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Unlocking potential:

occupational therapists as essential partners in whole-school SEND

Occupational therapist Faith Newton explores the ways OTs can use their skills and experience to help make schools inclusive for all students.

In your school, you may occasionally see an occupational therapist (OT) working with an individual child, but did you know that they can be key professionals in supporting a whole-school approach to SEND?

What do occupational therapists do?

Occupational therapists help children and young people to engage in meaningful occupations (activities). This could be learning to ride a bike, improving handwriting, or getting dressed.

Occupational therapists are unique amongst allied health professionals in that they are trained in mental and physical health. The OT looks at the interactions between people, their environment and the occupations they want to perform. OTs are great at detecting the cause of a problem and coming up with creative solutions.

The traditional model of occupational therapy

Traditionally, occupational therapists have tended to work with individual children. A child would be referred and when they reached the top of the waiting list, the therapist would assess the child.

> "Interventions focus on making the environment and teaching more inclusive, not solely on improving an individual child's skills.

Following an assessment, the OT may advise that certain equipment would help, and they may provide a block of therapy sessions at school to try and help the child develop their fine motor or gross motor skills or to help them cope with any sensory difficulties. Perhaps this sounds familiar?

I worked with individual children on my caseload for five years, and there is no doubt that this model of occupational therapy can be beneficial. But it has its drawbacks:

- Limited numbers of children can be seen.
- There are long waiting lists.
- Children being pulled out of class for assessments and interventions means they miss learning and their self-esteem can be affected by being singled out (**Hinder and Ashburner, 2017**).
- There is little opportunity for the therapist to work in collaboration with school staff and to share expertise.
- Interventions usually focus on 'fixing' the child, rather than changing the environment or activity.
- Recommendations are often not implemented as school staff are overstretched, and advice is not tailored to the school routine or resources.

A new model

As the number of children with SEND in mainstream schools increases year on year, it's clear that we need a new model. Occupational therapists need to be providing services not just to individuals but to the whole school. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists describes this as a tiered model (**RCOT, 2019**), and it's one that some NHS services are taking up. When occupational therapists are given a school-wide remit, all students benefit, not just the few on their case load. Children remain in class and teachers gain knowledge and confidence. Interventions focus on making the environment and teaching more inclusive, not solely on improving an individual child's skills. The therapist becomes a go-to person within the school when advice is needed on high quality teaching and making adaptations.

Implementing a whole-school approach

The components of a whole-school approach provide a helpful framework for exploring how occupational therapy can contribute to school-wide SEND support.

BIO

Faith Newton

Faith Newton is a school based occupational therapist with over ten years' experience. She is the founder of **School OT**, which includes blog articles on inclusive school policies, and is the author of **Inclusive PE for SEND Children: A Practical Guide for Teachers**.

→ SPOTLIGHT

Vision, values and ethos

All schools want to create an inclusive, safe environment where all learners realise their potential. However, schools sometimes require advice and support to enable them to embed these values into practice. An occupational therapist can provide a fresh perspective and identify opportunities to make the vision of the school a reality.

Staff development and support

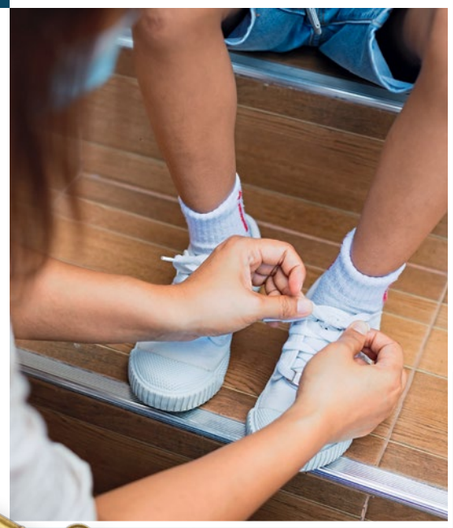
We know that SEND training for teachers has often been minimal. Occupational therapists can provide training sessions on areas of SEND as well as providing support in the classroom. Some therapists can also co-teach classes and work with small groups to identify needs. Consider if there is a specific class or year group that would benefit from targeted OT input in your school.

Family and community engagement

Children's occupational therapists work closely with parents and carers and help them to support children and young people at home. Therapists can engage with families by getting their feedback on school policies and practices, providing workshops and answering queries about SEND. For example, some schools ask OTs to provide parent workshops for new starters or for year one, three or seven classes, or have a stall at parents' evening to provide advice and support.
If you have occupational therapists coming into your school, talk with them about how they may be able to offer wider support, such as by helping improve handwriting across a key stage, or creating sensory corners in classrooms to help learners regulate without needing to leave the class.

Policy and practices

Occupational therapists can review and update your school policies to ensure that they are as inclusive as possible. Some policies to consider getting OT input into include attendance, behaviour, food, handwriting, physical activity, playtimes, toilet use and uniform.
If you are considering how to make your school's policies more inclusive, my **blog articles** may provide some helpful guidance.



School environment

Classroom, dining and playground environments can help or hinder students' engagement at school. Occupational therapists can conduct audits of your school to check accessibility and make recommendations on how to improve spaces for students with co-ordination and physical difficulties, sensory needs, as well as those who are easily distracted or seek movement. So, before you spend money on playground or classroom redesign or furniture, ask for OT input. If you don't have any OT input currently, you can approach your local NHS service or **independent OTs**, and remember that you may be able to use **PE Premium funding** to pay for input with PE or training around developing gross motor skills, for example.

Curriculum planning and teaching

Occupational therapists can support with handwriting development and advise on making whole-class teaching more inclusive. For example, by supporting staff to use visuals that are colour blind and dyslexic friendly and by advising on how to make PE more inclusive for children with social, emotional, and mental health needs.

Student voice

Listening to students' voices is vital in making schools inclusive, happy and healthy places to be. Therapists have a different relationship with students to other school staff and so can be well placed to open up conversations and get feedback from students.

> Occupational therapists can support with handwriting development and advise on making whole-class teaching more inclusive.