

Ask OTIS: Handwriting and Literacy

Q: My district has asked me to serve on the literacy committee. We are looking at printing curriculum and materials and they have asked my input from an Occupational Therapy perspective. What kind of information is out there?

The Occupational Therapists at Clover Park School District were struggling with a similar question. We were using professional development time to explore evidence based practice related to different topic areas that we worked with in our school setting. After repeatedly returning to the topic of literacy and handwriting, we decided to focus on handwriting by conducting a small survey of the kindergarten and first grade teachers in our district to gain first hand knowledge of our district's current instruction in handwriting.

A survey tool was created and we interviewed Kindergarten and 1st grade teachers with whom we had regular contact. The results to our 29 surveys of 6 teachers in all day kindergarten, 8 teachers in ½ day kindergarten, and 15 1st grade teachers showed instructional methods used were:

- Direct demonstration-28
- Instructional worksheets-21
- Teacher created curriculum-13
- Published curriculum-17
- Other-2

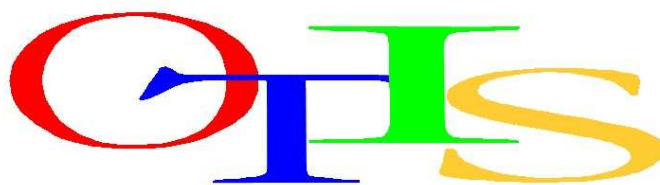
Seventeen of the 29 teachers were satisfied with their current curriculum and 17 teachers of the 29 teachers spent 5 to 15 minutes per day teaching handwriting 5 days per week. Nine of the 29 teachers spent 15 minutes or more on handwriting. The range of students in the classroom reported struggling with handwriting was from 11 to 50%.

Since we were curious if these teachers had any specific training that addressed handwriting teaching strategies, we asked what training they had received.

- None – 16 teachers
- College – 3 teachers
- Talking with OT – 1 teacher

Perhaps teachers in early grades pay little attention to handwriting because they themselves have been given little training in methods of teaching it. Teachers may lack the understanding that handwriting is a skill that demands a competent level of instruction (Altson & Taylor, 1987). Occupational Therapists have been trained to recognize that accurate motor patterns need to be demonstrated and practiced. Students need close adult supervision to ensure they are forming letters correctly. "Using a consistent letter formation helps to strengthen the kinesthetic memory of that letter formation" (Asher, A. 2006).

To return to the question of "What kind of information is out there?", we have learned through



our work that the specific materials and curriculum are not important compared to explicit, consistent instruction with brief, daily practice. Asher notes that little evidence exists in studies demonstrating that one program is superior to another in handwriting instruction (Asher, 2006).

The biggest reason for Occupational Therapy referrals in Clover Park School District, and we suspect in other districts as well, is students struggling with handwriting. Our Occupational Therapy staff believes that many of these referrals are of students who **do** have adequate underlying abilities to perform handwriting, “but needed structured handwriting instruction” (Asher, 2006)

The need for literacy and handwriting is not disappearing. The WASL and SAT have a mandatory handwritten component. Literacy skills are necessary for many areas of occupational performance in addition to assignments, homework, and tests for education. Some examples are job applications, reading product labels and bus schedules, and writing directions, paying bills, addressing envelopes, filling out questionnaires at the doctor’s office, making comments and notes to self.

Not until the rules for legible handwriting have been internalized can students devote more of their energy to spelling, grammar, and content of writing. “Students’ early development of fluent handwriting and spelling skills may prevent difficulties with writing performance in the later grades” (Edwards, 2003). This again emphasizes the need for consistent instruction with daily practice.

Occupational Therapists can support students’ literacy and handwriting development in many ways. This may include sitting on a curriculum committee, providing inservices to teachers, and collaborating with teachers (Bell, B. & Swinth, Y. 2005).

References

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This article was written by Janene Loudon, OTR/L & Lisa Barabe, OTR/L, of Clover Park School District. It originally appeared in the WOTA Newsletter in August 2008 (Vol. 67 No. 4 p. 6)

OTIS (Occupational Therapists In Schools) is a standing committee for the Washington Occupational Therapy Association (WOTA) that was set up to help support therapists in school-based practice.