

HANDWRITING CLUB

This paper was adapted from one submitted by Beverly H. Moskowitz, MS OTR/L as an academic requirement in the Doctoral Program at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. The intent was to discuss Handwriting Club in Occupational Theory terms, and as a reflection of the Occupational Practice Framework.

Background

The need to comply with state and federal mandates in the public school system has altered the curriculum and daily schedule of elementary schools throughout the country. No Child Left Behind stipulates that federal monies will be forthcoming to schools whose students show proficiency and continuing progress in standardized testing. State standards set additional expectations on the counties regarding reading and writing and the communities expect excellence by accelerating their instruction. Consequently, many basic and traditional programs, like handwriting, science and social studies have been eliminated to make room for more test preparation, test taking and data collection. The school district in which I work has no formal handwriting program. As a result, teachers frequently ask me to look at both regular and special education student's papers to suggest ways to help them write more legibly. In light of the pervasiveness of this problem and the importance it plays in future academic success, I propose to present an alternative program, Handwriting Club, as a means to engage students and teachers in a fun and effective vehicle for insuring legibility in Kindergarten through third grade.

Occupationally based theoretical context

A number of theoretical models' unique perspectives frame the current problem, the need for service and the reason for the success of the Handwriting Club program. The **International Classification of Function** includes as an *Environmental Support the Relationship and Attitudes* a client, hereafter known as the child, shares with his family, teachers and friends. *Environmental* points include the Policies set by Educational Services, Systems, Regulations and Standards. These include the curriculum as established by the school district. *Environmental Policies* are those set by Administration whose decisions regard staffing, curricular materials and class size, and adherence to federal and state policies as stated above.

The **Model of Human Occupation** acknowledges the role of Volition and Habituation in occupational performance. In the case of many poor handwriters, the problem frequently starts in preschool where teachers, programs or parents expect children to begin writing before their hands were ready to hold writing instruments or learn the correct way to make letters. As a consequence, both pencil grips and letter formations acquired during those earliest years resulted in habituated, inaccurate and inefficient patterns. By first grade, directions to correct directionality and letter size differences are met by blank stares because many children simply didn't know what they'd done wrong. Their sense of Personal Causation was in conflict with their teacher's expectations.

The result, as illustrated by the **Person-Environment-Occupational Performance** Model, was a poorly fitting environment. **PEOP** recognizes that if a

child's needs are greater than the existing supplies or instructional materials, then the supplies and materials need to be modified and enlarged, that is... the box enlarged... in order to help that child be successful. In order to get a 'just right fit,' a change needs to occur. Sometimes that change must occur literally "outside of the box." Handwriting Club was such an example.

Fortunately, the **Ecology of Occupation Model** offers a Temporal Context along with specific intervention strategies that corroborate my strategies. In terms of analyzing the core constructs of a task according to temporal components, **EO** notes the importance of sequence, steps, temporal location (day and time), rate of recurrence (how often) and temporal rigidity (how flexible). Accordingly, The Handwriting Clubs meet at set days and times for each grades agreed upon by the referring teachers, follows a specific sequence of instruction, use adapted formulas to determine readiness to move to the next step and easily blends follow-up or check-up times during regular class hours. Continuation of 'therapeutic techniques' is on-going by the teachers since consultation and classroom visits happen regularly and informally. Teachers are instructed to expect correct letter formations only on letters reviewed up to that point. Daily journals can continue to be opportunities for free expression without the added pressure to print neatly, excepting for letters taught and practiced. When those same letters are printed incorrectly, then it's time to role the dice.

Thus **EO's** intervention strategies involve adapting, modifying and creating chances for optimal performance. This is done through availing Sample Handwriting Paper Notebooks for copying so that assignments can be created using them. The handwriting notebook paper is a grade-level referenced book. Different types of paper are recommended for different writers within each class as fits their writing skill. There is nothing more exciting for a first grader than to be told that he is ready for second grade writing paper, a second grader to be told he's ready for third grade paper or a student to be told that they are ready to graduate to grown-up paper without any middle dotted line.

Lastly, the **Occupational Adaptation** model sums the reason Handwriting Club works at all, and that is the inherent Desire for Mastery.

Main components of the program

Combinations of all of the above models contribute to the current state of Handwriting Club, including administrative approval for flexible scheduling, (i.e. ICF Environment-Services, Systems and Policies), as one initiates contract negotiations to run a regular education/special education program.

Next would be enlisting teacher cooperation, another ICF Environment condition under the heading of Attitude. It's important to realize that we as therapists are on teacher's turf. In a school setting, Occupational Therapy is considered a related service, not a primary one. Best practices in a school setting is meets the needs of the students *and* the teachers. Toward that end, building a rapport with the teachers implies blending seamlessly in their rooms. It's important to assess a teacher's experience and comfort with handwriting instruction, to find out what's currently going on and what they're willing or ready to do.

Third is positioning & desk adjustments, the ICF Environment-Products and Technology domain. At the beginning of the year, rounds are made to assorted classrooms to fit each child to a desk and chair. This insures that the special needs children within the room were properly and stably seated, especially if they had physical, motor or handwriting problems. Proper postural alignment is important as it positions children in an optimum state of readiness for learning and participation.

More products are discussed under *Empowering Factors*, but it is worth mentioning that while adjusting the desks for height, some children with visual or motor problems might also have their desktops slanted slightly by raising the back legs a notch higher than the front. This places the writing surface at a comfortable angle for visual regard and copying. Higher angles had been attempted, but caused the contents of the desk to fall out. In these cases, **foam core doors** were either fabricated or **slant boards** were issued.

Fourth is skill assessment, MOHO habituation and performance components and PEOP's interest in the environment. Done informally in regular education, it is more formal in special education classes. It's important to look at journal books to see the kind of paper used, how desks are arranged, how a child copies from the board... Note too what references the child uses to refresh their memory about letter formations.

Next is a weekly scheduled Handwriting Club meeting—ICF's Attitude and MOHO's volition and habilitation construct. The implementation of treatment, including playing the Size Matters Game is discussed below. This predictability complements both EO's temporal contexts and ICF products. Scheduling Handwriting Club in each grade is important for establishing a routine and expectations.

Over the years, Handwriting Club has taken on different forms in each of the grades. In Kindergarten, Handwriting Club has become a Center during Center Time. This evolved from some teacher's beliefs that formal instruction in handwriting at this age was developmentally inappropriate and that children's work should be accepted as is without correction, in spite of requiring a Daily Journal page with pictures and innovated spelling words. During Center time and dependent on a teacher's preferences, either identified students or small groups of the entire class rotated turns at my table. We'd start with individual copies of the Handwriting Without Tears books to practice coloring and making shapes. As they finished those books, we started a more formal HWT program with the **wooden shapes, Magna Doodle boards** and new **individual HWT books**. The Kindergarten HWT book was divided into a series of six books so that the children would experience the thrill of finishing a book, taking a 'test' and earning a giant star. Mistakes were pointed out, erased and reattempted. Children unanimously wanted to learn the rules, get it right and please the teacher. It was an eye-opener for teachers to see how resilient their students were. Those experiencing continued difficulty or whose classrooms could not accommodate a Handwriting Center were given **home kits**. Home kits were homemade and included letter forms traced from the HWT wooden ones but cut from thick foam placemats, magic picture frames (to approximate the Magna Doodles)

with a layer of nonskid rubber matting as a tactile surface, simple parent instruction sheets and the first book of the series. Parents were encouraged to return completed books for this therapist before the next book in the series could be issued. If additional practice was still needed, *Real OT Solutions Activity Books* were sent home too.

In cases where pull-out is indicated, it's important to coordinate with recess, specials and academic time. In first grade, Handwriting Club could be either a push-in or a pullout program. Sometimes, the former option is attempted first to model the language, strategies and possibilities for teachers as well as to gain a sense of each teacher's personal style, expectations and comfort with handwriting instruction. This is especially helpful for teachers who feel overwhelmed by the prospect of adding one more subject to their already full day.

In a push-in classroom, the students play a game in which they first learn the three sizes of letters (See below) and score points for their teams (based on desk groupings). The children were encouraged to look around the room to find tools that could help them, including the **alphabet strip** above the front board and/or on their desks. This is often a good time to ask the children if they use special names for the lines on their papers. At this time, too, students should be directed to look at the **desktop name cards**, if they have them. Oftentimes, this is the first time, because they were so instructed, that the children may have noticed that letters touched some lines and not others, that tiny directional arrows were next to the letters, that tiny numbers indicated which lines should be made first and that not all letters were the same size. The **Size Matters Handwriting Program Game** should continue with children encouraged to reference the handy dandy cheat sheets their teachers purposefully gave them to use.

A push-in class session should last from 30-40 minutes and may continue weekly for 5-6 weeks to insure that the whole alphabet has been discussed, that Magic C (See Below again) has been made a big deal, and that the teachers are given realistic strategies to incorporate handwriting practice into their daily routines. For instance, once the class has covered all the rules of handwriting size, a teacher can review the daily journal and question a student about one or two letters that look particularly funky.

TEACHER: Tell me about this letter. What size is a lower case /a/?

STUDENT: It's a 2.

TEACHER: That's right. Size 2 letters have to start at the midline and touch the bottom line. BUT... *Not only is it a size 2....*

STUDENT: It's also a Super C letter!

TEACHER: Right again. Let's roll the dice and see how many beautiful lower case /a/'s you're going to make.

After the students are done their journal or daily edits, they use the bottom few remaining lines of their Daily Edit page to practice individual letters and/or words.

Pullout Handwriting Club groups allow more time for building feelings of competence and self-awareness as the process of letter size instruction is slowed down and a scoring

system built in. They also allow for a wonderfully cooperative and competitive team environment as each child progresses, earns more stars and produces more legible work. First of all, the children are each given a **blotter**, a cushioned writing surface that absorbs writing pressure and decreases the likelihood that a pencil will skid on the hard laminated tabletop. If the kids actually like writing on the blotters, they can take one to their class. The children are also given **adapted first grade writing paper** that has a thickened bottom line since it's usually harder to stop than it is to start. This thicker line gives them an added chance of getting the letter size correct.

The next to last component is critical to the success of the program, and that is self-appraisal and improvement --MOHO volition and performance components. A key feature of Handwriting Club is the insistence of making sure that the children can evaluate their own work. Only when they know the rules and can recite them back to you or their classmates do they begin to own them. This ownership tends to build excitement and enthusiasm for the writing process. The children proudly display their work and can't wait to show this therapist of their teacher.

And finally, another key ingredient that pronounces success in participation is the Certificate of Achievement the children get when they graduate from Handwriting Club. This custom-made personalized card exemplifies OA's premise that people have an inherent desire for mastery, especially as the children repeatedly ask to either join the club or if they're ready to graduate from it so they too can have a Certificate. It is also the last of the *Products and Technology* specific for function within the Environment as specified by ICF. Having the right materials can make the difference between success and struggle.

After being told that all letters come in sizes, just like shoes, the group is asked to identify all the Size One letters they can. When a letter is named, the therapist asks, "What kind of /A/?" so that the children realize that they must specify that the letter is an upper case letter. Ultimately, it becomes clear that all the upper case letters are Size One letters, that Size One letters must touch the top line and the bottom line, that they cannot go higher, lower or float in the middle. Students are then instructed to make 3-5 letters in a row, A-E, and are then scored as to whether each touches the lines in all the right places. Each correctly sized letter earns a star. Five correctly sized letters out of five written letters earns a score of 5/5—a Perfect Score!! Woo-hoo! The table cheers! The next five letters are practiced the same way.

If a student makes a letter incorrectly, that letter is practiced in isolation by rolling the **dice**. This simple act puts control back in the hands of the child himself, a vital attribute of **MOHO**. Invariably, the children laugh good-naturedly when they roll a six and applaud themselves for rolling a one. "But it better be a good one!" says the therapist. It is, after all, a crapshoot.

After all the upper case letters are practiced successfully, it's time to tell children that lower case letters come in 3 sizes, Size One (like upper case letters) must touch the top and bottom lines exactly. Size Two letters touch the middle and bottom lines and

Size Three touch the middle and go below the line. Now that the kids are aware of the importance of the lines on the paper, they can use the special **trifold alphabet cards** to find Size One lower case letters. Proper directionality and formation of those letters, /b/, /d/, /f/, /h/, /k/, /l/ and /t/ should be modeled for the children (3 or 4 at a time) and stars issued for exactitude. Be prepared for enthusiasm. “I got a 7 out of 7!” Once again, the dice are rolled for inaccurate letters, and the mantra is repeated... “Not only is /d/ as Size One letter, it’s also a Magic C letter!” As needed, **Super C posters** can be made for the classroom or individual desks.

Size Two and Size Three letters are also practiced in isolation or small clusters up to seven, at which point words are introduced, like spelling or word wall words. One word at a time should be written with care on each child’s paper so s/he can see your exact attention to the lines. The children then recite the sizes of each of the letters, showing their awareness of size differences. Only then do they take pencil to paper to demonstrate their skills. This is called a Direct Line Copy. It’s best to start with three-letter words so they are more likely to get a perfect score. Just the same, should an error occur, the dice are brought out and the game begun. And even though the children ultimately go through a lot of repetition, they don’t seem to mind it as much when they know that they have as good a chance of rolling a one as they do of rolling a six.

Single short words progress into lists of longer words and then short phrases or sentences. The benefit of using familiar words and sentences that the children themselves suggest increases the chance that the children will transfer the skills back to the classrooms where they’d have to write these same words in context and thus further increase the likelihood of successful participation in their natural setting.

Once multiple words are written on one line, it’s time to talk about “Spaghetti and Meatballs.” Spaghetti refers to the spacing between letters (inside a single word); Meatballs to the spacing between words. This metaphor typically has a hysterical effect on kids, especially as colored lines of spaghetti are drawn in the inside spaces, and the entrée items themselves said with a thick Italian accent. Children are taught that only one strand of spaghetti is allowed to be between the letters but that the meatballs need to be big and fat and all the same size. Here too, the prompts and the visual cuing are shared with the teachers so they can repeat them in class.

By this point, copying skills have progressed from direct line copy, where the student writes directly under the sample you’ve made for them on the same paper, to a near point sample propped in a **Page-up** or trifold in front of their paper, to a midpoint sample 3-5 feet away and eventually to a far point sample 8-12 feet. Copying strategy discussions are begun.

Special Education classes have their own versions of Handwriting Club. For the Kindergartners pulled out, the HWT manipulatives are used along with the series of 6 books and the *Real OT Solutions Activity Books*. These books provide additional letter practice while also working on prerequisite visual-perceptual, ocular-motor, fine motor and motor planning skills. The books follow the sequence of HWT, and supplement each

grouping of 4-5 letters.

Special Education first graders create their own **Letter Size Blocks**. This is a hands-on drawing, cutting and sewing project that each student does with the help of an adult. In the end, the children create an envelop of rectangles and squares that match the exact sizes of the rulings of standard issue **sentence strips**. The act of creating their own materials allows the children to get excited about letter sizes. The **envelopes** themselves are chosen from wallpaper sample books and are closed with Velcro. The students use them to demonstrate Size One, Two or Three letters, both when instructed in individual letters and then again when practicing words or sentences.

Second graders Handwriting Club builds on the same concepts, but starts with **adapted second grade paper**. Typically, the distance between the top and bottom lines in Kindergarten paper is 1 ¼". In first grade paper, it's 1". In second grade paper, it's ½ to ¾". As children become more dexterous and develop their intrinsic musculature, it actually becomes more cumbersome to write larger. Often, we see simultaneous improvements in letter constancy and a reduction in overall letter size. At that point, it's time to 'graduate' a student to a higher-grade paper. It's quite a thrill for a first grader to hear that he's ready for second grade paper or a third grader to hear that he's ready for grown-up paper without the middle dotted line. These incremental positive steps help keep the children excited about the quality of their written output. Teachers now reference a **Handwriting Club Sample Paper Book** left in the office to pick out appropriate sized paper for their student's journals or assignments. The plan is to offer these specially designed papers with the thickened bottom lines, absence of descending lines and wider spacing between line groupings on the Shared Ware Drive so teachers could create their assignments directly onto the paper on which the students have been successful.

Second and third graders follow the sequence of letter review, but at a quicker pace and/or starting at the word level. The additional feature of Handwriting Club at these grades is learning how to copy from the board. Strategies are shared with them about chunking 2-4 letters at a time, sub-vocalizing quietly to themselves, and then again as they write to maintain the sequence. Speed of writing and accuracy are both practiced and scored. Students are asked to evaluate themselves and suggest ways to make the task easier. Self-reflection is vital in helping children acquire skills and a can-do attitude. They also get to experiment with slant boards, pencil grips, blotters, desk placement in the room, Page-up paper holders and book holders.

Empowering factors

The Handwriting Club system has been extremely helpful not only improving the legibility of its members, but also in promoting a spirit of pride, accomplishment and successful participation. This is a testament to **MOHO**'s belief that fostering a student's sense of personal effectiveness is key to empowerment, and of **EO**'s appreciation of the inborn desire for mastery. **ICF**'s recognition of the role parents, teachers, health professionals and friends play in a child's life are authenticated when a child eagerly

hangs his best work on the classroom or hallway walls so that all can see it, or when s/he graduates Handwriting Club and has a **Certificate of Achievement** to prove it. Students love displaying evidence that they are good students.

Handwriting Club has also been a selling point to concerned parents at IEP or regular education conferences. The only sticking point is when a parent of a 'typical' student assumes that having Occupational Therapy involved with their child means their child is now part of Special Education. On the few instances in which that happened, the parents are comforted to know that Handwriting Club is also a regular education service. It just happens to be facilitated by the OT.

Conclusion

Handwriting Club can work in any district where the need is recognized from the bottom up and support is given from the top down. Administrative support has been key in getting this program off the ground.

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