

This paper deals with:

- 1 What is the Action Research Project?**
- 2 The Development of the core-group and the multi-disciplinary team.**
- 3 The dynamic processes which developed in the creation of a multi-disciplinary team.**

A What is the 'Action Research Project for and on The Handicapped'?

The Action Research Project is a research and action plan conducted within the Institute for Health Care at the University of Malta. Thus the University is not only concerning itself with the research for the handicapped but also with action. This means that wherever there is the possibility, for an action or an immediate intervention this is taken, when there is the need of an intervention but the required services do not exist or these cannot cope with the demand, the Action Research makes recommendations. In other words, Action Research is taking the necessary steps during the research study itself without waiting till all research is finished. What is the Action Research studying? The Action Research is conducting a study on the type of handicaps present in children attending Government Special Schools; and it proposes an action plan for every child including the development of the necessary health, education, and social services required to improve the quality of life of these children with special needs and their families. Mrs Maureen Cole and Dr.Sarah Portelli will give details on these topics in their papers.

B. The Historical development of the Action Research Project within the Institute for Health Care.

There were two important instances in the setting up of the Multi-disciplinary team of the Action Research Project:

1. First of all, there was the formation of the core-group consisting of the sociologist - Professor Mario Vassallo, Profs. Alfred Cuschieri, Professor in Genetics, myself as a psychologist, Dr. Sarah Portelli, a specialist in children with problems in the community and Mrs. Maureen Cole, social worker. The core-group is responsible for the creation of the tools for research and the research itself.

2. When the core group established the parameters on which the Action Research Project will have to develop, we started contacting the other professionals of the team. We did this through Dr. John Giglio, the Chief Government Medical Officer with regards to professionals working with the Health Department and through Mr. Frederick Fearn, Director of Education, in regards to those working with the Education Department.

I would like here to take the opportunity to thank them for their co-operation. Without their backing, the "core-group" would have never been able to form a multi-disciplinary team with so many members, and of such a high professional level.

The other professionals forming this team are from the Education Department:

Mr. George Samuel, Education Officer, Special Education
Mr. Anthony Vidal, Head of Wardija School
Teachers at Wardija School
Mr. Carmel Grech, Speech Therapist
Mr. Martin Micallef, Clinical Psychologist.

From the Department of Health:

Dr. Paul Vassallo Agius, Head of Paediatrics Department, St. Luke's Hospital.
Dr. Victoria Farrugia Sant' Angelo, Clinical Research Assistant.
Mr. Francis Laus, Dental Hygienist
Ms. Eileen Ritchie, Physiotherapist
Mr. Francis Saliba, Audiometric Technician
Mr. Mario Scicluna, Occupational Therapist
Dr. Anton Azzopardi Giappone, Ophthalmologist
Mrs. Carmen Borg, Project Nurse.

From the University:

Profs.Mario Vassallo, Sociologist & Project Co-ordinator
Profs.Alfred Cuschieri, Consultant Medical Geneticist
Mrs.Maureen Cole, Social Worker
Dr.Sarah Portelli, MD Specialised in Community Care for Children
Dr.Elena Tanti Burlo', Clinical Psychologist

I would like to mention an important person, who aided by her personal quality and professional qualifications, realised and developed the role of the nurse, within the team. Infact, the nurse is the important link between the “core-group”, the rest of the team, the school and parents.

Mention must go to Mrs.Carmen George the Secretary of the Institute for Health Care, as the person who with great patience types all our material.

C. Dynamic processes that developed in the setting of the Multi-Disciplinary team.

Almost every member of the team was used to work on his own, taking the client's case history, make his assessment and serve him without anybody “poking his nose” into the matter. When all the team met, various problems were discussed:-

1. Standardization mainly for the research part of the project.
2. Immediately we realised that it was impossible for all members of the team to meet the parents to gather the history of the child. We decided this not because we did not want to dedicate the time for the parents but we didn't want to make the parents repeat unnecessarily the story for more than ten times and hurriedly.

With regards to parents, our aim is that these will have, and feel that they have, enough time to express themselves in a relaxed manner, and for them to be able to consider certain details.

Thus, the “tug of war” between the professionals started. Every professional began feeling that there was someone who was going to meddle in his field of action. Everybody felt that it was impossible to work without meeting the parents. One meeting after another the problem kept cropping up even though with certain ‘wishful thinking’ we tried to believe that the final decision was taken. Through this decision it was agreed that everyone will propose the question he would like to ask the parents and then the ‘core group’ will gather all the information through two questionnaires. One of the questionnaires was to be filled in by the Social Worker while visiting the

home of the child and the other to be filled in by the community medical doctor and the clinical psychologist.

The most important thing that I observed in the team was that during the discussions to revise the traditional and sectorial roles of the professionals, there was great resistance. In the most natural way, everyone of us was defending his profession. This antagonism, although I believe it was very productive, seemed to evaporate when the team met to discuss the children during the Case Conference. Professional interests were set aside, in the most natural way also, and thus the team's focus was transferred onto the child.

The strength, being that everyone of us had to set aside personal and professional interest at the basis of the reciprocal respect that we developed towards each other.