

Thinking of Children and Occupation in a New Way

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In the United States the majority of children 3 to 21 years old who receive occupational therapy services are seen in public schools. Therapy targets supporting children in their student roles. Though therapists are encouraged draw on research literature, the bulk of our knowledge rests on an individualistic view of children. A container of skills serves as a metaphor for this way of thinking of children. Influenced by this perspective, therapists take individual children from their classrooms to work on skills needed in the classroom.

A different way of thinking about children is proposed. Previous work informed the researchers' transactional view of classrooms as communities of learners that form a functional whole. In these communities, occupations are how the children relate to each other, teachers and educational situations. The research objectives for this study were to (1) expand our understanding of factors that work together to influence children's engagement in occupations and (2) explore when and why children's participation changes.

Using Yin's repeated case study design, 2 classrooms of preschool children with developmental delays or risks for school failure were recruited. The researchers conducted sustained observations recording individual and group behaviors as fieldnotes. In addition teacher interviews, information about the programs and the state's curriculum goals provided data. Reflective logs and debriefing with colleagues occurred.

The focus of this paper is 8 children and their teachers in a 3 year old classroom and 16 children, their teachers, and substitute teachers in a 4 year old classroom. Both positive and negative examples of development of occupations were found. Findings revealed ways teachers structured routines and children's participation in classroom cultural practices. Furthermore, interpersonal interactions created peer cultures that made engaging in routines and designated roles meaningful, thus sustaining children's participation.

These findings suggest the importance of moving away from an individualistic approach to knowledge of children's occupations to a more transactional, holistic epistemology. Collaborating with teachers to enhance children's experiences of membership in the class and capitalizing on children's efforts to establish and expanding their peer cultures are practice strategies supported by this research.