



# How can occupational therapy be used to support people in schools?

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### Abstract

The following literature review explores the methods used by occupational therapists to support children and young people within schools. The use of the whole population program, targeted services as well as intensive occupational therapy within schools will be identified and explained. The literature review will state why each service is necessary to address the different needs of children and young people allowing them to develop at their own rate within the framework of mainstream education.

### Keywords

Occupational Therapy, Children and Young People, Whole Population Program, Targeted Services, Intensive Occupational Therapy

### Background

In 2016, the Scottish Government introduced a new policy aimed at Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) working with children and young people. AHPs are made up of 11 distinct professions and it enabled them to find common links across their professions allowing skills and expert knowledge to be shared and therefore giving the child or young person a more effective and simplified experience. This new way of thinking has been reinforced by the Children and Young People's Scotland Act 2014, the main principles of Getting it Right for Every Child, as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Scottish Government, 2016).

Occupational therapists are one of the largest professions within the AHP family and along with speech and language therapists and physiotherapists work within education. Occupational therapy allows for people to improve their daily life by providing advice, reassurance, support, assessment and intervention.

Occupational therapy is therefore necessary in schools across the country to allow for experts to quickly address issues concerning certain children and young people enabling them to develop their skills to participate in everyday activities (NHS Foundation Trust, 2018).

The next section of this report will summarise the available literature to identify three main methods that occupational therapists currently apply within schools in order to develop the lives of children and young people. Furthermore, in terms of validity, this report will identify certain limitations to its findings and will suggest where further research could be found.

### Whole Population Programmes

There are many aspects of the literature which describe and analyse a similar approach to occupational therapy which has been implemented by the Scottish Government. Prior to this new way of thinking, an individual child would be referred directly to an occupational

therapy service, which was separate from their schooling, formally known as a targeted service. The schools and families concerned played a distant role in the process resulting in support being limited. Children were therefore going to a separate occupational therapy service, which often caused waiting lists to be long and, in some cases, delayed the child's development even further. (Hutton, 2009).

There has now however, been a shift from targeted services to a whole population approach catered to address the needs of all children and young people (Hutton, et al, 2016). As well as making the service more efficient, it is believed that this new approach will enable children with mild or moderate needs to quickly be addressed. Under the old targeted system, it was commonplace that these children would fall through the net and develop secondary issues which would further hinder their development. (Dunford and Richards, 2003).

Occupational therapists are now given a platform to share their professional knowledge and skills with school staff in order to improve the engagement and participation of children in a range of school occupations. This therefore, allows for children as well the teachers to work together in a familiar environment without the constant need for an occupation therapist, enabling the children concerned to develop at a faster rate. The Royal College of Occupational Therapy provides prime examples of this, where teachers are supported to perform handwriting interventions in the classroom in collaboration with the occupational therapist. It has been argued that the style of co-teaching can improve the legibility, speed and fluency

of children's writing. (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2015). Occupational therapists could also promote healthy lifestyle choices, which can make a significant contribution towards addressing issues such as obesity (Reingold and Jordan 2013). This could include applying play activities in a nutritional education programme (Munguba et al 2008).

The collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers is very effective in reaching out to a large group of children and young people. This allows for professional knowledge and skills on child development, which were previously hard to access, to be available on a much larger scale within the familiar environment of the classroom. This availability of knowledge and effective collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers allows for the children and young people to develop at a faster rate. It must be noted however that children's development needs do vary. The whole population method caters to a large group of children and young people in order to develop skills that are already present but to a higher standard. Alternative methods must be in place to meet the needs of those struggling more severely with everyday activities.

### **Targeted or Selective Services**

In order to meet the needs of children and young people with more complex needs the Royal College of Occupational Therapy have redesigned the way in which targeted or selective services are being implemented. Targeted or selective services are designed to support children and young people whose development

has been significantly delayed as well as those who struggle with social skills, which is commonly linked to autism spectrum disorder. (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2015). As previously seen in the all population method, the targeted or selective service methods incorporate the wider workforce within the school with the support of the occupational therapist. Teachers and teaching assistants are trained for example to carry out classroom-based support such as handwriting practice in small groups for those with identified needs. (Hutton, et al, 2016). In terms of children and young people who are on the autistic spectrum, the Royal College of Occupational Therapy states that occupational therapists support teachers in adapting classroom tasks to meet the needs of those with autism. Adapting the motor challenges of classroom tasks is another example which enables enhanced participation of children and young people with developmental coordination disorder in school life. (Royal College of Occupational Therapy, 2015).

The targeted or selective services have been put into place to ensure that individuals whose development is behind their peers is properly addressed. This approach allows for the occupational therapist to provide the correct service for both the pupil and the teacher, ensuring that the child concerned continues their development in a positive way. This also reduces the possibility for children and young people 'slipping through the net' or being taken out of mainstream education which would be highly possible if this style of occupational therapy was not in place.

### **Intensive, or Specialist Occupational Therapy Services**

Intensive or specialist occupational therapy has been put in place to cater for children and young people with identified mental, physical, emotional, learning or behavioural needs which impact on their participation in life roles. (Royal College of Occupational Therapy, 2015). Using an approach of individualised intervention to teach cognitive strategies has proven to be successful. This approach is known as Cognitive Orientation to Daily Occupational Performance (CO-OP) intervention and is particularly effective with children who have acquired brain injuries (Missiuna, et al, 2010). CO-OP is defined by Polatajko and Mandich as a "client-centred, performance based, problem solving approach that enables skill acquisition through a process of strategy use and guided discovery". According to Missiuna, the main goals of CO-OP are to develop skill acquisition in child-chosen tasks, improve cognitive strategies as well as the generalization and transfer of learned skills and strategies (Rodger & Brandenburg, 2008). The implementation of individualised motor skill programmes by occupational therapists such as constraint-induced movement therapy and intensive bimanual therapy, have been found successful in improving limb function in children with hemiplegia and in achieving individualised goals (Sakzewski, et al, 2014). Home-based programmes have proven to be very successful in the development of children and young people who are using intensive, or specialist occupational therapy services. This environment allows for parents and occupational therapists

to cooperate with one another - once again allowing knowledge and skills to be shared. (Novak and Berry, 2014). It has been proven that whilst using the home-based programme, occupational therapists must incorporate the needs of the parents and the child when setting goals and delivering the intervention. If these interventions are delivered correctly, they can positively address social factors and participation in those everyday occupations highly valued by families (Morgan and Long, 2012).

Intensive, or specialist occupational therapy services are vital for children and young people with complex needs. Alongside this however, these children may also benefit from the whole population and targeted approaches. For example, commonly occurring difficulties in the childhood population such as difficulties with handwriting, ball skills, changing for physical education classes and lunchtime skills, which can be addressed through standard responses, are tackled earlier using a range of approaches and do not always require direct occupational therapy intervention. (Hutton, et al, 2016). As a result, children with complex needs benefit and develop using all the methods provided by occupational therapy. Not only does this mixed method approach enable difficulties to be identified and addressed more quickly, it also facilitates children and young people to spend as much time as possible within mainstream education.

### **Possible Weaknesses**

Within the literature there have been many case studies on the effectiveness of occupational therapists collaborating

with teachers with mixed outcomes. In one study, at the end of the trial period, teachers were interviewed to find out how regularly they were in contact with the occupational therapist, if the skills and knowledge they shared were effective, as well as what impact the method had on the children's development. There are many positive reviews such as 'I have learnt more in two terms than I ever did at college, or in my 26 years of teaching' from a Head Teacher. One trainee teacher also gave a positive review stating that 'We have seen benefits in terms of improved handwriting, more relaxed sitting and fidgeting has become less of a problem in the classroom.' (Hutton, 2009).

Interviews in other studies however, indicated some of the teachers had concerns in terms collaborating with occupational therapists. Teachers discussed barriers which made implementing the method problematic which included lack of time to meet the occupational therapist, lack of a consistent presence of therapists at school and lack of understanding of how therapy services help students to progress academically (Villeneuve, 2009).

Despite this, research carried out by the CanChild Centre discovered that school based occupational services were of benefit to a large range of children. Working using whole population and targeted occupational therapy over one year, it was reported that occupational therapists benefited over 2600 children, 185 teachers and 24 assistants. This equates to an occupational therapist benefiting over 8 children a day. Furthermore, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has considered public health interventions to be highly cost

effective and represents a good value for money considering the number of children the method is benefiting (Royal College of Occupational Therapy, 2015).

In case there is still cause for concern, Fairburn and Davidson provide insight into how these issues could be tackled. Feedback from teachers suggested that occupational therapists should spend more time working with students inside the classroom. Occupational therapists would therefore have more time to effectively convey their skills and ideas allowing for teachers to get a better understanding of what they are trying to implement (Hutton, 2009). It is clear that the new way in which occupational therapy is being implemented is benefiting a large range of children and young people. Making sure occupational therapists spend more time in the classroom however, would allow children and young people with varied needs to be addressed without confused resulting in a more positive learning environment.

### Limitations

When writing this literature review it became apparent that there was a lack of available literature which was either up-to-date or generally accessible. The literature concerning research into collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers is fairly outdated. As a result, it is possible that opinions as well as how collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers is implemented have changed. Despite this however, a range of resource were examined in the course of this review which included national strategy documents as well as published academic literature.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the tiered approach to occupational therapy outlined in current Scottish Government policy is vital to ensure all the needs of children and young people are met. Occupational therapists and teachers collaborating with one another can be seen across each tier of occupational therapy intervention which enables effective sharing of knowledge and skills to maximise childhood development. The whole population method was designed to cater for large groups of children and young people in which collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers is most present. The assistance of the occupational therapist allows for children and young people to develop basic skills faster as a result of professional knowledge being more accessible in a classroom environment. Targeted or selective services are aimed at smaller groups of children and young people whose development is behind the majority such as those who diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Once more, collaboration between occupational therapists and teaching staff is necessary to allow for the children and young people concerned to reach their full potential as well as continue in mainstream education as much as possible. Furthermore, intensive or specialist occupational therapy is also necessary to cater for those children and young people whose development is severely limited. Occupational therapists also collaborate with parents as well as teachers to come up with the best strategies to aid the development of children and young people who live with these kinds of disabilities. Some research undertaken indicates that teaching

staff are not satisfied with the amount of input from occupational therapists into schools. It has been suggested that the time occupational therapists spend in schools has been limited and there is a lack of understanding amongst teachers on how to implement certain occupational therapy practices. However, other studies have shown that collaborative approaches have made a positive impact on both the teaching staff and the opportunities for children and young people. Scottish Government

policy seeks to build on this and work towards collaborative approaches across therapy, school and home. Therefore, giving occupational therapists more of a platform within schools would address the issues highlighted by teaching staff, allow occupational therapists to more easily share their knowledge and skills and thereby ensuring that every child and young person is able to reach their full potential with no one 'slipping through the net'.

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