

Inclusive Education in Action: Strengthening Partnerships Between Occupational Therapists and Teachers



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BACKGROUND

- Collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers in schools is crucial for effective learning environments for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).
- Challenges such as time constraints, lack of access to resources, and limited knowledge of roles and processes hinder collaboration.
- Occupational therapists are positioned to clarify process procedures and timelines, plan opportunities for effective communication, and coordinate training related to school-based occupational therapy services.
- This research project aims to define and improve collaboration between teachers and occupational therapists in inclusive education by conducting a needs assessment with a small sample of teachers to clarify the problem and use the information to create a collective toolkit in the future.

PIO QUESTION

What are the necessary components for successful collaboration between teachers and OTs when providing inclusive education for students on an IEP?

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Despite a common goal to support the children’s role as students, differences in perceptions between OTs and teachers exist (Bazyk & Case-Smith, 2010).
- Teacher’s may not be not be aware of how occupational therapy services can benefit students. Occupational therapists should focus on establishing their role and building relationships within the school community (Rens & Joosten, 2015).
- OTs must understand the educational environment, curriculum, and classroom dynamics as they are crucial in developing collaborative strategies to support children with IEPs.
- School-based therapists can contribute to successful collaboration with teachers by educating them on the role of OT, establishing a relationship through physical presence, and advocating for workload change system-wide (Benson et al., 2016).
- Further research is needed to explore collaboration and intervention models between OT practitioners and other members of educational communities before implementation (Salazar Rivera et al., 2023).
- Providing students with inclusive education in the least restricted environment is supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Act [IDEA] (2004).
- Working together can result in better outcomes by utilizing the knowledge and skills of all individuals involved to promote the participation and inclusion of children in school (Lynch et al., 2023).
- Teachers report that communication with OTs needs improvement, including daily collaborative relationships and direct interaction in the classroom (Majasic et al., 2015).

SIGNIFICANCE

Occupational therapists are crucial in promoting engagement in meaningful activities, especially within educational settings. Children’s participation in academic, social, and self-care occupations significantly impacts their development and success. Occupational therapists help students participate effectively in academic and social contexts by ensuring they can access the curriculum and engage in classroom activities. They analyze the relationship between contextual factors that affect a child’s ability to function within their school environment and use the information to develop and implement a plan to address any issues supporting the IEP team’s goals. The communication and relationships between occupational therapists and teachers are crucial due to the collaborative nature of therapy service provision in school-based settings. This project will explore what is necessary to nurture those partnerships.

METHODS

Population

The survey will be administered to five teachers at Mirror Lakes Elementary (MLE) who work with pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students with IEPs.

Setting

The occupational therapist assessed the necessity and feasibility of the program at Mirror Lakes Elementary (MLE), a Title 1 school in Lehigh Acres, Florida. MLE caters to prekindergarten (PreK) students through 5th grade and is a Florida Model School. MLE has several special education classrooms, including behavioral intervention, life-skills, Autism PreK, and PreK.

Measurement Instrument

The measurement instrument consisted of a survey that was administered to the selected population. Observation checklists will be used in future research to gather information related to the campus and classroom environments, schedules, and routines.

Data Collection

The survey consisted of 16 questions to determine the teacher-indicated needs for improved collaboration with school-based occupational therapists. The procedure included the administration of the survey followed by collection and qualitative analysis of the results. Interviews and focus groups will be used in future research to gain additional information, elaborating on the results of the surveys.

Data Analysis

The surveys were analyzed using qualitative methods for an in-depth exploration of the teacher-reported needs to support collaboration with OTs in the school setting. The information was assessed to identify themes and patterns and then interpreted in relation to the research question and evidence from the literature review.

RESULTS

- Analysis of the survey data revealed several insights into the factors that influence teacher-occupational therapist relationships (see Figure A).

Descriptive Categories		
Factors influencing OT-teacher collaboration	Considerations to improve and support collaboration	OT components influenced by the OT-teacher relationship
1. Time limitations	1. Recurring scheduled face-to-face meetings	1. Awareness of potential need indicators for OT services
2. Consistency and availability	2. Training planned during pre-school week	2. Referral process
3. Competing demands	3. Increasing awareness of occupational therapy processes, services, and resources	3. Available tools and resources
4. Existing relationship between the OT and teachers	4. Structured learning of OT recommendations through workshops, meetings, and online modules	4. Teacher willingness and competency regarding use of OT recommendations
		5. IEP goal writing with clear connection to indicated OT

Figure A

- The results identify the necessary components for successful collaboration and provide an excellent initial response to the PIO question.
- Initial training includes workshops and resource distribution, while recurring meetings would facilitate consistent collaboration and communication.

SUMMARY

The findings of this project support the hypothesis that effective collaboration between occupational therapists and teachers is beneficial but needs improvement. Teachers value their relationship with the occupational therapist and want to improve collaborative efforts but want guidance throughout the process. Teachers recommend the implementation of occupational therapist-led workshops during the current training schedule at the beginning of the school year to address time limitations present during the school year. The training should address knowledge gaps related to OT tools, interventions, and strategies. The training should include information to expand the teachers’ understanding of the referral process and awareness of available resources. Teachers also suggest regularly scheduled meetings for consistent communication and feedback regarding collaborative efforts and updates.

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