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Primary School-Based Occupational Therapy for Children with Disabilities (Aged 6–12)

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Introduction

At this early stage, this introduction will guide the reader to use narrative reasoning. This reasoning is important as it helps to assist the child's participation in his/her environment and narrative reasoning allows the therapist to identify which story he or she is in with the child. Over time, the story unfolds as the therapist gains an understanding of the child, family and contact. Prospective stories are useful because they give therapists a starting point for evaluation. However, the fact is we adjust and adapt the story as new information becomes known. This unique story assists occupational therapy to identify what is significant and meaningful to the child. The therapies used to create meaningful experiences that engage the child are valued by the child and his or her family.

Children spend a substantial amount of their time in the school setting, interacting with peers and educators. The school plays a vital role in shaping children's social interactions, especially during their formative years. It is during this critical period that the school environment has a profound impact on the social growth and development of children. Without this influence, there is a risk that children may experience challenges with their mental health.

The child's physical and social environments undergo changes that are shaped by their developmental needs. Educators, parents and caregivers play a significant role in influencing these changes. Consequently, occupational therapy practices involving children are grounded in an understanding of the interplay between children, their activities, and their environment (Case-Smith and O'Brien, 2015, pp. 65–101). Occupational therapists assess a child's performance to determine whether any limitations are primarily rooted in the child's innate ability or are influenced by external factors in their environment (Anaby et al., 2015). In addition, their role is crucial in creating a conducive learning environment for children in schools. They aim to help children overcome any barriers to learning and reach their academic potential (Anaby et al., 2015).

Occupational therapists collaborate with teaching staff to explore techniques that support children in reaching their full potential in the classroom. They also understand the significance of play, leisure, and fun for children and young people, as these activities facilitate learning and the formation of friendships. Furthermore, they help children make friends and engage in play at home, school, and in the community (RCOT, 2024). As we evolve as a society, the appropriate use of terminology is forever changing, so as occupational therapists we can fly the flag and embrace the changes.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on providing support for children with developmental differences, commonly known as Special Educational Needs (SEN). According to the Children and Families Act (2014), SEN is characterized as ‘a learning difficulty or disability which requires special educational provision to be made for him or her’. The original idea behind the term ‘SEN’ was to recognize and support children with extra needs in school (O’Shaughnessy, 2020). However, it has been criticized for focusing too much on a child's weaknesses and delays, SEN only gives a limited understanding and can sometimes become a dominant label that negatively affects a person’s experiences throughout their life journey (O’Shaughnessy, 2020).

As we embrace change, it is crucial to use language that recognizes the diverse strengths, traits, differences, and needs of all children from an early age. Embracing the holistic development profile of children reinforces the understanding that each child is unique, competent, and valuable, leading to the concept of neurodiversity (O’Shaughnessy, 2020).

Neurodiversity refers to the variety of human minds, acknowledging that people’s brains can be different and unique and can process information differently, due to genetic and environmental influences, which can include autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and Tourette’s syndrome among others (University College London, 2023). So, in summary, when communicating with children and their family, it is important to acknowledge and honour their diverse preferences regarding the language used to describe themselves and the language they prefer others to use when exploring the difficulties or differences.

In a significant study conducted by Oxford University in the United Kingdom in 2019, it was discovered that Black Caribbean children, including those of mixed heritage, are twice as

likely as their white peers to be identified as having special needs (Strand and Lindorff, 2019). There is evidence to highlight the systemic challenges faced by Black Caribbean individuals, particularly in the UK education system. They face occupation deprivation, societal alienation, and higher rates of identification as having special needs compared to their white peers (Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury, 2022).

This over-representation is particularly pronounced in high-poverty schools in London, where factors such as crime rates and school discipline approaches contribute to the issue. Historical discrimination, racial stereotypes, and low teacher expectations also play a role, dating back to the 1960s (Strand and Lindorff, 2019). Moreover, religious beliefs in some communities may hinder acceptance of medical diagnoses, leading to reliance on prayer (Alexander and Shankley, 2020).

The service (universal)

Clinical or professional reasoning

Early occupational therapy was mostly intuitive, and the move to explore the process of clinical decision-making began in the USA in the 1980s (Duncan, 2023). Research into the subject is now conducted across the globe, with differences in opinions regarding what constitutes professional reasoning. While occupational therapy models and frames of reference should provide a structure, there are frequently other factors that influence practice. For this case study, the term professional reasoning is preferred as the focus is school- and community-based interventions and the use of the term ‘clinical’ seems too medical, and it also incorporates elements of pragmatic and ethical reasoning.

When viewing the Person, Environment, Occupation model, it is usually presented as three perfectly interlocking circles whose overlap is uniform across the different elements but, in reality, this is rarely the case (Egan and Townsend, 2005). The environment, and especially the social environment, can play a hugely influential role in the success of an intervention requiring the occupational therapist to use all the elements of professional reasoning to advocate for the client.

Team meetings

Team meetings offer an opportunity for complex case discussion and learning about best practice and different approaches within OT. This supports reflective thinking as well as the

professional identity of the individuals and team, leading to better patient experience. Team meetings may also be opportunities to share information about changes in proficiencies and professional requirements. However, an independent occupational therapist may have to find alternative methods of meeting these needs. In the UK, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) operates an online community, allowing the independent occupational therapist to access much of this information (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, n.d.), but there is a greater need to work proactively.

A multidisciplinary team (MDT)

A multidisciplinary team plays a crucial role in delivering comprehensive healthcare for children and young people. Each team member contributes their specific expertise to the process. The team collaborates to assess the child's condition and treatment plan, devise ongoing management strategies, and ensure the child or young person receives personalized, timely, and high-quality care (Taberna, 2020).

Effective communication within an MDT is essential for providing outstanding patient care. This promotes cohesion among team members, encourages efficient collaboration, and guarantees thorough attention to patient needs. The primary function of an MDT is to unite a group of professionals from different fields to develop treatment plans (Taberna, 2020).

Here are some key tips for effective MDT working:

1. Foster open communication by inquiring about team members' roles and professional backgrounds. Understanding each other is crucial for successful collaboration.
2. Encourage the sharing of insights into how other services operate and ensure that any unclear details are clarified.
3. Take the initiative to ensure that everyone is informed about organizational changes and new initiatives.
4. Integrate some social activities into multidisciplinary team meetings to strengthen personal connections, ultimately enhancing working relationships such as bring and share breakfast or lunch (The King's Fund, 2024).

Supervision

Supervision is a process that empowers the supervisee to enhance their professional, organizational, and personal skills, thereby contributing to the quality and efficacy of their work (HCPC, 2021).

The primary goal of supervision is to advocate for the well-being and best interests of the service user, whether in a clinical, educational, or other setting. Effective supervision should result in positive outcomes for the individuals receiving services, as well as for the worker, the supervisor, and the organization (Sweeney, Webley and Treacher, 2001).

The macro, meso, and micro contexts

Schooling in Trinidad and Tobago

The history of Trinidad and Tobago is somewhat different to the other Caribbean nations. Trinidad is the Spanish word for the holy trinity, named by Christopher Columbus, but the Spanish struggled to colonize the island as they had done elsewhere in the region. Meanwhile Tobago passed between multiple European powers and had a greater plantation economy. Slavery increased dramatically with British rule, and following the abolition of slavery, many indentured labourers were brought over, predominantly from India, but also from the British colonies in China, resulting in a more varied racial mix than on other islands. Following their period of indentured labour, these workers were given parcels of land as an incentive to settle permanently, an opportunity for financial independence not offered to the freed slaves, resulting in a racial inequality that continues to cause tensions today (Williams, 1964).

Trinidad and Tobago gained independence in 1962, but remained a member of the Commonwealth. The effects of British colonialism are still apparent today with the education system still being based upon the pre-independence model with primary school children sitting the Secondary Entrance Assessment (an exam equivalent to the 11+) for entrance to the most prestigious schools (Blair, 2013). Many of these schools were traditionally Catholic, meaning it was not unusual for students to convert to attend. The private school system was also imported to the island and there remains significant differences in the opportunities afforded to those who attend private as opposed to state schools.

Schooling has historically been highly valued, with Trinbagonian (the collective noun for people from Trinidad and Tobago) pupils frequently winning scholarships to study abroad. Historically, this brought them to the UK, but in more recent years the USA and Canada have

been preferred destinations. This has resulted in generations of ‘brain drain’ as many of these pupils sought citizenship in their new countries. As a small nation, this has presented challenges regarding specialist training and knowledge, but recent years have seen work ongoing to raise the standards of local educational provision. Central to this has been the relationship with other Caribbean nations. The creation of the University of the West Indies (Gordon, 2023), with its campus spread over multiple islands, allowed students to remain in the region and encouraged the sharing of knowledge, as did the development of the Caribbean Community (Caricom). The creation of the Caribbean Examinations Council and the introduction of locally produced examinations to replace the GCSEs and A-Levels allowed an education system with content that was more relevant to the populations (Griffiths, 2017). As this was shared across the Caribbean, it was afforded greater legitimacy and oversight. From an occupational therapy perspective, it was also the first island to have an Occupational Therapy programme, thanks in part to co-contributor Lesley Garcia.

However, schooling in Trinidad continues to face challenges; at present, Trinidad is experiencing a lack of suitable classroom assistants, meaning pupils who require additional support face long waits or are required to self-fund. At the time of writing, the Education Ministry does not employ any occupational therapists and any assessments or interventions must be paid for by the schools or the parents, leading to inequality of access for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The PNM, Trinidad’s oldest political party, used the slogan ‘Education First’ during their unsuccessful 2025 campaign, while another political party, the UNC, focused more upon the benefits of education through a human capital theory approach for national development. Both parties have a history of supporting education, but at times the political rivalry can be an obstacle. SEND provision has not always been prioritized and it is difficult to find reliable data regarding the number of children with additional needs excluded from formal education due to lack of access. Reporting on neurodiversity and autism is even lower; a trend found across the Caribbean and Latin American region (Montiel-Nava et al., 2023).

Occupational Gift

Occupational gift to the reader: steel pan by Ash Davies

When I was little, pan (steel drum) was everywhere, then when we moved to the UK I would only hear it at home and slowly even that stopped. I loved listening to it on my return, especially in the lead-up to carnival, when all the pan yards would be practising late into the

night (Blake, 1995). As part of the celebrations, the Panorama competition celebrates the best bands on the islands, with special categories for Primary, Secondary and under-21 to ensure the culture continues with the younger generations. Frequently, when I was in schools, I'd hear pupils practising and it felt such a contrast to the UK and such an incredible celebration of our indigenous instrument. Now seems a special time to celebrate pan as it has just replaced Columbus' ships on the Trinidadian coat of arms, such is its role in our national identity.

Occupational gift to the reader: reggae music by Natasha Powell

Jamaica is the birthplace of reggae music, so if engaging with a client with cultural roots from Jamaica, to start the rapport building, start off playing Bob Marley music and explore family life, as this is central to most Jamaicans, and it is natural for three generations to share a home, so being in the UK may be a difficult adjustment process.

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