# TEACHING THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILD: CHALLENGES TEACHERS ARE FACING

**Prof MAJ Olivier**
**And**
**Ms EE Williams**
*University of Port Elizabeth*

*This research study focused on the* special *nature (i.e. different from mainstream education) of special education and the experiences of teachers with regard to the challenges they face in teaching the mentally handicapped child. Special schoolteachers have the responsibility to offer not only good, but also highly individualized and goal-directed instruction. The aim with the research was to investigate the following research questions: What are the experiences of teachers regarding the major challenges they face in the education of the mentally handicapped child? What guidelines can be provided to these teachers? A qualitative study, with a descriptive, explorative, subjective and contextual research design was chosen, using a phenomenological approach to data collection. This inductive approach was considered to be appropriate for the investigation, because it would enable an in-depth investigation into the matter. The research was open and not directed by a conceptual framework or hypothesis. The research was undertaken in two phases: Phase one entailed an exploration and description of the experiences of teachers with regard to the challenges they face in teaching the mentally handicapped child. This was accomplished by conducting in-depth, personal phenomenological interviews at a specific special education school in Port Elizabeth. The research population was selected purposively in order to obtain rich information and participants were met in their own context. In Phase two, guidelines were derived from the results of Phase one, to assist teachers in teaching the mentally handicapped child, and to approach the challenges they experience more confidently and competently. Throughout the research, steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the proceedings, inter alia by using Guba's model of data verification. Ethical principles were also upheld throughout the study. The transcripts were analyzed by using the descriptive analysis method of Tesch (Creswell, 1994:155), as well as a re-coding procedure by an independent coder. Significant results were obtained and these serve as the basis for the guidelines that can be suggested.*

The mentally handicapped child has special educational needs and is thus often regarded as *special* in the sense that he requires assistance and support to overcome contextual, social and individual difficulties. These difficulties may also include slow cognitive development (reasoning, problem-solving, remembering and generalizing), as well as slow language development (Gulliford and Upton, 1992).

The learner with special educational needs finds it difficult to comply with the demands and expectations of society, possibly because of his perceived lack of performance or potential

(Stakes and Hornby, 1997). He is often treated with little interest or sympathy, with uneasiness, fear, embarrassment and/or even disgust.

In South Africa the learner with special educational needs is currently accommodated in Special Schools that cater for his specific needs. However, the South African special education system is currently under review. The Bill of Rights (The South African Constitutional Assembly, 1996) provides a framework for inclusive education in the country (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997). It is expected that specialized assistance will be made available through mainstream education in future and that the curriculum will become flexible enough to accommodate the special needs of, in this case, also the mentally handicapped child (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997).

The educator of a mentally handicapped child must do much more than simply follow a fixed and prescribed curriculum, because the educator constantly has to adapt to the specific and unique special needs of the individual mentally handicapped child. The educator should therefore be knowledgeable about the abilities of and circumstances in which the child learns best (Wolfendale, 1993). It has to be understood that the mentally handicapped child has limited reasoning powers and conceptual ability at his/her disposal. This fact has to be grasped intellectually and adjusted to. The educator has to be mentally and emotionally prepared to give the child adequate support. The educator is expected to feel empathy for him, not pity. Yet he should not become over-involved as the primary educator, but play a complementary role to that of the parents (Steenkamp, 1979).

In this article it is argued that many *teachers* of the mentally handicapped child experience an *inability* to handle their occupational situation efficiently and they find it hard to cope with the unique demands of their daily task, such as that a mentally handicapped child requires much more than ordinary educational teaching and assistance. For example, in planning learning programmes, cognizance should be taken of their specific needs (Steenkamp, 197919). Another common complaint of these teachers is that the mentally handicapped child is either neglected or overprotected by his/her parents. These teachers' voices need to be heard by the Education fraternity they work for, in order for their needs to be addressed.

This study proposes to investigate the problems and challenges experienced by the teachers of the mentally handicapped child and will conclude with some guidelines for addressing their needs.

**Statement of the Problem**
Very often the educator of the mentally handicapped child is faced with unique challenges that go far beyond the normal requirements of teaching. Not only must the special needs themselves be addressed, but the parent-teacher interaction also needs serious consideration. Uncertainty about the division of responsibilities between parent and teacher can be extremely stressful for the teacher.

Based on the realities in the practice of special education, the following research problems were formulated:

Primary research problem:
- *What are the experiences of teachers of the major challenges they face in the education of the mentally handicapped child?*

Secondary research problem:
- *Which guidelines can be provided to the teacher as educator of the mentally handicapped child to support and assist him in this challenging educational task?*

**Aim of the Research**
The objectives of the research are directly in line with the formulated research problems and therefore are to explore and describe what the teacher's experiences are of the major challenges he/she faces in the education of the mentally handicapped child; and to formulate guidelines for

the teacher for handling more effectively the difficult problems he/she faces in meeting the specific needs of the mentally handicapped child.

*Clarification of the Concepts*
The concepts relevant to this research study, namely *mentally handicapped child* and s*pecial needs* are briefly clarified as follows:

According to Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) the most commonly used definition for the mentally handicapped child specifies that in order for a person to be considered mentally handicapped, he/she has to meet two criteria:
- low intellectual functioning;
- low adaptive skills.

The mentally handicapped child deviates from the majority of children in body, mind or behaviour, to such an extent that he cannot derive sufficient benefit, make progress or develop from the instruction provided in mainstream education. He requires education of a specialised nature to facilitate his adaptation, and should not attend an ordinary class in an ordinary school (because such attendance may be harmful to himself or to other learners in that class), but he is nevertheless partially educable (Steenkamp and Steenkamp, 1992).

For the purpose of *this study*, the concept *mentally handicapped child* will refer to a child whose intellectual functioning is significantly below average and whose level of development lags behind in comparison with children of the same chronological age. Therefore, he finds it difficult to adapt to the learning situation.

Special needs exist where learners require special help and support if they are to overcome the particular contextual, social and individual disadvantages they face (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997). The concept of special needs should include personal and social needs, as well as educational needs (Gulliford and Upton, 1992). Special educational needs require the provision of different or additional resources for children on account of some degree of disability or impairment (Riddell and Brown, 1994).

For the purpose of *this study*, special needs refer to additional identified educational needs to those of a child in mainstream education, particularly experienced by the mentally handicapped child.

*Research Design*
The broad focus of the study was on the various problems faced by teachers involved in the education of the mentally handicapped child.

The research of *this study* was of a nature that was qualitative (interested in meaning rather than outcomes), exploratory (exploring a phenomenon), descriptive (describing something new), inductive (without preconceived ideas), holistic (looking at the bigger picture), interpretive (trying to understand meaning) and contextual (in the everyday setting) (Burns and Grove, 1993; Mouton and Marais, 1994; Creswell, 1998; Fraenkel and Wallen, 1993).

Qualitative research is often called *phenomenological* (going to the phenomenon itself), *hermeneutical* (interpreting the experiences of the participants), *naturalistic* (giving a true reflection of the participant's situation) or *constructivist* (with the emphasis on the participant constructing the conceptualizations) (Creswell, 1994).

**Method**
*This research study* was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved the exploration and description of the major challenges experienced by the teachers of the mentally handicapped child. In Phase 2 guidelines were derived from the results of Phase 1. In both cases a literature control was undertaken to verify the outcomes.

**Sampling of respondents**

Sampling refers to the process of selecting the sample from a population to obtain information regarding a phenomenon in a way that ensures that the population will be represented (Brink, 1991). The idea in qualitative research is to select participants who are best able to give the researcher access to a special perspective, experience or condition which the researcher wishes to understand (Morse, 1994; Yegidis and Weinbach, 1996).

The participants in *this research* were consciously and purposively selected (De Vos, 1998). Their ages differed from 20 to 58 years and they were representative of diverse gender, language, race, socio-economic and religious groups. They were a homogeneous group in that they were all employed at a school for the mentally handicapped child, where they had to face the challenges of teaching such children. They were therefore able to supply the researcher with rich information on the topic of investigation (Patton, 1990).

*Data collection*
During *this study* in-depth phenomenological interviews were held with individual participants to assist the researcher in identifying their primary experiences, perceptions and opinions and are concerned with the unique contribution of the participant (Kvale, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher used an audiotape recorder to capture the interviews (Burns and Grove, 1993). The personal interview in this study was based on the following open-ended research question:

> *What do you experience as the major challenges in teaching the mentally handicapped child?*

An open-ended question encourages fluency and rich disclosure of information (Kock, 1996). The interviews in this research were conducted until a point of saturation was reached and no new information was gathered (Kvale, 1996).

The role of the researcher in *this research* was that of the research instrument who facilitated the discussion, posed the research question and created an atmosphere conducive to discourse, in order to encourage the participants to speak freely (Silverman, 1998). During the interviews field notes were taken by a research observer, to ensure triangulation (Potter, 1996).

The results of Phase 1 served as data for Phase 2 and were used as basis from which the guidelines could be derived (Copi, 1986).

Data analysis
Data analysis entails gathering information, determining themes, allocating information into categories and, ultimately, writing a qualitative report (Creswell, 1994).

The data analysis for *this study* involved the verbatim transcription of the tape recording of each interview. Thereafter the information was analyzed by means of the descriptive analysis of Tesch (Creswell, 1994). The transcribed interviews were coded to derive the themes and categories that formed the basis of this research (Creswell, 1994). An experienced qualitative researcher was requested to serve as the independent re-coder. After the researcher and independent coder had both analyzed the material, a discussion took place between them to reach consensus on the identified themes, categories and sub- categories (De Vos, 1998).

Literature control
The results have subsequently also been confirmed by a literature control. The results of *this research study* were compared with the results of other research studies previously undertaken around this topic in order to determine differences, similarities, gaps and unique contributions (Poggenpoel, 1993). When the literature verifies the findings, it increases the reliability of the research (Woods and Catanzaro, 1988).

Furthermore a literature check was performed to verify the guidelines generated during Phase 2. The proposed guidelines were also discussed with the participants, as well as professional role players in Special Education, such as psychologists and therapists. It was furthermore subjected to peer assessment.

*Trustworthiness*
In qualitative research the same measures used in quantitative research to ensure reliability and validity, cannot be applied. Trustworthiness then becomes the quest to produce results through qualitative research that can be trusted and are *worth paying attention to* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In *this research* Guba's model was adhered to (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to ensure trustworthiness. The principles of credibility (checking the truth-value), transferability (the strategy used to attain applicability), dependability (refers to the consistency of the findings) and confirmability (using the criterion of neutrality as freedom of bias) were maintained. The strategies to ensure trustworthiness in this research study are contained in the attached Annexure 1 of this article.

Ethical measures
The researcher has the responsibility to protect the participants throughout a research study (Creswell, 1994).
For the purpose of *this study* the following ethical measures were adhered to: confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, prior informed consent of participants and the principal, as well as full disclosure of information about the research (Kvale, 1996).

*Results*
Through data analysis, two themes emerged during the research. Under each theme various categories and sub-categories were identified.

In the first theme, the categories described represent the challenging nature of special education. Theme two gives an exposition of the needs expressed by teachers of handicapped children.

**Theme 1 : Special Education is challenging by its very nature**
The participating teachers stated that special demands were made on them by the *specific nature of special education*. They specifically referred to the following aspects:

(a)      Special education is *different* from mainstream education
The participants highlighted the following problems with regard to the challenge of teaching the handicapped child: the different levels of potential and ability of the learners in the same group, communication problems created by language differences in one group, and disciplinary problems they experienced in the class.

The fact that special education is more demanding than mainstream education was also confirmed in the literature. Wolfendale (1992) emphasizes that the skills and expertise needed for special needs teaching are clearly different from the teaching skills required for mainstream learners. Bos and Vaughn (1994) therefore contend that teachers need special training for this task.

Differences between special education and mainstream education were further differentiated with regard to intellectual ability and language differences.

(i)      Different *levels* of intellectual ability
The participant teachers, especially those teachers who came from mainstream education to special education, observed that they found it difficult to adjust to the differences in the *intellectual levels* of learners of the same age in one group.
*Our classes at present is* [sic] *divided into age, the age of the child, and not to the abilities.*

*This is also a big challenge, as you have mentally handicapped children who have different levels of ability in one class.*

Individual differences are evident in classes for the mentally handicapped child, even more so than in the mainstream class. Some mentally handicapped children are multi-handicapped, making it even more difficult for the teacher. It is therefore essential for the teacher to

differentiate and to decide on the appropriate teaching style to stimulate and facilitate curiosity and creativity and to allow the child to progress at his/her own pace (Friel, 1995).

(ii)     Different *languages*
Spoken language is an important medium of communication between people and it is essential for the mentally handicapped child to be taught to express himself verbally.  Unfortunately, it is often difficult to communicate effectively in class, because frequently there is a need for a third language to be used by the teacher, who may not be fluent in this language.

Comments from the teachers interviewed included the following:

*We've got kids from three, basically three language groups. English, Afrikaans and Xhosa. I don't think I'm capable of really talking to a child or training a child in Xhosa, especially a mentally handicapped child. It's, it's very, very difficult.*

*In the class, I had different languages ... I didn't have to be bilingual, but trilingual.*

Teachers have to understand and honour their learners' culture and language, in order to meet their needs (Fletcher and Boss, 1999).  These teachers try but are not able to comprehend and communicate in the learner's mother tongue and therefore valuable teaching moments are lost.

(b)      *Discipline* in the mentally disabled class is more complicated
Teachers were of the opinion that disciplinary or behavioural problems might occur for various reasons in the classroom of mentally handicapped learners, such as a short attention span or lack of understanding. Their comments included the following:

*Another thing that I found very challenging, was the discipline. How do we discipline these children in a severely mentally handicapped school? Do they really understand what is discipline ? for what purpose, and why?*

*Their attention span is very short ... They become restless ...*

Mentally handicapped learners tend to be very restless, moody and sensitive, which demands a lot of effort and energy from teachers to maintain discipline in the class (Baum, 1982:52).

(c)      Special education involves additional *work* and *responsibility*
From the comments made by the teachers interviewed, it was clear that teaching the mentally handicapped child entailed a lot of additional work and responsibilities.  They made numerous references to the fact that they serve not only as teachers, but also had to assume the roles of class aid, nurse, social worker and therapist:
*I had to prepare different lessons, different activities, and it meant a lot of work.*

*I must simplify each little word and first explain it.*

*We have a shortage of teachers' assistants.  Therefore the teachers themselves must help out.*

It was confirmed in the literature that the fact that the learners do not achieve equally and instructions have to suit each child's ability, required the teacher to do a lot of preparatory work (Steenkamp and Steenkamp, 1992).  The teacher has to plan adaptation activities and material to ensure the learners' participation.

(d)      A *stigma* is attached to special education
During the interviews, some of the teachers stated that there was a stigma attached to special education.  These teachers reported that the stigma was obvious from the reflections of attitudes of other persons, especially colleagues in mainstream education and society in general.
*The other teachers, uhm, the staff at other schools, actually look down on us who are associated with the special school.*

> *It seems that, uhm, people think we are, uhm, less than, uhm, our child is less than a normal child. The society seems to think that way about our children.*

Teachers of mentally handicapped children often lack the support, acknowledgement and appreciation they deserve. Furthermore the stigma is often linked to the low academic status of the school and converted to the teachers of the school (Norwich, 1990:113).

(e)        Special education causes *stress* for the teacher

The problems and frustrations expressed by the teachers were obviously experienced as very tiring and stressful.

> *Teaching at the school can be very tiresome, as we have to encounter many problems.*

> *I admit that it can be very difficult and stressful at times.*

Teachers of mentally handicapped children need enormous resources of patience, and empathy. They often feel drained and experience emotions such as guilt, anger and irritation. Apart from the heavy emotional toll it takes, this exhausting and stressful situation can also affect the teachers' personal health and family life (McGrath, 1995:8).

(f)        Special education can also be highly *fulfilling* and rewarding
Despite their many problems, frustrations and concerns, the teachers interviewed emphasized that they found their work fulfilling and rewarding. Comments to this effect included the following:

> *It is not always easy to teach the mentally handicapped child, but it is very rewarding.*

> *It's so much more fulfilling than working with a mainstream school child.*

Riddell and Brown (1994) confirmed this fact in their research. Although these children may not have the ability, they are generally eager to learn and the rewards come after the struggle, when something is actually eventually achieved.

**Theme 2**: *Teachers in Special Education display special needs*
The second theme revolved around the fact that teachers of mentally handicapped learners displayed special needs. They expressed the following clearly identifiable needs:

(a)        A need for *orientation* and *experience* with regard to their task
Teachers of mentally handicapped learners find it difficult to fulfil their task, because they are not often adequately orientated with regard to what would be expected of them. According to some of the teachers interviewed, they found it hard to adjust to the new situation, as they had no prior background experience of special school teaching.

> *Uhm, there was no orientation, which I think is very important for a new teacher, especially from a mainstream school ….*

> *There was no orientation, nobody helped me, nobody explained to me what type of child I'm actually dealing with.*

> *You know, I was in a sort of adapt-or-die situation … I was either gonna survive here and become more comfortable with the children, or not at all.*

> *Here you cannot expect to walk in and work as if you are teaching normal children.*

> *It was a totally new experience for me and very challenging.*

Gerber, Nel and Van Dyk (1995) contended that all newly appointed staff should receive induction training to reduce adjustment problems by instilling a sense of security and confidence. Fink (1992:47) also emphasizes the importance of the introduction and preparation of new employees for the demands of a new working environment. The management of the institution should initiate such a program.

Hutchinson (1982) argues that a limited range of educational experiences was often matched by low expectations. It confirms the contention that a more experienced teacher will be more equipped to live up to increased challenges in the teaching context.

(b)      A need for *specialized training*
An important need that clearly emerged in the reports of the participants was their need for special training.

> *.. and there was no training for us, no workshops, no training for severely mentally handicapped children, and it became very difficult.*

> *I think if the Department was fair enough, teachers dealing with these learners should receive special training ….*

Hellriegel, Jackson and Slocum (1999), highlighted the important role of special training and development in overcoming certain limitations in the basic training of teachers.

(c)      A need for *support*
It seems from the statements made by the participating teachers that they themselves also experienced a need for support. They expressed a need for support by experts in the field, from the Department of Education, eg in-service training regarding the curriculum and inclusive education, from parents who do not adequately care for their children, or overprotect them, or foster unrealistic expectations of their children and from their community and society at large.

A general concern expressed by most of the teachers interviewed was that they had no assistance from professional experts to deal with the many physical and psychological problems experienced by teachers. They complained that they *have no occupational therapists to assist, to assist us in working out activities that are suitable for the learners. Also we do, uhm, not have any psychologists, educational therapists or speech therapists – there is nobody that has the expertise that we can turn to. We need medical personnel ... a social worker.*

According to Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) teachers need to collaborate with other professionals in identifying and making maximum use of learners' abilities. Gulliford and Upton (1992:69) further explained that special education requires collaboration and a multi-disciplinary team approach.

The participants furthermore expressed rather negative feelings towards the Department of Education, due to a perceived lack of support. The teachers also expressed concern about changes in education (inclusion) and job insecurity of staff in special schools.
> *We have requested an OBE, uhm, workshop to be done for us. Nothing has materialized. We do not know if we are doing the right or wrong with regard to the curriculum.*

Tomlinson (1982:139) states that it is not particularly surprising that special school teachers should be confused as to the nature of the special school curriculum and its aims and objectives, as they operated within an ambiguous frame of reference. Hegarty (1993) contends that local education authorities must assume a more active role in in-service training.

The teachers interviewed further voiced their disappointment and dissatisfaction about the general lack of parental involvement and interest at their school. *The parental involvement ... it's almost non-existent ... as if the parents are only too happy to see their children off at the school* Closely linked to this is inadequate care for the mentally handicapped child by his parents. Parents are sometimes also overprotective and in other cases they have unrealistic expectations of their children and the teachers.

> *Sometimes the parents neglect their children. Some are not well cared for. Uhm, they do not receive enough food ... they are not even washed.*

> *According to the overprotective parent, the child can do no wrong.*

> *I said the expectations of the parents were too high from this type of child ..*

Hegarty (1993) also expressed concern about the fact that parents were more than happy for schools to take over full responsibility for their children's education and care.  They also often display a lack of understanding for the child (Fine, 1991).

The teachers who took part in the research were of the opinion that the community and society in general were apathetic and ignorant, which could possibly be ascribed to a lack of communication.  Such apathy means few sponsors and little financial support.
> *We have little or no community support.*

Many special schools rely heavily on money raised from the community within which the school is located (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997; Hegarty, 1993).  Where there is little interest in the disabled and they are treated in an uncaring manner, the school will be at a disadvantage.

(d)      A need for *resources*
Teachers were dis-empowered by a lack of resources to enable them to fulfil their task, because they *are experiencing a shortage of apparatus.  There was also not enough resource material to assist me ....*   The resources used by the teacher have a major influence on what and how information and skills are taught (Bos and Vaughn, 1994).

(e)      A need for strong *leadership* and *management*.
The participant teachers commented about various aspects of leadership and management, such as a lack of co-operation and transparency at the school, and a non-democratic style.
> *.. the school is run in a more autocratic way, which is reminiscent of the old South Africa ..*

The principal of a special school has to be innovative, flexible and should seek co-operation from all role-players to ensure the efficient functioning of his/her school.  That would include the provision of resources, being a resource regarding instruction, a visible presence, and good communication skills (Harber and Davies (1997).

GUIDELINES TO ASSIST TEACHERS OF MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN
Guidelines were derived from the results to assist teachers of mentally handicapped children in coping with the challenges and needs as revealed by this investigation.

Guidelines in respect of the *first theme*, special education is challenging by its very nature include the following:

1.  To address the challenges posed by the different levels of development, intellectual abilities and languages of the learners in one class (see Theme 1), the following strategies and approaches could be employed:

*(i)      The employment of additional staff*
The employment of experts and assistants, such as psychologists, occupational, physio- and speech therapists, as well as nurses and class aides, whether on a permanent or temporary, paid or voluntary basis, would make a significant contribution to alleviating the pressure on teachers at special education schools.

*(ii)     The use of a variety of classroom strategies*
The teacher could consider a variety of methods of presentation in the class.  The volume of work to be taught could be reconsidered and the work could be arranged in smaller chunks (Engelbrecht and Green, 2001).  Helpful devices, such as audio-tapes, video recordings and computers could also be incorporated.  A well-organised teacher will probably also find it easier to handle the diversity in the classroom, eg early arrival to prepare the classroom and *to-do* lists of priorities.

*(iii)       Different groupings with appropriate curricula*
Age-appropriate curricula are suggested to facilitate the differences between the phases.  In the junior phase (6-9 years) the focus can be more on perceptual and motor, safety, communication and socialisation skills, body image and basic reading and numeracy skills (Engelbrecht and Green, 2001).  In the middle phase (9-12 years) the focus can be on socialisation, self-sufficiency, communication, motor co-ordination and more functional academic skills, which allow greater independence.  In the senior phase (12-18 years) career-related activities, such as handwork, painting and cooking can be introduced, as well as sexuality education.
The later years of the senior phase can be seen as a preparation for an occupation.  Learners with profound mental impairment can be focused on practical skills, such as self-care, motor development, socialisation and safety.  On-the-job training and part-time placements can be arranged for older learners (Hegarty, 1993)

*iv)        An aappropriate record system*
In order to enable teachers to place learners in the appropriate group, proper records of progress and achievement should be kept.  A personal information file should be opened for each learner, as well as a personal assessment portfolio.  This record should accompany the learner throughout his learning path and should be retained as visible proof of his development (Government Gazette, 1998).

*v)         Appointment of tutors and class assistants*
With regard to the language dilemma faced by teachers, they could appoint peer tutors as an invaluable source of assistance (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1997).  In this way pupils could effectively tutor one another and develop peer networks.  It is also an inexpensive source of assistance.  Parents and other community volunteers could also stand in as class assistants for language translations (Williams and Snipper, 1990).

2.  It was further evident from the results obtained in Theme 1 that discipline was a challenging issue for teachers in special education.  Various ways and means of addressing the issue of discipline can include (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1997; Bos and Vaugn, 1994; Steenkamp and Steenkamp, 1992; Bernard, 1990): a code of conduct (disciplinary policy) for the school, classroom rules, routine and order, a balanced approach, flexibility, class mentors, setting up a reward system, stronger capacity, prefects or monitors, collaboration with families, and behaviour management workshops.

3.  The results obtained under Theme 1 also indicated that special education involved extra work and responsibility, and therefore causes stress.  Various strategies and techniques could be employed to address this problem: Systematic planning is essential (Gulliford and Upton, 1992).  The teacher also has to be resourceful, as she has to change an activity or instructional material midstream when it is clear that a planned programme does not have the desired results (Steenkamp and Steenkamp, 1992).  Teachers should remain students to keep up with the latest developments in the field of special education. Teachers could also benefit from life skills training, by developing a positive outlook on life, and good interpersonal relationships (Dunham, 1992), to handle the stress they experience.

4. To address the reality of the stigma attached to special education, improved interaction between mainstream and special education schools as well as the community and society at large, can be suggested.

Guidelines in respect of the *second theme*, Teachers in special education display special needs include orientation courses, adjustment, experience, specialized training and mentoring programs for teachers (Dunham, 1992).

1.  To address the identified need for orientation, management could design and implement a preparation and adjustment program and mentoring for new teachers (Donald, Lazarus and

Lolwana (1997) to ensure that the teacher assumes his/her duties in a productive manner, without insecurity.

2.  Specialised teacher training by tertiary institutions and through in-service workshops is the appropriate avenue to equip teachers with the skills and competencies they need to address their task.

3.  Effective in-service staff development workshops are vital for the development of appropriate teaching strategies.  These workshops should be preceded by a needs assessment. The following, according to Engelbrecht and Green (2001), are some categories of activities that may emerge during staff development initiatives:
    - An analysis of barriers to learning and participation.
    - Deciding on a target issue.
    - Problem-solving and solution finding.
    - Setting of success criteria.

4.  Strategies that could be adopted to provide teachers in special education with the required support are
    - teacher support groups (Dunham,1992)
    - a staff welfare policy (Bernard, 1990)
    - peer group support (Bernard, 1990)
    - voluntary expert support from the community.

An urgent requirement of teachers is active support from the Department of Education through the following:
    - The Department could send delegations around to schools to advise and support teachers on relevant issues.
    - Officials of the Department should give demonstration lessons in order for teachers to observe how to work with a mentally handicapped child.
    - Workshops could be arranged to enlighten teachers on curriculum matters.
    - Supporting means, such as finance, material and resources, are very important and should be provided by the Department of Education.

Programs for the development of parent support, empowerment and co-operation could be facilitated through home visits (to establish contact and interaction) and parent-teacher partnerships.  Teachers could encourage parents to play a more active role at the school, such as painting the school or providing the school with legal advice, depending on the skills and competencies of the parent (Engelbrecht and Green, 2001; Shea and Bauer, 1985).

From the results it would seem as if there is a serious need for support from the community.  Community support would include family members, volunteers, non-governmental organizations and the business sector.  The following are possible activities and strategies to obtain community support:
    - Awareness and information campaigns.  Newsletters and brochures could be sent to businesses, firms and churches.
    - Media campaigns.  Articles could be placed in the local community newspapers on the achievements of and challenges facing mentally handicapped children.
    - Involving the community in school activities, eg by means of invitations to open days and involving the learners in community projects, eg making greeting cards for old age homes.
    - Using the school as center for community development, such as education programs for illiterate members of society, and making the school facilities available for community use, eg the hall, the sport fields (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 1997).
    - Utilizing community services.  The community could share their expertise by offering art, dance or music lessons to the mentally handicapped child and exposing him to social experiences through concerts and performances in the community.

5.      The need for resources in the school for the mentally handicapped child has to be addressed to prevent the child from suffering. This could be done by means of a resource network and sponsoring bodies (Norwich, 1990:37), as well as twinning relationships with other schools.

6.      The need for strong leadership could be fulfilled by the principal, through understanding, support, good relationships, involvement of teachers and a democratic management style. The principal can consider
-      discussing the vision for the school with the teachers;
-      the educational goals to be striven for;
-      a school leader development program;
-      good communication channels (regular meetings, democratic decision-making and participation of teachers)

**Conclusion**

This study explored and highlighted the challenges posed by special education and identified the special needs displayed by special education teachers. The teachers daily accompany the mentally handicapped child, with his many needs, problems, joys and sadness and, especially, his (or her) daily struggle at school to understand, to learn, and to develop, to finally take his place in society. Guidelines were provided to assist teachers in this important task. Teachers in special education, as well as the mentally handicapped child, will be the ultimate beneficiaries of any good action, however small, that may flow from this study, and it was for the sake of every single one of them that this study was undertaken.

**References**

Baum, D. ( 1982). *The human side of exeptionality.* Baltimore: University Park Press.

Bernard, M. ( 1990). *Taking the stress out of teaching.* Melbourne: Collins Dove Publishers.

Bos, C. and Vaugn, S. (1994). *Strategies for teaching students with learning and behaviour problems.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Brink, H. ( 1991). Quantitative vs qualitative research. *Nursing RSA Verpleging*, 6(1):14-16.

Burns, N. and Grove, S. ( 19930. *The practice of nursing research: Conduct, critique and utilisation.* Second edition. Philadelphia: Saunders.

Copi, M. (1986). *Informal logic.* New York: MacMillan.

Creswell, J.(1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches.* London: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design. Choosing among five traditions.* California: Sage publications.

De Vos, A. (Ed.) (1998). *Research atgrassroots.* Pretoria: J L van Schaik Publishers.

Donald, D., Lazarus, S. and Lolwana, P. (1997). *Educational psychology in social context. Challenges of developing social issues and special needs in South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Dunham, J. (1992). *Stress in teaching.* London: Routledge.

Engelbrecht, P. and Green, L. (2001). *Promoting learner development.* Cape Town: J L van Schaik Publishers.

Fine, M. (1991). *Collaboration with parents of exceptional children.* Brandon: Clinical Psychology Publishing Company.

Fink, L. (1992). *New and junior faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Fletcher, T. and Bos, C. (1999). *Helping individuals with disabilities and their families.* Arizona: Bilingual Review Press.

Fraenkel, J. and Wallen, N. (1993). *How to design and evaluate research in education. New York: McGrw-Hill Inc.*

Friel, J. (1995). *Children with special needs. Assessment, law and practice.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gerber, P., Nel, P. and Van Dyk, P. (1995). *Human resources management.* Halfway House: Southern Publishers.

Government Gazette (1998). Pretoria: Government Printers.

Gulliford, R. and Upton, G. (1992). *Special educational needs*. London: Routledge.

Hallahan, D. and Kauffman, J. (1997). *Exceptional learners. Introduction to special education,* 7th edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Harber, C. and Davies, L. (1997). *School management and effectiveness in developing countries.* London: Cassell.

Hegarty, S. (1993). *Meeting special needs in ordinary schools*. London: Cassell.

Hellriegel, D., Jackson, S. and Slocum, J. (1999). *Management.* Eighth edition. Cincinnati Ohio: South Western College Publishing.

Hutchinson, D. (1982). *Work preparation for the handicapped*. London: Croon Helm.

Kock, T. (1996). Implementation of hermeneutical inquiry in nursing philosophy, rigor and representation. *Journal of Advanced Nursing,* 24:174-184.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews. An introduction of qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E.(1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage Publications.

McGrath, M. (1995). *Teachers today.* California: Corwin Press Inc.

Morse, J. (1994). *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. California: Sage Publications.

Mouton, J. and Marais, H. (1994). *Basiese begrippe: Metodologie van die geesteswetenskappe*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Norwich, B. (1990). *Special needs in ordinary schools – Reappraising special needs education.* London: Cassell.

Patton, M.(1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Second edition. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Poggenpoel, M. (1993). Phenomenological research. Johannesburg: Rand Afrikaans University.

Potter, W. (). *An analysis of thinking and research about qualitative methods.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum associates.

Riddell, S. and Brown, S. (1994). *Special educational needs policy in the 1990's*. London and New York: Routledge.

Shea, T. and Bauer, M. (1985). *Parents and teachers of exceptional students*. London: Allyn and Bacon.

Silverman, D. (1998). *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*. London: Sage Publications.

Stakes, R. and Hornby, G. (1997). *Change in special education*. London: Cassell.

Steenkamp, E. (1979). *Die verstandelik gestremde kind: 'n Handleiding vir dagsentra*. Durban and Pretoria: Butterworths.

Steenkamp, E. and Steenkamp, W. (1992). *The intellectually handicapped child: A manual for parents, teachers and related professions*. Durban: Butterworths.

*The Constitution of South Africa*, (1996) (Act 108). Pretoria: Government  Printers.

Tomlinson, S. (1982). *A sociology of special education*. London: Routledge.

Williams, J. and Snipper, G. (1990). *Literacy and bilingualism.* New York: Longman.

Wolfendale, S. (1992). *Primary schools and special needs.* London: Cassell.

Wolfendale, S. (1993). *Assessing special educational needs*. London: Cassell.

Woods, N. and Catanzaro, M. (1988). *Nursing research: Theory and practice.* St. Louis: The C.V. Mosby Company.

Yegidis, L. and Weinbach, R. (1996). *Research methods for social workers.* Second edition. Needham Heights, M A: Allyn and Bacon.