

Project Write to Learn (PWTL)

Program Description

Writing is an important instructional outcome for schoolchildren and it is especially challenging for children receiving special education services under the IDEA qualifying category of specific learning disability (SLD). Children who qualify for special education services under the category of SLD include those with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and language-based learning disabilities. Children with SLD are the largest proportion (35%) of children receiving special education services through the IDEA program (Kena et al. 2016). An important academic outcome for these children is the ability to write, and research indicates that children with SLD are on average one standard deviation below typically developing peers across 53 studies (Graham et al. 2017). Therefore, written expression is an important academic outcome for children with SLD due to the cognitive, language, graphomotor, visual perception, and sensory skills needed to engage in the writing process (Hayes & Berninger, 2014). Given the complex orchestration of these skills needed for writing (Garcia & Fidalgo, 2008) and the importance of writing for academic success as outlined by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; 2012), written expression is considered a priority for children with SLD. Children with SLD are a heterogeneous group and can demonstrate difficulties with one or more writing processes, with great variation across individual learning profiles (e.g., Dockrell et al. 2015; Koutsoftas, 2016). Due to their shared practice roles related to written expression, occupational therapy (OT) and speech language pathology (SLP) professionals can effectively collaborate as a means of improving academic outcomes for children with SLD. Written expression is considered within the scope of practice for both professions (AOTA, 2017; ASHA, 2001) and so lends itself well to interprofessional practice.

With all of this in mind, Project Write to Learn (PWTL) was developed. PWTL is a federally funded Office of Special Education Programs personnel training grant that provides graduate students in OT and SLP shared coursework, group assignments, and coordinated clinical experiences that lead to developing intervention protocols to improve writing in children with SLD. OT and SLP students have completed instructional units on the following topics:

1 - Foundations of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). During this phase students gained advanced knowledge of the IDEA laws that govern implementation of IEPs with a focus on children with SLD.

2 - Writing process framework and academic standards. During this phase students gained knowledge about the writing process (Hayes & Berninger, 2014) and academic standards set forth by the CCSS (2012).

3 - Specific Learning Disabilities and written expression. During this phase students gained knowledge about the bases of SLD and how written expression can be impacted by cognitive, linguistic, motor, visual, and sensory challenges associated with different SLDs.

4 - Intensive Interventions in school settings. During this phase students gained knowledge about data-based intensive interventions by completing online modules provided by the National Center for Intensive Intervention (NCII, 2017).

Knowledge gained from each phase was used to create a comprehensive table of options for the assessment and intervention of writing difficulties in children with SLD. The table of options was subdivided by type of disability (dyslexia, dysgraphia, and language-based learning disabilities) providing OT and SLP graduate students a 'menu of options' to select data-based assessment and intervention protocols.

Using this 'menu of options' OT and SLP students will work together to conduct a short (45 to 60 minutes) assessment of a child with SLD. The assessment will include asking the child to write a short story or essay, OT and SLP students will observe how the student writes as well as the final written product. Observations from writing activity are the primary source of assessment information for the child. Additional standardized assessments may also be administered depending on child's needs and will include subtests from commercially available norm-referenced tests of handwriting, spelling, and/or oral language. Following the assessment, the OT and SLP students will select one Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD; Graham & Harris, 2005) skill that they would like to teach to the student. SRSDs are research-based writing instructional strategies that target skills related to the writing process. For example, the **COPS** editing strategy stands for: **C**apitalize first words and proper nouns, **O**verall appearance, **P**unctuation use, and **S**pelling. A child will be taught how to apply this strategy to writing they have completed. Also included in the writing instruction will be speech and language and occupational therapy goals/targets identified as important for the strategy as observed during the writing sample.

District Request

We are looking for school district partners who would be willing to have OT and SLP students complete their clinical internships within their district. As part of that clinical internship, OT and SLP students would complete their requirements for implementing components of Project Write to Learn within their school district. This would be facilitated with their OT or SLP supervisor alongside project faculty from the university.

This intervention is a clinical venture and so we are asking that the proposed intervention takes place as part of speech language and/or OT services or another designated time by school personnel that can support academic instruction for writing. The intervention would run for 4 to 6 weeks providing one or two intervention sessions per week to a child or within a classroom in collaboration with classroom teachers. Data would be collected as part of the intervention and will be shared with the child's SLP and OT. Aggregate data for any participating school or district would also be provided to the district. A clinical affiliation agreement, data plan, and research approvals would need to be in place prior to starting the project, all of which would be coordinated by one of the Project Write to Learn faculty.

Project Write to Learn Faculty

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