



Introduction

The inclusion of students with diverse disabilities in mainstream schools has led to a growing number of occupational therapists to practice in mainstream schools (1, 2). Contemporary school-based occupational therapy has been frequently described as integrated service delivery using a consultative approach, involving a high level of collaboration with school staff, families and students (1, 2, 6, 8, 11). Both Health and Education sector have set clear directives for agencies to work together for the well-being of the child with special needs attending mainstream schools (4, 5). However, day-to-day school-based practice remains widely elusive and subject to continuous debate.



Current Issues and Challenges in School-based OT Practice & Research

School-based Practice & Processes

- OTs have reported positive attitudes towards moving beyond traditional, one-to-one intervention in school-based services (9, 10). However, therapists also feel inadequately prepared to work collaboratively in schools (9, 10). Research on day-to-day implementation and practice reality of collaboration practice is rather limited.
- Theoretically derived consultative service provision models for school-aged children with special needs have been proposed (2, 8). These models have not been supported by research in terms of validity or effectiveness. Generally, core elements of models have been rather vaguely defined (1, 2, 6, 8, 11). Additionally, it is difficult to determine whether intervention provided in various school-based research papers is similar or distinctly different (1, 6, 11).

Client-centeredness, Collaboration & Consultation

- Teachers value OT, however they struggle to clearly identify OT's role (3). Additionally, teachers identify lack of training as an obstacle that keeps them from actively supporting and assisting children in the classroom (3). Teachers also frequently have limited understanding of different disabilities and their implications in day-to-day life, as well as age appropriate skills (3). This situation leads to a lack of confidence about when to refer (3).
- Staying within their "comfort zone", teachers usually focus on child's academic performance and progress with little consideration of children's participation and performance in other school occupations (9, 10) or persisting issues with long-term implications such as coordination difficulties (3). Therefore, these other issues might go unrecognized or untreated (3, 9, 10).
- Little research has been undertaken to show the effectiveness of specific material or methods of providing advice to teachers in terms of an increased a) understanding of children's needs and challenges, b) ability to assist children with diverse needs and/ or c) confidence in terms of referral requirements and processes.
- School-based OTs highly value collaboration with teachers, but the reality of collaborative practice can be rather complex and challenging within resource and time constraints (3, 9, 10). The presence or absence of mutual respect and relationship building actions promotes or hinders collaborative working (3, 9, 10).
- Organisational factors in schools such as roles allocated to school staff, as well as availability of adult support in the classroom, and the head teachers' influence, can act as a facilitator or barrier to working collaboratively with therapists on a day-to-day basis (3). The designated roles of school staff and how these roles influence the effectiveness of therapy have not been fully investigated.
- Maintaining active involvement of parents might be challenging at times as services are provided during school hours within the school context (9, 10). While additional home visits might be not possible, practitioners have developed a range of innovative ways to overcome obstacles (9, 10).
- Little research has been undertaken to show the effectiveness of various communication as well as collaboration approaches and methods in terms of a) parental engagement and b) parental satisfaction with services. Additionally, little research has been undertaken to show the effectiveness of specific materials and advice which is given to parents.
- While actively engaging the student in school-based therapy provision has been acknowledged, the challenges of ensuring a child's voice is heard amidst all the adults has also been highlighted (9, 10). At present there is no research focusing on students' perceptions of outcomes and satisfaction with services.

Consistency & Reality of Service Provision

- Service provider often struggle to ensure that there is equality and consistency in services delivered by different practitioners. Equally, the consistency and validity of materials that are produced is questioned (7). Past research investigating effectiveness of school-based occupational therapy services has lacked effective measures of fidelity (treatment integrity) (2, 8).
- Establishing and maintaining quality services can be challenging as demand for OT service exceeds the service provision (7). Currently and for some time to come, therapist are and will be faced with the dilemma of providing prompt, effective and efficient services with limited resources.
- There seems to be a considerable discrepancy between the level of intervention provided in research (e.g. weekly 60 minute consultation meetings) (6, 11) and the practice reality encountered by therapists within the UK context (3, 7).

Effectiveness & Efficiency – Measuring Meaningful and Reliable Outcomes

- Accountability to funding sources as well as clients has led to an increased need for services to demonstrate their efficiency (evaluating the cost effectiveness of resources & processes) and effectiveness (evaluating outcomes).
- Measuring outcomes has been part of past research, however, the suitability and usefulness of some of the chosen tools are questionable (1, 6, 11).
- Traditionally an emphasis has been placed on measuring outcomes focusing on fine motor difficulties, however, participation and performance in a wide range of school occupations has received little attention (1, 6, 11).
- Satisfaction questionnaires found that parents and teachers were highly satisfied with services provided in general (12).

Your child, your schools, our future: Building a 21st century school system (White Paper) (5)

In every school: Excellent teaching and the extra help each child needs

"10. Every pupil will go to a school where they are taught in a way that meets their needs, where their progress is regularly checked and where additional needs are spotted early and quickly addressed... Where young people face barriers such as disability or special education need, or where they or their family are facing wider problems and needing specialist support, we will make sure that they receive early intervention support from appropriate professionals. This will be often based in schools, but working as part of multi-agency teams – so that problems are tackled early and barriers are broken down." (p. 7)

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Service (5)

Standard 8 - Disabled Children and Young People Those with Complex Health Needs

"Children and young people who are disabled or who have complex health needs receive co-ordinated, high quality child and family-centred services which are based on assessed needs, which promote social inclusion and, where possible, which enable them and their family to live ordinary lives."



Figure 1 to 5:

Children participating in typical school occupations

Paediatric occupational therapists are concerned with children's and young people's participation and performance in typical childhood occupations, which include self-care, leisure, play and academic work within a school environment (14). Paediatric occupational therapists enable children to participate in and perform their chosen and valued daily occupations, including a wide range of school occupations (13). This naturally takes paediatric occupational therapist into the school environment, challenging and transforming their practice along the way.

Trends and Opportunities in School-based OT Practice & Research

Collaborative and Co-ordinated Approach to Research & Practice Development

- Collaboration between OT practitioners and researchers to develop cohesive, effective and efficient practice.
- Consolidation and thorough 'road-testing' of models and frameworks in practice settings is required; for models developed by a) individual service providers (1), b) practice research (9, 10) and c) theoretical processes (2, 8).
- Practice evaluation and high-quality research focusing on the effectiveness will be essential.
- Increasing cohesion between services explored in research and current practice reality will be also key (6, 11).
- Development and implementation of appropriate "fidelity tools" will be another step towards transparency and consistency of services provided (1, 6, 11).
- Effective and wide dissemination of practice development projects, service evaluation and research.

Expanding and Consolidating our Understanding of School-based Practice Principles: Client-centeredness, Collaboration & Consultation

- Trusting relationships have been identified as key to successful practice (9, 10, 3).
- Training of school staff in the identification and management of children with special needs has been widely recommended but is not carried out with consistency or regularity (3).
- Further research to investigate in particular the long-term outcomes of collaborative working between teachers and OTs on enabling children's occupational participation and performance within the school context is required.

Contextualising & Individualising School-based Occupational Therapy Services

- OTs need to be more aware of the format and content of environmental modifications, task adaptations, generic and child-specific recommendations they make to teachers. For example:
 - Contextualising school-based intervention to fit within the respective classroom culture (9, 10)
 - Adapting intervention to the teacher's attitudes, values and "style of running the classroom" (9, 10)
 - Provision of programme material suited to a teachers' preferred layout & learning style (3)

Conclusion

It is clear that there is a necessity for paediatric therapists to work differently in schools. In the long-term, co-ordinated strategic planning between health and education at a national and local level will be essential to the wide spread implementation of effective, efficient and evidence-based school-based occupational therapy practice. For practitioners and service providers, the challenge is to find frameworks, systems and strategies that facilitate effective school-based practice for children who have functional difficulties in their everyday school occupations. Research protocols that will assist with the implementation of evidence-based practice are an evidence based and not merely a result of service pressures or common practice.

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