

Introducing a School-Based Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Enabling student participation in mainstream schools

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Introduction

Internationally, occupational therapists are moving towards service provision for school-aged children with special needs within mainstream schools. Theoretically derived practice models have been proposed by different authors (e.g. Bundy, 2002) but core elements of school-based practice have frequently been poorly defined in research (e.g. Kemnis & Dunn, 1996). Additionally, therapists feel inadequately prepared to move beyond traditional, one-to-one intervention in school-based services (Swinth & Hanft, 2002).

Objectives

Participants will be introduced to a School-based Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (SB-OT-PF). Participants will also examine the core constructs, practice principles and clinical reasoning processes underlying the SB-OT-PF.

Methods

The SB-OT-PF emerged from practice research conducted in Aotearoa / New Zealand. Eight experienced school-based occupational therapists participated in extensive, semi-structured interviews. Data collection and analysis were informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

The School-based Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (SB-OT-PF) comprises three elements or sub-structures, including a practice process model, practice principles and clinical reasoning processes. These elements are described individually but are inseparable in practice.

The practice process model consists of individual constructs, e.g. skilled classroom observations, reframing, coaching, provision of generic & child specific strategies. This model proposes that process components occur in a non-linear and concurrent manner.

Practice principles underpinning the therapist's school-based practice include consultation, collaboration, and client-centeredness. Therapists utilize an ecological approach and maintain occupational focus throughout their professional involvement. Each practice principle is described through a behavioral indicator, which makes adherence to a principle evident.

The clinical reasoning processes taking place in school-based practice resemble a collaborative problem solving journey. School-based therapists, students, school staff and parents engage in a complex but controlled trial and error process aimed at solving complex and often initially ill-defined.

Conclusion

While school-based occupational therapy practice is complex, a clearly defined practice framework can facilitate the transition of therapists into this area of practice, and support intervention for experienced therapists.

Contribution - Practice/ Evidence

Use of a practice framework facilitates equality in services delivered by different practitioners. Fidelity and treatment integrity are also prerequisites for quality research, which in turn assists with the implementation of evidence-based practice.