

Successful school-based placements for occupational therapy learners

A 'how to' guide to setting up and managing school-based placements

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Acknowledgements

The creation of this guide was funded by NHS England, and developed collaboratively with children's occupational therapists, practice educators, HEI placement coordinators, occupational therapy learners and teachers who've supported occupational therapy learners on school-based placements.

Introduction

An increasing range of routes to occupational therapy registration (e.g. apprenticeship, undergraduate, postgraduate) means the number of pre-registration occupational therapy learners is growing. This is placing practice educators and higher education institutions (HEIs) under pressure to provide more placement opportunities.

School-based placements are one way to increase placement capacity. They can also help the current recruitment crisis in children's occupational therapy services by developing a future workforce ready to fill vital roles.

'We've been thinking as a Trust for a while about how we can expand (placement) capacity and we've done a pilot where we had a student in a school and we really did have that sense that this could grow and this could really help with placement capacity'

Sarah, Practice Education Lead for Allied Health Professionals (AHPs)

Purpose of the guide

We've written this guide to help occupational therapy services set up and deliver successful school-based placements. It covers the:

- **Development** of a school-based placement offer
- **Preparation** for school-based placements
- **Delivery** of school-based placements
- **Advice for learners:** How to get the most from a school-based placement
- **Impact** of school-based placements

We've included case studies showing how the guide can be applied and some further resources to support your development. This guide should be read alongside the AHP Principles for Practice Based Learning: [Practice-based Learning | RCOT](#)

Who this guidance is for:

- **Children's occupational therapy teams** thinking about establishing or expanding their school-based placement offer
- **Practice educators** supporting school-based placements
- **Occupational therapy learners** preparing for a school-based placement
- **HEIs** wanting to increase their school-based placement offer
- **Schools and local authorities** looking to collaborate with occupational therapists on the development of a school-based placement offer.

Summary of key points

School-based placements can:

- Be part of the solution to increase placement capacity
- Contribute to growth of the future children's occupational therapy workforce, helping to address current recruitment challenges
- Prepare occupational therapy learners to work in diverse settings
- Help address inequalities in children's access to occupational therapy expertise, especially for those living in rural and coastal areas and in other underserved communities
- Support the shift of children's occupational therapy resource from clinic to community, providing place-based support to address children's needs in context

- We need further research to understand facilitators for successful school-based occupational therapy learner placements from the perspective of children and young people, schools and teachers.



Section 1.

Why we need to develop school-based occupational therapy learner placements

Meeting occupational therapy learner demand for 'paediatric' experience

Many occupational therapy learners ask for a 'paediatric' placement, yet 25% of children's occupational therapists who responded to a Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) survey (2023) said they didn't offer them. This is despite having a professional responsibility for providing regular practice-based learning opportunities for pre-registration occupational therapy learners where possible (RCOT Professional standards for occupational therapy practice, conduct and ethics, 2021)

'I was initially after paedics and had so many knock-backs when services couldn't take me on'
Shelby, Occupational therapy learner

Making community-based placements more accessible to occupational therapy learners

Location, the requirement to be a car driver, or individual learner needs (such as caring responsibilities) make it difficult for some occupational therapy learners to access community-based placements (RCOT survey data 2024). School-based occupational therapy placements can be part of the solution to address these challenges.

'The benefit of this type (of placement) is that once they've arrived, they're at that static base and they're there all day. They haven't then got to travel around, so they haven't got additional travel fatigue other than getting to that base'

Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs

Supporting occupation-focused, inclusive, place-based practice

School-based placements align with the national and professional policy shift towards early intervention and prevention and from clinic to community by:

- **Focusing on whole-school approaches** to help schools become more inclusive and accessible for everyone
- **Enabling easier access to occupational therapy expertise** for children and young people living in under-served communities (including rural and coastal settings) and those who don't meet the threshold for individualised occupational therapy services
- **Building the capacity of teaching staff** to recognise and support children and young people whose health, learning or wellbeing is of concern, and to know when and how to access additional occupational therapy support.

Developing the occupational therapy workforce

Many children and young people are missing out on timely access to occupational therapy support because of service recruitment challenges (RCOT survey 2024). School-based learner placements can help by:

- Developing a future workforce of occupational therapy graduates who've experienced children's occupational therapy services
- Giving occupational therapy learners the experience, confidence and skills to apply for posts in children's occupational therapy services
- Providing a professional development opportunity for practice educators.

Section 2.

Collaborating to develop a school-based placement offer

Establishing a successful school-based placement offer takes time and requires good collaboration between an occupational therapy service, their employing organisation, the HEI and school.

'I think it's networking - working with the Uni, working with the Trust Placement Coordinator, the OT teams, the SENCo area lead and also the SEND team including the Head of SEN in our Local Authority'

Lucy, Occupational Therapy Team Leader

Engaging the occupational therapy team

School-based placements are different to the placement opportunities most registered occupational therapists experienced themselves, so team members may need time and support to consider the opportunities this approach offers.

- **Flexible educator opportunities**
Including for people who work part-time or hold management, academic or research roles.
- **Reduced educator pressure**
Learners aren't with them all the time.
I take two students because they support each other. They have more confidence. They're not with you the whole time. It's much better for everyone' - Caroline, practice educator
- **Sharing responsibilities**
Could you facilitate tutorials or peer-learning groups with other teams or neighbouring organisations? This also creates a more enriching learner experience.
- **Accessing support**
The university and organisation's AHP placement coordinator (if available) can provide support to establish and deliver school-based placements.
- **Financial incentives**
Where available, learner tariffs can be used to fund teams' professional development.
'It's going to be split so a proportion's going to the school.... And then we'll take the other percentage to support and invest back into our learning services within the Trust' – Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs
- **Building a case for school-based practice**
Occupational therapy learners can gather evidence to support the development of a school-based service. You could use this to show the value and impact of occupational therapy to education authorities, service commissioners and others.
- **Better implementation of occupational therapy recommendations**

Teachers who've worked with an occupational therapy learner may be more likely to follow occupational therapy recommendations because they have a better understanding of the role.

'They can see the benefits practically in their setting. If (OT learners) are promoting OT within the schools, this supports knowledge of what the service can offer, what universal strategies are available. This will hopefully reduce the frustration of teachers feeling they have to do something additional, and reduce frustrations of the OT team who sometimes feel they aren't always recognised for what they can offer, or don't get that follow-through after their input' – Lucy, Occupational Therapy Team Leader

Collaborate with education providers

Many education providers are already exploring opportunities for increasing the number of school-based placements. Consider the following to ensure positive placement experiences.

Level of study:

School-based placements are more suitable for final year or master's level learners who typically have more advanced skills, greater autonomy, and a deeper understanding of occupational therapy principles. These are essential for succeeding in settings where there isn't an established occupational therapy role.

'It would be helpful to have students who have some experience, not your first years or second years really, but ideally third year or master's level is what we were looking at because you have to be really autonomous in this setting' – Beth, practice educator

Selecting the right learners:

School-based placements are best suited for learners who want to work with children and young people. Lacking confidence or experience with children can affect learners' motivation, engagement, and development as occupational therapy practitioners, and a negative placement experience could affect the relationship between the occupational therapy team and school.

'It has to be a certain type of student who is happy to put themselves out there a bit, ask some questions, set things up for themselves. Sit with that uncertainty a little bit. It's not suitable for all' – Claire, practice educator

Two learners per school:

Having two (or more) learners per school means a richer learning experience. It can also reduce pressure on the practice educator as learners can collaborate to problem solve and provide mutual support.

Longer placements:

School-based placements should last 8-12 weeks, allowing time for occupational therapy learners to establish their role, develop collaborative relationships with students and staff, understand the school environment and effectively implement and evaluate interventions.

'It could have been a bit longer, but I mean eight weeks was great, but the first couple of weeks is more scoping. I suppose working on my chosen topic ideally it would be better to have longer than six weeks. That was explained to the school, but I think they thought well, we can continue this and we can work on this. So in actual fact, it worked out really well. But it would have been nice to have longer' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Engage with education

Collaborating with colleagues in education to develop a school-based placement offer is essential but takes time. Partners could include the Area Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) or Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo), the Local Authority Special Educational Needs

and Disabilities (SEND) lead, educational psychologists (who cover many schools) and school senior leaders, including the SENCo/ALENCo.

'Planning is key and it needs to start a long way in advance. We've been talking about this placement for quite some time and it's needed different stages of working with the wider SEND team, identifying the schools, sending expressions of interest out, waiting for those to come back, having meetings with them... having it planned out, knowing who to network with and having clear communication between all people is, I think going to be key for it working' – Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs.

Engage interested schools first:

Focus on schools who have some understanding of the occupational therapy role. Talk to people in key positions and ask for their support in advocating for an occupational therapy learner placement in their setting.

'We needed to start with schools who already had a relatively good understanding of what OT was or at least when to refer...I think there's definitely room to improve understanding of OT and give timely provision, but thankfully the sites who agreed to take part were motivated to engage. I think that was a big part of it. As our first time offering this model we also needed schools that saw the value in this' – Lucy, Occupational Therapy Team Leader

Address a school's needs:

Show how school-based placements can address a need the school has identified, for example support for children's mental health or handwriting, or self-regulation strategies to help children access learning.

'My head teacher approached me to ask me if I was interested in getting an occupational therapy student and I bit her hand off at the chance because trying to get occupational therapy as a service for a lot of my pupils is actually quite tricky because their service is overwhelmed by requests' – Brenda, class teacher

Leverage early adopters:

Schools who've seen the benefits of supporting occupational therapy learners on placement can help you by promoting the benefits to other schools.

'Once we've got those schools that are interested on board, they're going to be the ones to support us reaching out to others, promoting the value of school-based OT provision. We're not going to be able to just enforce that on sites. It's working with the local authority and those schools that are interested to begin with to make it successful' – Lucy, Occupational Therapy Team Leader.

Section 3.

Pre-placement preparation

Timing

School holidays

School-based placements will nearly always include a school holiday.

'The one thing that needs consideration is the fact that these schools have half terms, so taking the time to plan in advance what could half term look like look like?' – Leanne, practice educator

Planning ahead means you can use these to enhance the learning experience. Learners could:

- Observe and support assessment clinics run by the occupational therapy service
- Support the delivery of intervention groups run by the occupational therapy service
- Shadow other professionals and visit services to develop a wider understanding of support for children's health, development and wellbeing e.g. school nurses, educational psychologists, child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS).
- Develop resources and prepare staff development training sessions
- Develop media materials to promote the role of occupational therapy in schools
- Run workshops for parents/carers

Placement hours

Learners need to feel part of the school community. This helps them build collaborative relationships and understand the school culture, routines and needs of young people and staff members.

We recommend full days at school rather than attending part time.

'We used to let the students go for half a day or a couple of hours, but I've changed it so they are in school all day and they really try to be part of the school community and that fosters this sense of belonging' – Caroline, Practice Educator

Extra-curricular activities such as sports clubs, parent coffee mornings and breakfast clubs offer extra opportunities to enhance learning, deliver support and add placement hours.

Hybrid placements: While having learners based entirely at a school replicates the school-based occupational therapy approach, hybrid placements - where learners spend part of their week in a typical community occupational therapy service – can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the community-based occupational therapy role. This may make it easier when they transition into practice.

Placement focus

It's essential that the focus or goal for the placement is agreed and understood by the school, practice educator and occupational therapy learner. This will help structure the placement experience and ensure shared and realistic expectations about placement outcomes and outputs.

Note that occupational therapy learners must **not** provide specialist/individualised occupational therapy input or deliver provision included in an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP - England), Individual Development Plan (IDP - Wales), Statement of Special Educational needs (Northern Ireland) or Coordinated Support Plan (CSP – Scotland).

Discovery project

Goal: to explore, understand and articulate the role and potential contribution of occupational therapy within the school setting. Activities include observation, collaborating with school staff,

research, and sharing findings in a way that demonstrates understanding and application of the occupational therapy process.

'We're essentially looking at how an OT service could potentially fit in within the school and what it looks like and how it would all work' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Whole-school support

Goal: to identify and implement universal strategies that enhance school inclusivity and accessibility, meaning all children and young people can participate and benefit from being there. Activities include environmental assessments, collaborative development of inclusive policies and practices, delivering staff development workshops and creating resources.

'If you're taking a universal approach then you're actually really working with the TA, the teachers, the catering staff rather than a child, you're taking that whole school approach' – Claire, practice educator

Project focused

Goal: to address a specific project identified by the school. It allows the occupational therapy learner to apply their knowledge and skills to address a particular need or challenge within the school community. Activities include discussions with school staff, children and others to understand the project context and importance, carrying out a needs assessment (through observation, interviews, surveys), developing a project plan, applying occupational therapy principles to implement the project (e.g. delivering an intervention or environmental modifications), communicating and collaborating with stakeholders, and project evaluation.

Caseload approach

Goal: to provide targeted support for a small group of individuals with low-risk needs who've been identified by the school or practice educator, for example handwriting, use of cutlery at lunchtime or getting changed. This involves collaborating with school staff and the practice educator to understand the children's needs, assessing their strengths, challenges and needs to identify suitable goals, designing and implementing group or individual interventions, collaborating with school staff to ensure these are integrated into children's daily routines, and evaluating their impact. Note the importance of preparing parents and carers, children and young people for the end of this type of placement at the start.

Consecutive placements

Goal: offering consecutive placements to different learners in one school, taking a cumulative, collaborative approach to achieve a long-term goal. You should work with the school to establish a clear and focused plan for the series of placements – these should be adaptable to the needs of different occupational therapy learners. You'll need good documentation and a clear handover by each set of learners to ensure continuity and clarity. Learners should focus on the goals for their individual placement, and their contribution to the long-term goal.

'Over time, we've been able to build their understanding of what OT is instead of starting from scratch every time. I think there's a lot of value in maybe choosing a key school and then keeping working with them' – Marjolein, practice educator

Learner orientation

An induction or orientation process is vital for ensuring occupational therapy learners are prepared for a school-based placement and can successfully integrate into the school environment. It reduces learners' anxiety, helps them understand the educational context and provides essential information about school policies and procedures.

'We make sure we go through keeping children safe in education, Prevent training, all the training that will be relevant. We used to assume that this would be good enough in the schools, but the reality is it's not. It also helps the schools to trust this process a bit more because the students are going in well-equipped' – Caroline, practice educator

An orientation programme for school-based placements should include:

Educational context

Ensuring a basic understanding of the context in which education is provided, including provisions for children and young people with special educational or additional learning needs and disabilities. Learners should be aware of the national curriculum and the statutory assessment process, including the role of occupational therapy in supporting these.

Occupational therapy role in schools

You should help occupational therapy learners understand their role in enabling children and young people to overcome barriers to learning and participation so they can thrive in the school environment. Include an overview of typical needs that an occupational therapist might support, for example those relating to motor coordination, handwriting and self-regulation. Help learners understand that their role is not to provide specialist input, but to focus on universal and targeted support. Emphasise the importance of collaboration, communication and a coaching approach to embed therapeutic approaches into everyday school life.

'We do 'what is school based OT?' We go through Partnering for Change model and the tiered approach. We usually do what being neuro affirmative means' – Caroline, practice educator

School environment

Explain school organisational structures (e.g. roles of the school leadership team, teachers, teaching assistants), their usual operating hours and routines (including start/end of the day), dress code and mobile phone policies.

'There's no nuts in schools, you can't take nuts. You can't have your mobile phone in any public area. We just go through lots of scenarios. We physically check their DBS because again, they might be on the update service and they will have a DBS but for schools it's a requirement that they have the physical DBS copy and no matter how many times I do a pre placement visit with the students, tell them weeks before you must have this they say yes, they turn up, they don't' – Caroline, practice educator

Safeguarding, health and safety

Ensure learners understand school safeguarding policies and how to raise and document any safeguarding or health and safety concerns.

Communicating with children

Explore effective strategies for engaging and communicating with children and young people.

'We get the students to make a PowerPoint slide which is about them. So their name, some things that they're interested in. It's a really good learning experience for the students because they'll start with loads and loads of bullet points and then we talk about, so will the children be interested in this? Do they need some visuals? Are you communicating to all learners? So there's lots of learning involved. Then we send this to the school SENCo before they even start in the school, and we ask them to share these slides with the children, the teachers, the school community' – Caroline, practice educator

Working with placement peers

Learners may need support to work effectively with their peers on placement. Consider effective strategies for working together, conflict resolution, problem-solving and communication.

'We do a lot around group work and dynamics and the processes that groups go through... you're not in competition with each other and you're working together as a team and you're going to have strengths in one area and someone's going to have strengths in another area, we all do the best we can. And this is what it's like in real life' – Caroline, practice educator

Preparing the school

You should prepare schools to welcome occupational therapy learners on placement to ensure a positive experience for the learner, the school and the practice educator.

Welcome meeting

Arranging a pre-placement meeting between the school SENCo and/or on-site mentor, the placement coordinator, and practice educator will help you establish effective communication channels and foster a collaborative and supportive learning environment. If you are supporting more than one school-based placement, you could arrange for several schools to meet at the same time.

'We invited the schools to a meeting on Teams. We asked all the schools to come along, the university link came who could answer questions about the students, processes and the paperwork side of things. We discussed what we expect you to do from a mentor perspective, being in the school day-to-day. What is their role? So they were quite clear on that' – Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs

Shared understanding of occupational therapy learner role expectations

Setting clear expectations for the learner's role, responsibilities and goals will help schools understand what is required of them. It also reduces the risk of occupational therapy learners being asked to do things that aren't within their scope of practice.

'We just wanted to clarify the fact that OT learners aren't yet qualified OTs, so they'll be coming in and offering more of that universal level input to support the teachers to embed strategies into everyday practice' – Lucy, Occupational Therapy Team Leader

Identifying classes or students to work with

The 'client' for a school-based placement could be the school, a class or a group of children or young people. Identifying a suitable focus will help schools structure a placement that will make a meaningful contribution to the school community whilst ensuring the individual meets their learning objectives. It will also help identify the resources, opportunities and support a learner may need.

'Are there any particular classrooms they can think of in advance of the students coming they'd like them to start off with, or are there any environments they'd particularly like the students to work in?' – Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs

Informing parents

Parents and carers must be told that an occupational therapy learner will be on placement in their child's class or school so they know who is involved in their child's education. You could do this via a school newsletter (if the learner will be working across the whole school) or letter (if they are working with a particular class).

'We've written a letter that they send out to parents to say we've got OT students on practice placement with us, they'll be in school and spending time with the children. I have a bit of a marketing blurb (about OT) too' – Caroline, practice educator

Preparing the children

Schools may also want to let the children know that someone new is going to be in their class. Could you ask the occupational therapy learner to prepare some information for the teacher to share?

'They actually get quite scared when somebody new is coming in, and so before she even came in we had pictures of her on the wall so that they actually saw her before she came into the classroom... That's something I usually try and do with anybody new coming into the classroom, just so they are accepting of that' – Brenda, class teacher.

Preparing the practice educator

Practice educators providing long-arm support may need extra time and support to prepare for supervising a school-based placement. Long-arm supervisors could be a children's occupational therapist, an experienced occupational therapist working in a related field, or a member of the university team.

It's not essential that practice educators are experienced with children and young people. Not having specific knowledge can encourage shared problem-solving and critical analysis, allowing for the generation of innovative solutions based on occupational therapy theory. This approach can help learners build a strong foundation for their future practice whilst also supporting the practice educator's professional development.

'She was an occupational therapist that worked within the medical team in an acute setting so it was quite different for her. But she was very keen on what I was doing. Every time we met up, she had a lot of really fantastic ideas. It was nice because we brought our ideas together. She would kindly also try and find policies for me and different documentation, so it was definitely a joint effort, putting our minds together. We were able to bounce ideas back and forth, which was really great' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Understanding the role of a long-arm supervisor

Practice educators may not be familiar with providing long arm supervision. Those new to the concept should access training and support offered by HEIs.

Recognise the time commitment

Practice educators must be able to provide weekly supervision at an agreed time and place. They should also be available in-between to answer queries that need a more immediate response. Some learners may require more support, so the practice educator should be flexible in their approach and time commitment.

'Are they aware of their time commitments for this? Because it may extend to more than that once-a-week supervision sessions, that student might struggle and might need more frequent check-ins, so is there scope for that?' - Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs

Section 4.

Delivery

Supervisory roles and responsibilities

Practice educator:

In most cases, the practice educator will be based off-site, providing long-arm supervision and support. As a registered occupational therapist they will take overall responsibility for managing the placement, providing weekly supervision, completing assessments, and supporting the occupational therapy learner to apply theory to practice. They will work closely with the on-site school mentor.

'Right from the very start, we're setting the expectations with the school that this is their placement. (The school's) responsibility is to supervise these issues on a day-to-day basis. We are coming in once a week for professional supervision' – Leanne, practice educator

On-site mentor:

This role is often taken by the SENCo or ALNCo - someone who can inform key staff members about the occupational therapy learner's role, facilitate communication, ensure the occupational therapy learner understands school policies, and enable access to information and resources. They are also likely to be the point of contact for any safeguarding or health and safety concerns.

'We were always able to go to (the SENCo) in regards to our plans and whether we wanted to maybe join other classes or go to PE or whatever. She was kind of our link for other teaching staff as well. Also, any concerns we had, you know, if we had any safeguarding concerns we would have known that she was the person that we went and spoke to' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Teacher/other school staff:

In some cases, the occupational therapy learner will be working directly with another member of the school team, like a class teacher, who will provide practical day-to-day learning opportunities and support. Teachers often value the opportunity to share their expertise without the responsibility for assessment, paperwork and formal supervision.

'The SENCO is extremely busy, sometimes it was a little bit harder to lock her down because she had a huge role to do herself, so in terms of that we sort of liaised mainly with the teachers. I'd say they became our supervisors in that respect, they were the main person to go to' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

'I have typically had lots of students in the past in terms of teaching students, and early years officers as students... I think actually there was less in terms of requirements for me in terms of you know, if you have a teaching student then quite often you are helping the student to plan their lessons, you're observing them and their practice and giving them feedback on their lessons and things, whereas there wasn't the requirement of that' – Brenda, class teacher

Managing practical issues

Timetables:

The practice educator and on-site mentor should coordinate a placement timetable that offers the learner a variety of experiences and ensures they can achieve their placement goals. Allow time for research and reflection and observing children in different settings. More structure may be required in the early weeks, but there should be flexibility to accommodate learners' needs and unforeseen changes.

'Have a routine and to make sure the students know that routine and their timetable, because sometimes we underestimate the anxiety that students have if they haven't got a clear routine' – Caroline, practice educator

'That first two weeks is just them going from classroom to classroom and observing. They don't need to be 'doing' as reflections and observations are powerful assessment and clinical reasoning skills. Their curiosity from placement preparations, their reading about school-based OT and observations in the first week or two can inform their planning for whatever coaching, training or environmental audits they might be doing in their settings' – Lucy, practice educator

Consent:

Parents and carers should be informed that occupational therapy learners will be at school on placement. If learners are working with a particular group of children, then they must get parental consent as they would in other settings.

'If they are going to be running some groups for some targeted work then we do get consent in the in the normal way just because that's the OT process. And that's good learning as well'
– Caroline, practice educator

Recording notes:

Approaches to record keeping will vary. Occupational therapy learners won't have access to children's school records, and they may not be able to access IT systems used by their practice educator. The placement coordinator and SENCo should agree how the learner's observations, assessments, intervention plans and outcomes will be recorded and shared.

'If they're connected to a community team they use those notes, but if they're working with a whole class are they going to write up just some reflections and observations about that? Where does that get shared? Where does it get stored?' – Claire, practice educator
'We uploaded them to a OneDrive folder for each student and every time we did an intervention, we uploaded the notes and only the Senco and the lead for the pastoral team could see that' – Lauren, occupational therapy learner

Negotiating space and resources:

Occupational therapy learners may need support to negotiate resources and space. Articulating requests clearly and providing a rationale that highlights the benefits to both children and the school is an important skill to develop.

'I asked her whether it be possible to have any funding towards these activities and she agreed. So the school purchased me my theraputty, pegs, beads, lots of activities which then school have got to keep. I've broken down the weekly handwriting sessions, items that are required for that particular section and they've got a big box and they're all in there ready for the session. I was a bit nervous asking for any funding, but I thought, you know, I will ask' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Supporting the placement journey

Less doing, more observing, reflecting and planning:

The learning journey on a school-based placement may differ from that in a role-established setting. Learners will have to spend time understanding and adapting to the educational environment, researching and planning, observing and collaborating. It's critical that the practice educator, the occupational therapy learner and the on-site mentor recognise and support this process.

'The first week or two we don't ask them to do anything other than spend time in the classroom and just observe children in their natural occupations. What are they doing? What do they look like?' – Caroline, practice educator

'As a student you do want to kind of get in there and do as much as you can, but in this particular placement, especially a completely new role-emerging role, pacing yourself and just taking that time to know what the gaps are within that school and where occupational therapy can fill that gap' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner.

Applying the occupational therapy process:

In school-based occupational therapy practice the 'client' is typically the school – including staff and children. Occupational therapy learners will need support to apply the occupational therapy process to the educational environment as a whole, rather than for individuals. This includes:

- **Information gathering** from staff members, children and young people, from policies and from research to understand the issue or need that the school (or practice educator for a discovery focused placement) has identified.
- **Assessment** using observation and relevant tools to understand the strengths and needs of the group, activity, routine, policy or environment.
- **Intervention planning:** collaborating with key stakeholders e.g. (teachers, school leadership team, children, dinner supervisors) to set goals and develop an intervention plan.
- **Implementation:** delivering training, developing resources, or providing targeted support to address the identified need.
- **Evaluation:** adjusting implementation plans based on feedback and observed outcomes.
- **Outcomes and impact:** assessing the effectiveness of interventions and their impact on the school environment and children's participation. Sharing findings with key stakeholders.

'They are doing the occupational profile, like what is the school's need and what could that be? The school is their client. And then they do the strengths and needs, and they start working through the OT process, and they do need supervision and guidance to get through that. But then when they have delivered their training or they've created their resource and then they've actually showcased it, they're always 100% clear on the OT process' –
Caroline, practice educator

Planning and implementing interventions

Develop intervention plans collaboratively - with the occupational therapy learner, the school and practice educator - so they are relevant and address the school's needs. Interventions could include the following.

Identifying the occupational therapy role

'We're essentially looking at how an OT service could potentially fit in within the school and what it looks like and how it would all work' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Seating audit

'I looked at some support for his feet because he was very small in stature. So we got some rests and they went underneath his feet and then he was in a nice position and a lot better than what we'd seen before' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Creating a resource

'The OT students I've had in school settings have been able to do things like identify need and set up some sort of resource. Whether that is a physical resource of some fine motor activities that people can do or a sensory box or those sort of things. Or it can be more of a structured routine or something like that' – Claire, practice educator

Meeting children's sensory needs

'I noticed really early on that things like movement breaks would support him throughout the day. And I think the teacher was new to the profession and she came to me for a lot of support with that. It was amazing to see how that joint working can really work, and we worked so well together' –
Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Promoting the role and value of occupational therapy in schools

'The last couple of students that I had it happened to be OT week when they were on placement. So that was a lovely project for them, thinking about what is occupational therapy? and actually trying to help raise the flag, give an awareness of what OT is' – Beth, practice educator

Staff wellbeing

'The OT students did something on self-care, looking after yourself, so well-being that kind of thing. It's a very, very busy environment, stressful and not much time for themselves in a busy working school day, and there's lots of additional need as well, which means staff have burned out and go off sick with stress and that kind of thing' – Beth, practice educator

Developing safe spaces

Creating safe social spaces at lunchtimes for students who have experienced bullying.

Applying theory to school-based practice

A key part of the practice educator's role is to help occupational therapy learners apply theory to practice. These resources can be used alongside regular supervision and peer learning:

- **School-based occupational therapy website:** [Home SBOT Curriculum](#). Developed by members of the School-based OT International Network with support from the European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education (ENOTHE). It identifies 11 learning areas with learning outcomes and learning activities for each.
- **Implementing occupation-centred practice: A practical guide for occupational therapy practice learning** (Dancza and Rodger, 2018). This book includes a school-based placement case study and is available as an e-book from the RCOT library.
- **Partnering for Change:** [Partnering For Change | CanChild](#) Developed by and for occupational therapists working with children with motor coordination difficulties in schools. The website includes a range of resources to help health professionals understand the tiered service delivery model in schools.

Supporting the learner

Peer support

Having two learners per school placement enables shared learning and exposure to diverse perspectives which can enhance the learning experience. Peers can problem-solve, share resources, and divide tasks, which fosters teamwork and collaboration. Reflecting together deepens understanding and promotes professional growth. Working with a peer also reduces isolation and boosts confidence, especially in schools where there isn't an established occupational therapy presence.

'We used each other quite a lot, and it was amazing having someone else on placement. I would 100% say that that is something that would be recommended' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Working with children

Not all occupational therapy learners will be confident in their ability to work with children and young people. Support them with pre-placement orientation sessions, learning about child development, observing experienced practitioners, and reflecting on their observations and experiences with their practice educator and onsite mentor.

'If it had been that she wasn't good at interacting with the children, and that can happen from students from any kind of background or experience, I would have had a lot more input and to see how to get down to the child's level, how to interact and how to model or behave in certain situations' – Brenda, class teacher

Professional identity

School-based placements can help learners develop a strong sense of professional identity because learners practice articulating the role of occupational therapy and have to use occupational therapy theory to guide their practice. Use supervision to explore and establish this further.

'I think it was quite a big thing for some of the students, seeing some amazing work and actually, where do they fit with that? Where does OT fit in with that? So the same in any setting would be identifying actually what was our unique contribution? Where can we support and where can we link in and how can we work together?' – Beth, practice educator

Managing expectations

At the start of their placement, occupational therapy learners often have many ideas about what they can do. This can lead to them feeling overwhelmed and unsure where to start. You can boost their confidence and ensure a positive placement experience by helping them set realistic goals that can be achieved within the placement timeframe.

'They go from 'I don't know what to do' to 'Oh my goodness, there's so much to do! What do I focus on?' But right from the start, you're saying, realistically, you're only going to have six sessions with the children, so in terms of the expectations it's managing that and saying realistically what can we achieve in that time?' – Beth, practice educator

Supporting diverse needs

Schools are often well equipped to support occupational therapy learners who need a prayer space, or who have caring or other needs. This is due to their strong focus on inclusion, access to resources, and the flexibility provided by school holidays.

'I think schools are very equipped and used to supporting people with a diverse range of needs... and actually if the students share that with us and the school, the schools are really, really good at accommodating and making really reasonable adjustments' – Caroline, practice educator

Planning the end at the start

Children can form strong bonds with occupational therapy learners, so learners must prepare them early for the end of their placement. Coping with change and endings is an important life skill, and planning ahead can help reduce children's feelings of loss and confusion.

'We did a countdown because some children that we work with would really struggle with that. Very early on we would say 'OK, like this is our 8th week, it's a 10 week placement'... because they were prepared we'd have children come up to us like 'this your final week' and they'd know. And I think that was the best thing we could have done because ten weeks is so short. I think we did that really well actually, but that's kind of planning the ending at the beginning almost' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Section 5.

Advice for learners

Occupational therapy learners who have experienced a school-based placement shared the following advice.

Do some pre-placement research

It's helpful to have a general understanding of:

- How education is structured, and the provision that is available for children and young people with special educational needs or additional learning needs. Education System in the UK
- The role of occupational therapy in schools OT in schools - RCOT
- Child development and common challenges that an occupational therapist might support. Have a look at children's occupational therapy service websites to find out more.

Know that it's a different placement experience

Your pace of learning will differ to that of learners who work alongside an experienced occupational therapist. Initially you may feel nervously excited, then overwhelmed and unsure of your role.

Eventually you'll gain confidence in your ability to problem solve, collaborate and articulate the role and value of occupational therapy in schools. Be prepared to:

- **Sit with uncertainty.** There's no need to rush into planning an intervention. You need to understand the school context and needs first.
- **Take time to observe** children in class, on the playground, in the dining room and elsewhere. You may not have this opportunity again.
- **Research and reflect.** How can you apply occupational therapy theory to what you've seen, read and heard about?
- **Use supervision** to help problem-solve and check your rationale.

'The first two weeks, weren't they long? Oh gosh, you can imagine being in the sea and just treading water, not knowing what direction you were in. That is exactly how we felt for about two weeks' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Be realistic about what you can achieve

Focus on the goal and priorities you've agreed with your supervisor and on-site mentor. Accept that you'll see needs that you won't have time to address.

'It's only 10 weeks, you're not going to be able to do everything that you want to be able to do. I felt like I wasn't doing enough, but you only have a limited time at the end of the day' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Be flexible and adaptable

Schools are busy places and plans can change. Be ready to move rooms, adjust your timetable and modify your plans if unexpected events, like school closures happen. And remember that an approach that worked with one class or group won't always work with another. Listen to feedback from teachers, children and other members of the school team and adjust your approach accordingly.

'Be open minded going in and maybe not fully committing to an idea you have pre going into the school. Having conversations with pupils and teachers is really beneficial because you might actually end up thinking there's more of a need for something else' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Be part of the school team

Talk to staff, tell them who you are and what you are doing. Sitting in the staff room and talking to everyone will foster collaborative relationships whilst also raising awareness of the occupational therapy role. Let them know that whilst you are there to learn, you also bring a different set of skills to the school.

'I think in the first week it's really important that you make yourself known and what you're going to be doing, sitting in the staff room, going into the kitchen and chatting to them. Just very simple things like saying 'Hi, I'm Lauren' – Lauren, occupational therapy learner

Know your boundaries

If you're asked to do something that doesn't feel within your scope of practice, say something then check with your practice educator.

'I was asked to train the staff in manual handling, and I was like, oh, I'm sorry, I can't. But it was quite nice because that wasn't the end of the conversation. I was able to direct them to the physical and complex occupational therapy team leader and the person who does the training for schools. So I was able to give them information without putting myself in a situation which I wasn't really qualified to be able to do' – Mandy, occupational therapy learner

Make the most of supervision

Think about how you'd like to use your time. Plan a supervision agenda, identifying what you need to know, where you are stuck and the help you need to achieve your placement goals. Agree a way of contacting your practice educator if you need advice or support in-between supervision sessions.

'She was always on the other end of an e-mail or WhatsApp so we always felt very supported, but yeah, it was very different to what I've done before where I had someone there and I was able to ask them things all the time. You don't realise how much you sort of double check things until you don't have that person there to do that' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner.

Section 6

Value and impact

School-based occupational therapy placements benefit a wide range of people and organisations.

Teachers gain valuable insights and realistic strategies to support children and young people with diverse needs in their settings. They'll have greater understanding of the occupational therapy role, meaning they can identify and seek timely support for children and young people who need it.

'Our classroom is very different this year because of that placement. We've still got a long way to go, but certainly I feel like I'm better meeting the needs of the children in the classroom this year' – Brenda, class teacher

'It was really useful for all the other teachers to be involved in the presentation that she put together at the end to make them more aware of the various different sensory needs that children in their classroom have' – Brenda, class teacher

Schools benefit from new resources and direct support to embed occupational therapy recommendations into their routines and environments.

'I left a handwriting course, which was for six weeks. I explained why we did things so the teaching assistants could carry it on afterwards' - Mandy, occupational therapy learner

'Over time you have reached quite a lot of the children around the school and those values, I think, do translate more into the classrooms, those ways of working. You see our worksheets pop up a year later when the child goes 'I did something like that' and you can see they're still using it, which I think is very exciting' – Marjolein, practice educator

Children and young people benefit from more inclusive, accessible school environments, and early occupational therapy support that enhances their learning and development.

'He was proud of himself. And all things that at the beginning I noticed he struggled with, by the end you could see a change, which was lovely' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

'It was just really nice to hear positive things from the teacher about how he'd been and how I've worked with him. And then also to see a subtle change because as we know, we don't fix the children. It was just more of like how can we make little improvements? I think that was the amazing thing I took from it. That I can't come in and change the world. But you can make those little differences' – Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Occupational therapy learners gain practical experience, increasing their skills and confidence as future members of the children's occupational therapy workforce. Other benefits include:

- Gaining a lifespan perspective on the value and impact of occupational therapy
- Enhanced observation skills of children and young people in their natural context
- Developing leadership skills by establishing and articulating the occupational therapy role in schools
- Enhanced communication and collaborative skills
- Greater confidence to practice autonomously

'She could see a full day of these children and get that experience, a really rich, in depth experience of the challenges that these children face. It's what their transitions look like, all their vertical and horizontal transitions, their sensory needs and seeing that map through an entire day and been able to observe that. I think that was a really, really rich experience for her' – Brenda, class teacher

Practice educators benefit from the opportunity to enhance their supervisory skills whilst reflecting on their own practice and staying up to date with current research. They can also share their

passion for work with children and young people, helping to promote children's occupational therapy as an exciting and progressive area of work.

'I express my passion and how lucky we are to be working in the context of natural environments and natural occupations and being able to help in the moment' - Caroline, practice educator

Children's occupational therapy services benefit from:

- Strengthened partnerships with education
- The development of a future occupational therapy workforce with experience of children's occupational therapy services
- Increased capacity of schools to identify and support children with diverse needs
- Occupational therapy support for schools that might otherwise be difficult to reach due to their location
- Evidence to support the occupational therapy role in schools. You can use this to build a business case for new ways of working so more children and young people have early access to occupational therapy expertise to improve long term health, education and wellbeing outcomes.
- Support for the development of service projects such as training resources for teachers
'I had some students help me create some training just as a bit of a research project for themselves and they really enjoyed getting stuck in with that. Don't be afraid to give them a little bit of work that you're doing, because they'll learn from that and maybe they can contribute to what you're doing' – Marjolein, practice educator

Higher education institutions benefit from:

- Increased placement capacity, especially in children's occupational therapy services which are in high demand
- Placements that can accommodate and adapt to diverse learner needs, including learners who are parents, who don't drive and those who need adjustments for learning and faith needs.
'With the financial difficulties at the moment we're finding more and more students coming through that don't have cars, that haven't done driving lessons, so this type of placement is ideal for them, it guarantees some experience in paediatrics as well' – Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs

The occupational therapy profession benefits from:

- A growing evidence-base for the expansion of school-based occupational therapy practice
- Promotion of occupation-focused practice, supporting the shift in service delivery from clinic to neighbourhood settings
- Development of a future children's occupational therapy workforce with employability skills across all four pillars of practice – clinical, leadership, education and research.
'We're opening their eyes to different types of placements and areas that they could work in. So I think that in itself is a benefit, giving them the skills to be confident and work in settings that aren't traditional is wonderful' – Sarah, Practice Education Lead for AHPs

Glossary

| | Definition |
|--|--|
| Long arm supervision | A model of supervision used when the practice educator is not based on-site with the learner. |
| On-site mentor | A designated member of school staff - often the SENCo/ALEnCo or someone in a similar role -who provides day-to-day, non-clinical support to the occupational therapy learner. |
| Placements | Structured, supervised learning experiences that allow occupational therapy learners (students or apprentices) to apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings. Also known as practice-based learning. |
| Practice educator | An occupational therapist who is responsible for supervising and supporting occupational therapy learners during their practice-based learning (placement). |
| Role-emerging placements | A type of practice-based learning experience where occupational therapy in settings that don't have an established or on-site occupational therapist. |
| Universal, targeted and individualised model of support | This model describes a graduated approach to supporting children and young people, designed to ensure that everyone can access the right level of help at the right time. Universal support is provided to all learners. It includes strategies and environments that promote participation, learning, and well-being for the whole class or school. Targeted support is for groups of learners who may be at risk of underachievement or who need more help than universal strategies provide. Individualised support is specifically tailored to meet the needs of an individual. This level of support should not be provided by occupational therapy learners on school-based placements. |

Resources

[Home SBOT Curriculum](#)

[Implementing Occupation-centred Practice | A Practical Guide for Occupational Therapy P](#)
[Role Emerging Placements – A New Lens](#)

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Case Studies

A. The Lincoln experience

page 27

A university and children's occupational therapy service collaborated to design and pilot a school-based placement for a second year MSc pre-registration learner. The practice educator was the Occupational Therapy Professional Lead who is using the placement experience to support the expansion of occupational therapy services into schools

B. NHS Forth Valley

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A pilot placement for a final year occupational therapy learner who spent two days in a school and three days with the occupational therapy CAMHS team. It includes the perspective of the learner, occupational therapy team and class teacher. The case study shows how offering a split placement enabled the occupational therapy team to support a learner without the pressure of having a learner with them full time. It also highlights how the school benefitted from the experience.

C. Multi-disciplinary collaboration between York St John University and Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership

page 32

An innovative collaboration between the York St John University occupational therapy team and Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership. Final year occupational therapy learners work with young people to identify interventions that benefit groups or the wider school community. Long arm supervision is provided a university lecturer or a local occupational therapist. The case study includes recommendations for HEIs to ensure the successful development and implementation of school-based placements.

D. Communicate2U, Selly Oak Trust and Calthorpe Academy

page 35

An illustration of the importance of pre-placement preparation and the benefits for occupational therapy learners, practice educators, schools and students of consecutive project-based placements.

E. Well-being Therapy Solutions

page 38

An independent occupational therapy practice has developed a programme of consecutive placements in a mainstream primary school, providing wellbeing support for children and school staff. It includes the perspectives of practice educators and occupational therapy learners.

A The Lincoln experience

The children's occupational therapy service in Lincoln worked with the University of Lincoln to support Charlotte, a second year MSc student on a role-emerging placement in a mainstream primary school. The placement was initiated by Louise Howe, MSc Occupational Therapy Placement Lead. Louise was in touch with a local school who were interested in supporting an occupational therapy learner on placement. The SENCo identified several pupils in years 1-3 who could benefit from occupational therapy support. None had a diagnosis or were known to the occupational therapy service. Abi Storr, an experienced children's occupational therapist and service manager was recruited to provide long-arm supervision. Louise provided support before, during and after the placement.

Louise's experience

Whilst lots of learners on the MSc course were interested in having a paediatric placement, the number offered by community children's occupational therapy services was limited. Many services require learners to have access to a car due to the rural areas they covered, which excludes some people. Louise identified school-based placements as a way of increasing placement capacity, offering valuable learning experiences for occupational therapy learners, and providing opportunities for practitioners who couldn't support a full-time placement the opportunity to become practice educator. An advantage of school-based placements is that learners only need to get themselves to and from one site, which can be done on public transport, thus removing the barrier of car access.

Louise collaborated with the SENCo to establish shared expectations about the placement and the support the university would provide. This included addressing practical issues like what the occupational therapy learner would do, on-site mentoring arrangements, and back-up plans for potential problems. Building a strong relationship with school was essential to ensure the availability of an on-site mentor for daily support, to help the learner make connections and integrate them into the broader educational context. Louise said 'I was lucky I already had a relationship with the school. They already take teaching students so understood how supervision and support should work. I recognized it was important to build on that relationship so the SENCo knew they had support from the University and would feel confident in the students we placed with them'. Louise also prepared a school contract and said that providing some financial compensation through the tariff, although small, was beneficial.

Louise stresses that learners shouldn't be used to fill service gaps and that everyone understood the goal of the placement was to scope the role of occupational therapy within a school setting. She found it helpful to have an experienced children's occupational therapist as a long-arm supervisor to offer advice and support: 'It really helped having Abi as the practice educator as she knew how to support Charlotte.' Effective supervision is key to the success of school-based placements: 'I think the learners don't have the same relationship with their practice educator, but they have to be more prepared for supervision sessions which actually makes them more productive.'

Louise reflected on the challenges of a role-emerging school-based placement for learners. She said 'We are a Masters programme so our learners generally have more confidence to go into an unfamiliar setting and organise themselves. Most students are terrified before they start but say afterwards it's one of their best learning experiences.'

Charlotte's experience

Charlotte spent the first of her six weeks of placement observing the pupils and liaising with school staff. She had weekly meetings on Teams with Abi who also provided email support throughout the placement. Based on Charlotte's observations and discussions with Abi and the SENCo about what the children needed to access learning, Charlotte researched, set up and ran two Sensory Circuit

programmes and some individual and small group fine motor interventions. Charlotte also suggested some strategies for children struggling with their handwriting, including seating to enable a good working posture, and movement breaks for pupils who found it hard to focus and attend in class. She collated resources so her work could continue after the placement, including activity ideas to develop fine motor skills and YouTube 'movement break' videos which were shared with school staff.

Charlotte learned valuable skills during her placement and said afterwards 'I've learned a lot about observations and have more confidence and skills to work in a school. Because I was on my own, I had to do things myself, so I feel more confident.' She's keen to work with children and young people after graduating.

The school's experience

The SENCo saw first-hand how occupational therapy can support pupils' development and participation in academic, social and extracurricular activities at school. Pupils who wouldn't meet criteria for referral to the occupational therapy service also benefitted from early support to develop key skills and access learning. A teacher said 'Charlotte's input has already made a difference to the pupils she's worked with (fine motor skills)'.

Abi's experience

Abi said 'The placement went incredibly well for the student - she acquired skills, knowledge and experience that she would not get via just lectures or teaching. The placement has also given me evidence as professional advisor for our service review. It highlighted the need for occupational therapists in mainstream schools and I will be using this to grow what our service and profession can offer. This placement has also had a significant impact on our reputation and relationship with our local university - I will be pushing for more students for us to support on placement in mainstream schools.'

Abi also reflected that this placement was easier for her as an educator compared to a more traditional placement: 'As lead professional with a smaller caseload, being a long arm supervisor was a lot easier to manage. I also think for some of my senior occupational therapists they would prefer being a long arm supervisor, due to the amount of clinical report writing and assessments we have to write.'

Key learning points

- School-based placements are an opportunity to develop the future children's occupational therapy workforce.
- HEIs can provide support and training to ensure effective long-arm supervision
- Use local knowledge and contacts to identify a school willing to be involved. The SENCo should be available during the placement to facilitate meetings with teachers and identify pupils, find resources/rooms and to be a point of daily contact with the learner.
- Set up a pre-placement meeting between the educator, learner and SENCo to ensure shared expectations of the student role.
- Identify an experienced occupational therapist for weekly supervision who can also provide timely responses to queries in-between.
- This placement model opens the role of practice educator to service managers who may not be able to support a more typical practice placement.

B NHS Forth Valley

A split CAMHS and school-based placement

Occupational therapists Tracy and Sarah who are part of the Forth Valley NHS CAMHS occupational therapy service, piloted a school-based placement as a way of providing a positive learning opportunity that members of the CAMHS team could reasonably support. The seven-week split placement was offered to a final year occupational therapy learner Shelby, who spent two days a week at a school and three days with the CAMHS team. The mainstream primary school was identified through a personal contact and Shelby worked alongside teacher Brenda in a small class that included several children with additional learning needs. Shelby received weekly supervision from her occupational therapy practice educator at the school and was also supported by the wider CAMHS occupational therapy team.

During her first week Shelby visited the school with Tracy to discuss and agree goals that aligned with her own needs, interests and university requirements, and with those of the service and the school. Establishing shared expectations for the placement and anticipated outcomes was important at the outset.

They agreed that Shelby would create a booklet describing sensory strategies to support children's participation and engagement in the classroom. With parental consent, Shelby also completed a sensory profile for one young person to fulfil the university requirement to demonstrate assessment skills. At the end of the placement Shelby gave a presentation to staff on understanding sensory regulation/dysregulation and strategies to support children in the classroom. This initially focused on a staff in a specific class but was extended to the whole school after other teachers expressed an interest.

Learner experience

Shelby was keen to experience occupational therapy across the lifespan but had been told by several children's occupational therapy services that they didn't have the capacity to support a student. The split placement gave Shelby the opportunity to experience school-based occupational therapy alongside a more traditional CAMHS placement.

Shelby valued the opportunity to observe children's typical behaviour and reality at school. She reflected that the strategies she developed were more relevant and directly applicable to children's everyday experiences than they might have been after a one-off school visit. Understanding children's natural environments also helped Shelby make recommendations that had minimal impact on class routines, meaning they were more likely to continue after her placement. Shelby felt it was important to develop something tangible during her placement that the school could continue to use after she'd left: 'The goal was to have something substantial at the end of it, like something I could actually leave them with because if I come in here and I do all this observation, we have all these discussions but then by the time I walk out the door and I'm no longer here, it goes back to the way it was, I feel that wouldn't have been fair on the teacher or the students.' The sensory booklet she developed was well received by the school and is a useful asset for the occupational therapy team.

Shelby said the placement provided a unique opportunity to develop confidence in her abilities as an occupational therapy learner preparing to graduate. She appreciated having an experienced educator and team to consult with when she was uncertain but also valued the opportunity to problem-solve for herself.

The practice educator perspective

The split placement arrangement was suggested as a way of enabling the occupational therapy team to increase learning opportunities with children and young people. Careful planning was required, including liaising with the Practice Education Lead, university and school, and then with the learner to ensure arrangements and expectations for the placement were shared and appropriate.

Tracy reflected on the value of the occupational therapy learner being immersed in the school environment: 'Being in the school, observing a class of thirty children in a day, enabled a wider learning experience than a clinic-based model.' She felt that Shelby benefited from seeing children in their natural context and could soon identify children who might benefit from some occupational therapy contact. Being in a school enabled her to see the value of working at a universal level, as well as working directly with individuals which is the approach typically offered.

The teacher's experience

Brenda was keen when offered the opportunity to have an occupational therapy learner on a placement in her class: 'My head teacher approached me to ask me if I was interested in getting an occupational therapy student and I bit her hand off at the chance because trying to get occupational therapy as a service for a lot of my pupils is actually quite tricky and difficult because their service is overwhelmed by requests.'

She valued the time that Shelby could spend observing a particular child and found the suggestions she made insightful and practical: 'I was hoping that somebody would come in and help me understand his sensory needs, and she definitely did that.'

Brenda has supported many teaching and early years students in training and whilst she was initially concerned that Shelby might find her class a bit overwhelming, she was extremely positive about the placement: 'It was fantastic having somebody with experience of occupational therapy in the classroom because once she understood the children, she absolutely understood their needs.'

Having the support of practice educators who provided the clinical supervision also meant the administrative burden was much less than Brenda anticipated: 'If you have a teaching student then quite often you are helping the student to plan their lessons, you're observing them and their practice and giving them feedback on their lessons and things, whereas there wasn't the requirement of that for Shelby.' She said 'this was a completely different experience. I think the benefits that I got for myself personally and that my class saw as a result were huge, so I just think the benefits way outweighed any work involved on my part'.

The impact

Practice educators Tracy and Sarah felt that the split placement worked well for their team. It allowed professional liaison with the school and helped their understanding of the occupational therapy role at universal, targeted and individualised levels. Their service also benefited from the development of updated, fresh resources that are valued by everyone.

Shelby's placement helped her understand the value of occupational therapy in school settings. She feels more confident in her practice, knowing that her educator and the occupational therapy team trusted her ability to make independent decisions.

Brenda said that her classroom looks very different to how it did before the occupational therapy placement as she's created an area for her children to access self-regulatory activities. The training Shelby provided has helped teachers understand and address children's sensory regulation issues, leading to several "light bulb" moments when teachers realized what they could do to help children engage in learning.

Key learning points

- This type of placement requires practice educators who are open-minded, willing to be creative and flexible in their approach.
- There needs to be a cultural change within children's occupational therapy services to embrace the opportunities that school-based placements offer. Sharing experiences amongst the children's occupational therapy community will help support this shift.
- It's important to identify a school that is receptive to the idea of supporting an occupational therapy learner, and to have collaborative conversations to ensure expectations of the learner and what can be achieved by the placement are shared.
- Agreeing an end goal is important, especially if the placement is part of an ongoing project. This will help learners and the school feel satisfied with the placement outcome, even if further placements are planned to build on the outcome of the first.

C Multi-disciplinary collaboration between York St John University and Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership

Through an innovative collaboration between York St John University, the University of Hull and Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership, a local academy of primary and secondary schools has become a valued location for multi-disciplinary school-based placements for students across occupational therapy, physiotherapy and nutrition & dietetics courses.

Dr Fiona Howlett (Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy and Placement Lead for BSc and MSc Occupational Therapy Programmes at York St John University) shared her learning and tips for best practice from the extensive role emerging, school-based placement opportunities she and her colleague Miranda Threw have developed for occupational therapy learners during their final year of study.

Engaging the school

Fiona said that having initial 'buy-in' from the headteacher at the school, and a well-appointed mentor, really influenced the success of placements.

"The head teacher needs to be on board, because without that it can slip quite easily, and they must have some understanding of the role of OT, and what we can and can't do. So, the preliminary meeting that we have both with the Mentor and the person in charge of the organisation is really important."

Placement focus – working with the school community

Rather than working with a caseload of individual children, occupational therapy learners (who are on placement in pairs) offer interventions and outcomes that benefit groups or the wider school community. These are child-led, rather than teacher or adult led projects which are more familiar for school staff. Occupational therapy learners have empowered young people to share their voice through meaningful, purposeful and effective interventions.

Examples of placement projects

- Improving 'time-out' environments and creating a large, meaningful mosaic with the children
- Developing resources for pupils to develop **better mental health** during exam periods
- Creating **safe social spaces** at lunchtimes for students who have experienced bullying
- Developing information resources for school staff on **neurodiversity**
- **Improving the classroom environment** and giving the children a voice through photography to demonstrate what a positive environment looks like from their perspective

When the placement commences, occupational therapy learners are given initial direction from school staff as to an issue, a challenge, a target group of young people, or an area for improvement. Learners then spend time observing and creating a project proposal to be agreed with the mentor and long arm supervisor.

"They observe the classroom or classrooms that they're working with. They work with a community of students rather than one to one, and, after their observations, they might be in one specific class, or they might be looking at a target group that the school have asked us to look at, and so they'll observe what's going on in the 1st week and then they'll negotiate a project with the Mentor and with the Supervisor, and we come to an agreement on what they're going to produce."

Student supervision

Long arm supervision is provided by local occupational therapists in practice or a York St John University lecturer. None of the supervisors from practice had a paediatric background – and Fiona says that whilst supervisors with a paediatric background would be welcome, this isn't essential. The skills and competencies needed for supervision of a community wide project have afforded a new opportunity for occupational therapists to experience a different setting to their workplace.

"Clinicians volunteer to supervise. We don't have any specialist paediatric OTs that do the supervision, interestingly."

"We have clinicians, perhaps, who are at the more senior levels, and band sevens or eights who would like to keep their hand in, but don't have as much clinical contact. So, they actually, really enjoy doing clinical supervision."

Supervision normally takes place with both learners present, unless a learner needs individual time to discuss more personal issues. Fiona has found that supervision sessions give essential space for learners to explore and discuss differences in the approaches/culture between education professionals and the occupational therapist. Discussions can often involve supporting students to remain within their code of practice, when other professionals within the school have different standards and practices to adhere to.

Innovative support for learners

One key initiative that Fiona has implemented, with great success, is an evening drop-in session on Teams. Fiona or a colleague is available online at a pre-determined time each week for the duration of the placement for learner support outside of placement hours, should they wish to discuss any aspect of placement in an informal setting.

This was first trialled during the Covid-19 pandemic, when in-person visits were not possible. Learner feedback indicated that learners greatly valued the initiative and, therefore, sessions have continued as a source of support for school-based (and other role emerging) placements.

Placement success factors for HEI's to consider

- Only learners who have an interest in working in a school are offered the opportunity at York St John University
- Fiona ensures that learners placed in pairs know each other and have a good working relationship before the placement
- Fiona matches learners to placements within a reasonable commuting distance so they have their usual support systems in place during the placement
- Learners who wish to work outside of traditional roles are encouraged to engage with school-based placements
- A module handbook specifically for role emerging placements is provided
- Good communication between all parties involved is essential

"I need to match the students as well... and I always ask them, do they get on? And it's very frank conversation to have, but it's important to get on with each other."

"I think that good communication between the learners, the mentors and the supervisor is central, and, if you don't have it, I think problems emerge, and you don't know about them until the end. And that's too late, really."

Future of the profession

In school-based placements, occupational therapy learners can be innovative and creative, applying their skills and knowledge in a wider context, which ultimately enhances their leadership skills and employability.

Fiona's experiences have shown that the placements afford new opportunities for the profession, as they serve a valuable marketing to audiences who may have pre-conceived ideas about what occupational therapy is, as well as those to whom the profession is new.

Fiona has observed learners developing excitement and passion for their placement roles which seems to have enhanced their performance at interview for their first professional post. The schools that host the placements also consider potential employment of occupational therapists in the future, which is a real testament to the success of the placements.

"I think it's the way forward. They're so encouraged. And they're so excited by what they've done, because it's very, very different, and I think quite a lot of them get jobs on the back of their excitement and their passion for OT."

A video testimony of the placements that Fiona has developed in collaboration with health and social care professionals, students, University departments, the academy of schools and the NHS Trust is available: [Role Emerging Placements – A New Lens - YouTube](#)

D School based collaborative placement with Communicate 2 U, Selly Oak Trust School and Calthorpe Academy

Occupational therapists, Dan Waldron and Leanne Rouse, at Communicate 2 U and Selly Oak Trust School in Birmingham have developed a suite of occupational therapy learner placements using a range of traditional and role emerging models.

After a period of outreach work, one day per week by Leanne at Calthorpe Academy (the second biggest SEN school provision in Europe), a role emerging occupational therapy student placement was developed. The outreach work demonstrated a clear need for increased occupational therapy input for the school community and, therefore, project-based placements for two occupational therapy learners at a time were developed. Around four placement opportunities are offered per academic year.

Placement model

- **Setting:** Large SEN school provision in Birmingham
- **Age range:** 4 to 24 years
- **OT students:** 2 students per placement at Level 5 or 6
- **Practice educator:** One practice educator for both learners (based off site) and an identified on-site mentor for day-to-day support
- **Placement style:** Project based placement, full-time for 10 weeks

Project based placements

Through their experience as practice educators, Dan and Leanne found that the project style placement was preferred for this setting as they offer wider impact and are more suited to the skills and experience of learners.

Projects are identified through scoping reviews, staff feedback and observations by occupational therapists and the senior leadership team at the school. A Project Overview document is developed by Leanne and Dan which provides a clear framework of the project milestones week by week from the beginning. This is given to learners and school staff at the start of the placement and feedback has identified that it helps to alleviate any anxiety students may have by giving them clear direction.

Projects benefit the student community at Calthorpe and have proven to be very successful in developing the skills, opportunities and independence of Calthorpe students. School staff also feel more knowledgeable and skilful in their roles.

Support for occupational therapy learners

Learners are placed in pairs for peer support throughout the placement. They receive weekly in person individual supervision from their practice educator for around an hour and can also access informal support from them outside of this.

Group reflection sessions with learners on placement elsewhere with Communicate 2U are held at the end of each working day during week 1, facilitated by practice educators. Each session focuses on a specific theme or topic.

Weekly training sessions are then offered for learners in groups, where they are given opportunities to apply theory into practice.

In-school support is available from the senior leadership team, Safeguarding Lead and the identified on-site mentor (usually a curriculum lead) who is briefed on the expectations of the student by practice educator & University. They are also given the project overview.

There is also a document held on Teams with examples of previous students work, resources, references, activity analysis, interventions that students can access throughout the placement.

Skill development

A wide range of skill development opportunities are presented through this placement. These include:

- Developing professional discussion skills with education staff
- Clinical judgement and articulation
- Management skills – setting up meetings with school staff autonomously
- Autonomy of practice and building confidence as an occupational therapist
- Putting theory into practice
- Pitching ideas to senior managers

“I think they get that level of autonomy. I think that their confidence greatly improves. I think their understanding of the OT Process in relation to theory into practice, you know, was one of the biggest things that they take from it, but also their confidence with generating intervention plans, and seeing them in action and working alongside the staff, and at the end they were able to pitch to the senior leadership team.” - Leanne, practice educator

Pre-placement preparation

Dan and Leanne have developed various pre-placement processes. They believe that preparation activities are a key investment for a positive placement experience:

- An **induction handbook** has been developed which includes basic information about the placement and expectations on a day-to-day basis. This is given to learners before the placement starts.
- The **Project Overview** is written and communicated with all parties involved in the placement. This document is key to the success of this placement.
- Practice educators review and remind school staff of **expectations of learners**, as this varies for individuals
- Allocated learners meet with all staff involved in the placement

Impact of the placements

The impact and outcomes of this placement have been widely commended. Occupational therapy learners have facilitated change in policy, process, environment, and staff skills. They've also provided opportunities for occupational therapy, students and families at Calthorpe Academy, including:

- Change in culture and staff skills regarding feeding and mealtimes
- Improved communication between school and families
- Occupational therapy learners leave a 'legacy' and feel they have made a difference
- Articles for OT News have been published – so influencing the profession
- Job opportunities for graduates have emerged
- Positive feedback has been given by parents on the enhanced skills of a student

“We've had parents contact us to ask us what have we been doing? Because all of a sudden their young person is more independent within the home.” – Leanne, practice educator

“The rapport they built with the students was just really, really lovely. And they noticed the change in the staff that through that use of modelling and through that use of supporting the staff and giving them materials that that were accessible to them.” - Dan, practice educator

Recommendations for other schools

- Schools should consider and be clear about what they can offer in a placement and understand their responsibility in delivering support.
- Talk to an experienced occupational therapist to get a clear picture of requirements
- Spend time planning. The preplacement effort is worth it and this should be done in collaboration with an experienced occupational therapist

“I think reaching out to an occupational therapist who has done long arm supervision before to give you an idea about what's achievable in a placement window, is a good starting point.” – Leanne, practice educator

“That really early planning time to work out what a successful placement could look like. I guess that the first step to that is reaching out to occupational therapists who can support with keeping things occupation focused - which is a huge one in schools, isn't it?” - Dan, practice educator

E Wellbeing Therapy Solutions – consecutive school placements with a focus on emotional health

Kate Jackson is an independent occupational therapist and Managing Director of Wellbeing Therapy Solutions. She and her occupational therapy colleagues Beth Gardiner and Marjolein Clever have been supporting occupational therapy learners on school-based placements since 2019. They've built a relationship with a mainstream primary school, collaborating to create consecutive placement opportunities that focus on mental health and wellbeing for occupational therapy learners from Derby and Coventry universities.

Kate coordinates the placements, liaising with the university, practice educators, school and learners to ensure effective communication and shared expectations. Learners are supported by Beth or Marjolein as practice educators. They provide weekly supervision at the school, plus informal support in between. The school SENCo acts as the on-site mentor. Learners are linked to the school Pastoral Team with pastoral team members providing day-to-day support.

Building a relationship with the school over time

Offering consecutive placements within one school means that Clare, the SENCo has developed a good understanding of occupational therapy and what occupational therapy learners can do. Kate meets with Clare and the practice educator before each placement to discuss possible projects and children who could benefit from occupational therapy support.

'Clare's got a really good grasp of OT and the school are fairly used to students now so that they are used to the setup and actually this is what they could be looking at with the child' - Beth, practice educator.

'I think it's been really valuable to keep going back to the same school. Offering a similar setup of placement has meant they understand what's going to happen. They get much better at sort of working out which children need help' - Marjolein, practice educator

Meeting the school's needs

The school is in an area of multiple deprivation and supports an increasing number of children with social and emotional needs, many of whom are also neurodivergent. Whilst early intervention can help these children grow and thrive at school, occupational therapy isn't usually available until children's needs reach a crisis point. Occupational therapy learner placements that focus on preventative and early intervention approaches for children's mental health and wellbeing therefore address an important unmet need.

Practice educators – not just children's occupational therapists

Whilst neither Beth nor Marjolein describe themselves as children's occupational therapists, their occupational therapy skills and experience enable them to support school-based placements:

'I had an initial conversation with Kate, which was helpful and reassuring, saying well, you've had students before. It doesn't specifically matter about any condition that you're treating. It's about our approach and how we stick to the OT process and guiding students through that' - Beth, practice educator

Beth believes that having a practice educator with different experience can be beneficial for occupational therapy learners. It encourages them to solve problems and seek information from various sources.

'It's building their autonomy, it's building their sort of resilience because actually in the workplace they won't always know the answers and they'll have to think right, I'm stumped on this one. How do I go through this?' - Beth, practice educator

Placement focus

Occupational therapy learners have worked on a variety of wellbeing projects as part of their placement, including introducing children to breathing techniques to manage anxiety, providing staff training on sensory regulation, and setting up a sensory circuit programme.

Beth and Marjolein encourage learners to use their interests and previous experience when planning their interventions. One explored the benefits of movement for health and wellbeing by engaging children in football and basketball, while another used craft as a therapeutic tool. Marjolein stressed the importance of working with the school and learners in advance to ensure a good match between the interests of the occupational therapy learners and children's needs and motivations.

Another pair of learners took a different approach by using OT Week to focus on staff well-being. They helped staff think about activities and things they could do to look after themselves and each other. This also helped teachers develop a wider understanding of the occupational therapy role, beyond work with children and young people.

The learner experience

Hannah and Lauren completed a school-based placement with Wellbeing Therapy Solutions as part of their Masters programme. They valued the opportunity to see the occupational therapy process from start to finish – including information gathering to understand the occupational therapy need and support that was already in place, observing and assessing a group of children, and planning and delivering an intervention. They liaised with teachers and the pastoral team, planning their own timetable and making sure they fitted in with school routines and activities. Understanding the roles of school staff and building relationships with them was crucial to the success of their placement.

Hannah and Lauren focused on a particular year group who'd been identified by the school as struggling due to several staff changes the previous year. Their interventions included introducing movement breaks and creating personalised resources to help with self-regulation.

Hannah and Lauren said that not having an educator on hand to check things with was sometimes challenging, but the experience helped them grow into confident, autonomous practitioners.

'I think it's really increased my independence and confidence in myself being able to do it because I wasn't relying on somebody else being in there and double checking and then telling me what to do all the time. It encouraged me to be able to think for myself' - Lauren, occupational therapy learner

'By the end we were doing things because we used our clinical reasoning to think that's fine. And then we were able to just do it. And that was that was incredible' - Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Whilst they missed getting in-the-moment feedback from their practice educator, they valued comments from teachers about their work and its impact.

'It was just really nice to hear positive things from the teacher of how he'd been and how I've worked with him. And then also to see a subtle change because as we know, you don't fix the children. It was just more of like how can we make little improvements? I think that was

amazing that I took from it. That I can't come in and change the world. But you can make those little differences' - Hannah, occupational therapy learner

Independent practice perspective

Kate, Beth and Marjolein have brought their passion for supporting the next generation of occupational therapists into independent practice. The nature of their work means that supporting school-based placements can be more achievable than a traditional practice placement, although forward planning is required:

'You do have to plan ahead for a placement and make sure that maybe you have less other work going on so that you really can be there to support the students because you know your reality is does take time. You have to spend time with your students supervision, but also supporting with their research and their learning.

So I always make sure it's planned in advance' - Marjolein, practice educator

Kate uses the placement tariff to fund the time Beth and Marjolein need to plan, prepare and supervise their learner placements.

But it's not all about giving. Occupational therapy learners have also contributed to the Practice and to the occupational therapy profession more widely by creating social media content such as blogs, videos and posts about their placements. The team ensure appropriate safeguards are in place, such as making sure names and faces aren't visible, and value the creativity and enthusiasm of occupational therapy learners to showcase the role and value of school-based occupational therapy.

'We sometimes get the parents of the children they're working with following and liking and it gives them a bit more of an insight as to what's happened, you know, kind of behind closed doors at school' - Marjolein, practice educator

Supporting the growth of the occupational therapy profession

Practice educators and learners all recognise the value of school-based placements in helping develop confident, autonomous occupational therapy learners who are ready for practice – with children and young people and elsewhere.

'I think this is a really unique opportunity. And yes, it's challenging and they're often terrified when they first come but to be able to have the autonomy, to think about what OT assessments to use, what's the OT process? You know, and actually being able to follow that and think for themselves, to see how to set up a service and follow the OT process through from referral to discharge, it's an amazing thing for students to be able to experience' - Beth, practice educator

Key learning points

- Consecutive occupational therapy learner placements in one school benefit practice educators, the school community and occupational therapy learners through the development of processes, shared understanding and realistic placement expectations.
- Practice educators don't have to be experienced children's occupational therapists to support a school-based placement.
- Independent practitioners can take on the role of practice educator for school-based placements.
- School-based occupational therapy placements that focus on mental health and wellbeing can help address needs that aren't currently being met by schools or occupational therapy services.

- School-based placements offer opportunities for occupational therapy learners to develop the confidence and skills to work autonomously post-registration.