitated. It seems to be expedient to explore whether such a transformative experience will come about for a broader group of participants, and how to implement this program for a larger population. The following considerations support the conjunctive application of gestalt playtherapy and occupational therapy.

The ongoing pressure to reconcile cost-containment with providing the best treatment, needs to be taken into account when exploring realistic future pursuits for the profession. The researcher found that her initial proposition that Gestalt playtherapy was effective and time-efficient proved to be true, in the study of Janet’s emerging agency. Janet had experienced the core human experience of being doing and becoming within a period of two months.

The evidence of Janet’s increased agency was thoroughly checked and triangulated against various sources of verification. Janet’s shift towards an agentic life-position had been noticeable and remarkable (Chapter 5: 3). This conclusion was validated by different informants (parents and teacher), different research methods were applied (qualitative and quantitative evaluation, observation and categorical aggregation), different analysts examined the data, (researcher and key informant) as well as member-checking and corroborating findings against existing theoretical knowledge.

The results emphasize how apt and justified the concurrent application of Gestalt playtherapy can be within a paediatric occupational therapy perspective. At the same time it was possible to dealing with the challenges of cost and time containment, accentuated by the effectiveness of the intervention leading rapidly to the transformation of Janet’s agency (Chapter 1: 3.3).
5. REFLECTION ON THE STEPS TAKEN IN THE RESEARCH

Once the study had been concluded, the researcher reviewed whether the inquiry had illuminated insights on original postulations.

5.1 REFORMULATION OF THE TITLE

When initially formulating the research proposal, the researcher had assumed that a child who was lacking in agency would be primarily passive and non-engaged. The researcher was not aware at that stage that this was her own biased pre-conceived notion. She thought that lack of agency would be synonymous to passivity, as reflected in the title of the research proposal.

Insights of the study showed that in Janet’s case she blocked contact in her (unconscious) attempts to maintain the impasse (Chapter 5: 2.1.3 and Chapter 4: Illustration I). Janet’s lack of agency at the stage of baseline assessment was apparent. This was the result of active ego-defending against the awareness of inner sensations as well as preventing contact with people and objects. Janet was unable to resolve some unfinished issues, in particular the issue of her brother who had died, entrapping her in the impasse layer, which prohibited her from expanding her contact boundaries. The impasse’ was thus maintained through active resistance (Chapter 2: 4.2.1). In retrospect, having uncovered many layers of Janet’s story, it would have been appropriate to frame the title as follows: *Transformative Self-Discoveries: Unleashing of Agency - Janet’s Story of Becoming.*

The self-discoveries enabled Janet to experience herself as vibrant, focused and purposeful. These experiences helped her to redefine herself as a capable and worthy person, with an internal locus of control over the events in her life.

5.2 REFLECTION ON THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study, advocated agency as an important area to be investigated by occupational therapists (in this chapter: 3). The lessons learned in this study could be utilized to inform future planning and investigation on how agency can be facilitated in
larger populations of pre-schoolers. Interest in this study has already been generated and led to related topics for study.

- Currently a group of undergraduate students are conducting an investigation on agency and risk behaviour in a group of primary-school children who live in a marginalized area in Lavender Hill. This indicates that the Occupational Therapy Department at the University of Cape Town has been alerted to the phenomenon of agency in children.

- An occupational therapist working with a group of mildly intellectually challenged adolescents, is planning to study how agency can be facilitated in her target group through adapted Gestalt therapeutic strategies.

5.3 REVIEWING THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

5.3.1 To capture the participant’s baseline agentic functioning.
Knowledge of Janet’s baseline agentic functioning provided the basis for focused intervention and enabled comparison pre- and post-intervention. The effectiveness of the diagnostic reasoning was thereby heightened (Chapter 4:2).

5.3.2 To identify the participant’s agentic responses (inherently given patterns and response patterns which were triggered through intervention).
Janet’s inherent agency and her responses, which were enabled through the intervention, were identified and utilized for further analysis (Chapter 4: 3.1).

5.3.3 To denote the therapeutic enablers of agency, which facilitated self-discovery leading to externalized agentic behaviour over the treatment period.
The Gestalt playtherapy process and the self-enabling structure facilitated self-discovery resulting in externalized agentic behaviour over the treatment period. Once identified these strategies were repeatedly implemented over five consecutive sessions. The strategies were found suitable to be utilized and to be further investigated (Chapter 4:3.2).
5.3.4 To capture post-treatment agentic functioning in order to ascertain whether shifts in agency were evidenced beyond the treatment room.

Post-treatment agentic functioning was captured and analyzed. It was ascertained that shifts in agentic behaviour were evident and that Janet’s agency was manifesting in her life (Chapter 4: 3.4).

5.4 FINDINGS SUPPORTING OR REFUTING THE ASSUMPTIONS MADE BEFORE COMMENCING WITH THE STUDY

The assumptions identified prior to data collection (Chapter 1, 5.3) in relation to the case study findings are validated at this point. These assumptions are based on literature review (Chapter 2:2 and Chapter 2:3), as well as the conclusions drawn from this study about the impact of Janet’s agency on her sense of purpose in life and the potential for well-being. Assumptions are printed in Italics for easy identification.

- Pre-school children who developed a sense of purpose at pre-school age are likely to be purposeful at later stages in their development as well.

This assumption could not be corroborated. The study was confined to a period of two months. It would be necessary to conduct a longitudinal follow-up study on several participants in order to support or refute the above argument (3.1 in this chapter). It was however established that as soon as Janet had been enabled to assume an agentic life-position, she was increasingly able to be purposeful in all the areas of her pre-school function and at home. De Gangi (2000,8) raises an important point in this regard when she argues that “it is crucial to intervene as early as possible in order to minimize the detrimental effects on compromised development and contingent relational difficulties”.

Since the study was concluded in June 2002, Janet has maintained and furthered her agentic life-position (feedback form parents and teacher 3.1 in this chapter).

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

The impasse in Janet’s life manifested in a disengagement of herself as a person to the events in her life. During intervention the link between Janet the person and her world was
sought. Developing Janet’s sense of who she is and gaining meaning enabled her to be, to do and to become. She experienced agency and at the same time fulfilled her developmental destiny of learning to be purposeful (Discussion in Chapter 5: 2.3)

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

  Intrinsic factors that were noted in this study were the inherent agency trends (Table 6 Theme 1). Extrinsic factors were identified in terms of Janet’s contextual circumstances (Synthesis of baseline findings 2.3). Both factors influenced Janet’s agency. Through controlling distractibility and redressing early childhood experiences, agency was facilitated. In order to generalize on the observation, it is advisable to study a larger population and compare lacking agency with prevailing extrinsic and intrinsic factors.

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

  This was clearly demonstrated, when Janet started to make meaningful contact with people and objects, when she started to make sense of her world and regulated her own intentions and feelings, dramatic shifts in her agency were taking place (Chapter 5, 2.3).

- **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.**

  Once Janet had arrived at a position of agency it was possible for her to ideate what she might be doing next. She was able to connect this idea with what she had done before and a clear link of feedback and feedforward in terms of guiding her action was evident. This enabled her to set goals for herself and strive towards them but also helped her to envisage alternatives and strategize to overcome problems. Bandura’s (2001:1) work on agency substantiates these findings. “The core features of agency enable people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation and self-renewal with changing times.” These processes are clearly dependent on cognitive maturation but it was noticeable how much more directed Janet had become once she was operating from a position of agency.
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 strategies.

At the stage of participant selection Janet was identified as the participant who best matched the selection criteria. This was so notwithstanding the fact that Janet had to date seemingly adequate environmental affordances. Her parents cared for her, she had a stable homebase, and her parents had a stable relationship. Family routines were acceptable to all its members; Janet was also attending a school where the environment supported learning. Despite these occupational opportunities, Janet’s behaviour was devoid of agency prior to the intervention. When the strategies of intervention were implemented she was able to grow into her intrinsically given potential and utilize the affordances that were offered by her environment. More rigorous study needs to be carried out to establish how these findings compared with a larger population.

Knowledge and insights gained on how a position of diminished agency is maintained will assist the profession to strategize how to deal with this problem.

Janet’s story of her emerging agency illustrated clearly how the patterns of diminished agency were maintained through inherent behavioural trends, habitual patterns and blocks in her contact with her world. Before strategies can be formulated and general guidelines can be developed, the findings of this study need to be tested against a broader pre-school population. It is felt however that in a small way this study has contributed in informing occupational therapists on the development and maintenance of a life-position lacking in agency.

6. METHODOLOGY

The case study methodology was well suited to study the problem of lacking agency within the context of five-year-old Janet’s personal history. The bounded system dictated that the study should comprise of five consecutive weekly intervention sessions. This rigorous time frame accounted for the fact that the data collection was concluded after 2 ½ months from initial participant selection to post-intervention play observation at Janet’s school. This
signifies that the shifts in Janet’s adaptive behaviour were instrumented through Janet’s agency and cannot be ascribed to coincidental maturational factors.

6.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

A holistic in-depth investigation was conducted. Strydom (1997) argues that the single case study is best suited to utilize for repeated observation, to establish trends and to evaluate behavioural change. The limitations and advantages of the design have already been discussed under (1.1 and 1.2 in this chapter).

6.2 ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS

This study was performed in partial fulfillment of a Masters Degree in Diaconiologiae (Playtherapy). The limitations set out for a course-work master dissertation restricted the researcher; she needed to condense her findings in an attempt to accommodate the recommended number of pages for a dissertation. The researcher was unable to fully adhere to the requirements. She resolved that if information was further reduced, valuable and relevant information would have been lost. This matter was discussed with her supervisor at various stages and while the supervisor emphasized the importance to be disciplined and concise, she acknowledged that by working within two theoretical perspectives (occupational therapy and Gestalt playtherapy), justice needed to be done to the complexity of the study.

7. DATA OF THE CASE STUDY OF FIVE-YEAR-OLD JANET

This study provides rich data about agency and indeed about Janet’s lifestory of transformation. The suitability of Janet’s story for generalization was re-considered. Janet was selected because of her distinct lack of agency. The researcher was unaware of any possible personal issues or adversities during participant selection. As it transpired, were Janet’s early childhood circumstances representative for many of South Africa’s pre-school population. However, it was not Janet’s personal history that made her the most suitable
participant. It was her diminished agentic behaviour ("extreme case”- Creswell, 1998). This leads to a pertinent postulation:

7.1 POSTULATION

If the fact that a child presented as lacking in agency coincides with difficult and adverse circumstances, where children are trying to survive without enough emotional support to develop a positive life-position, this could be a powerful window for problem spotting. Children who have not been afforded opportunities to achieve wholeness may be identified in this way. Such a correlation can however not be made with the limited facts currently available. This matter raises questions for a new inquiry to establish whether such a correlation does exist.

7.2 BASELINE DATA OF JANET’S STORY OF BECOMING

Janet’s function was entrapped in the impasse layer, where no growth could take place (Chapter 2:4.2.1).

7.2.1 FACTORS PERTAINING TO JANET’S PERSONAL HISTORY

- Inconsistent attachment figures.
- Disharmonious relationships among family members.
- Mother had personal problems in Janet’s infancy.
- An unverified incident of family violence involving Grandpa Ronnie.
- Communication were lacking in transparency (the fact that she had lived for a period with her granny, paternity-issues, Gunsha). There were missing links in Janet’s coherence of her life. Janet had lost a brother but this was an unfinished issue. It was not spoken about.
7.2.2 AGENCY STATUS

- In her BEING she was undefined. She was “there” in person but appeared to not be present. Her affect was flat. Her teacher described her as “nebulous”. Basic performance skills were latently underlying, but Janet was not connecting with her environment to be aware of her potential nor was she utilizing it in her doing.

- In her DOING Janet was uncertain, unstructured, random and chaotic. She did not engage in play pursuits at home nor at school. She allowed her little sister to bully her. She was mostly drifting around aimlessly; she never got the drift of a game.

- There was no notion of BECOMING. Interaction with family members seemed shallow and very limited interaction took place with peers. Janet was unable to engage in age appropriate pursuits at school.

7.3 INTERVENTION STAGE DATA

The process of Gestalt playtherapy, strengthened through the self-enabling structure, allowed Janet’s inner self to be activated beyond the resistance of the impasse. This enabled agency. Her contact boundaries became more permeable and she started to sense, explore, experiment and experience herself and her world.

- Janet’s BEING manifested in her (potential but under-utilized) agency, which was directed by her curiosity and her distractibility. In addition, there were entrenched ego-defensive strategies in place, to prevent Janet from making contact. Resistance to contact had become her self-regulation and maintained and perpetuated an impasse. Janet’s being was revealed as her inner and outer contact functions became enhanced.

- Janet’s DOING was challenged through the intervention, which was aimed at overcoming resistance and limiting her inherent distractibility while using her inherent curiosity to learn more about her world. Gestalt therapeutic techniques were used to intensify Janet’s contact with her inner and outer world. This was made more effective by employing a structured stimulus-controlling approach. This aided Janet to be and become focused contactful, aware and agentic. It is evident that her doing and being were enabled through self-
discovery (once contact cutting was restricted through the therapeutic intervention). The processes of being and doing were closely inter-linked

- **BECOMING** was enabled through her agency. Janet was enabled to discover herself and to experience her own competence. She also created meaning for herself about issues in her life, which she had not been able to understand, and had not been able to own. This influenced her doing and her being.

### 7.4 AGENCY BEYOND THE TREATMENT ROOM

As Janet moved towards an agentic life-position her life was enriched. This was most evident in her play at school (Chapter 4: 4.7 Table VI). Through play expressed her true being.

- **BEING** - Janet’s emotions had freed up and she had a vivid facial expression. She was relating with warmth to her family and friends. Sibling-conflict was diminished and Janet was fun to be with. The quality of the contact between her and her world had changed it felt as if Janet was really there!

- **DOING** - Janet was playing in an age-appropriate manner with friends at school and with her sister at home. She also utilized the occupational opportunities at school and at home. Through doing she learned to master new skills and was able to reach new destinies.

- **BECOMING** - Through being in touch with her inner self and in contact with people and opportunities outside herself, through partaking in her world and receiving feedback, through being conscious and real, Janet was recreating herself. She had entered the process of becoming.

Gestalt playtherapy, which facilitated transformative self-discoveries, is suited to be applied in many client-contexts. As an intervention, which is specifically targeted at changing the template of thinking about the self into a self-affirming blueprint justifies further exploration and wide application. Considering that pre-school children are at a stage of their development, where they are naturally ready to develop a sense of purpose it was regarded as particularly suited to undertake this exploration for this age group, and it seems to be justified to offer other children such opportunities of becoming.
8. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The significant shifts in Janet’s agency were noticed by the teacher, the parents, the researcher and the key-informant. After such a remarkable response to intervention the matter of possible follow-up to ensure that Janet is contained in her new way of being, needed to be ensured. Yontef (1993) asserted that because of the impact of Gestalt therapy and the ease and the speed at which strong and buried issues can be accessed it is of particular importance to provide safety islands. He urged therapists to ensure therapeutic holding or support until a client is truly ready, and new ways of doing things are consolidated. The previously outlined steps (3.1 in this chapter) were built in as a precautionary measure in this regard. In the member-checking interview with Janet and the final discussion with her parents the researcher clarified how a re-referral could be instigated (3:3.5).

9. FINAL REMARKS

A brief reflection seems justified on the mandate set out by the profession of occupational therapy, challenging the development of health service delivery to all South Africans, in relationship to this study (Chapter 1: 2)

It is not the purpose of this study to make recommendations regarding paediatric occupational therapist’s role in the redressing of historical inequalities. It is however hoped that this study will stimulate thought on how to re-orientate practice to address pertinent promotion of well-being for pre-school children as a priority matter on a broad basis (3.1 in this chapter). Thereby the pre-school children in the population whose need is greatest in terms of developing a lifeposition of agency will be reached.

Studies on resiliency in children (Timmermans, Hassler & Booker; 1999) reveal that children, as all humans, have an inherent biological tendency to achieve wholeness. Aspiring wholeness finds expression in a dynamic flexible balance permitting recoil and regression, as well as rebound and progression (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; and Gil 1991).
This inherent ability that children have, despite grave adversities, can be facilitated and can produce remarkable personal growth within a very short space of time. Young children’s potential towards transformation needs to be taken seriously and should be incorporated in efforts of community transformation.

In conclusion the researcher wants to synthesize what she has discovered. It was found that agency is really a stance of the mind, an attitude, an inner state of awareness, directing actions. Action without directedness from an inner locus of control is not agency (personal research journal 5.4.02). This was best embraced by Wilcock’s view on humans as “being”, “doing” and “becoming “(1998), where inner energy and posture of the mind create a balance in which agency can be experienced and expressed. These processes were evident in the unleashing of five-year-old Janet’s agency through the transformative self-discoveries leading to her becoming.