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'Them and us': Lessons learnt in an educator – therapist collaboration

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Background: Children in South African low quintile schools face multiple barriers to learning, with handwriting difficulties being a key concern. Access to on-site occupational therapy (OT) is limited because of human resource constraints. In response, final-year OT students from the University of Cape Town collaborated with Grade R educators at a low quintile school, training them to implement an educator-led, classroom-based fine motor programme. This approach was guided by evidence supporting collaborative, contextually relevant interventions.

Aim: The study aimed to describe educators' experiences of the training and explore factors influencing the implementation of the fine motor programme.

Setting: Low quintile primary school in the Western Cape, Cape Town.

Methods: A qualitative, descriptive design was used. Three Grade R educators were purposively selected and trained. Two focus group discussions were conducted to gather their perspectives on the training and implementation process. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively to identify themes and categories.

Results: The central theme, 'them and us', captured the divide between stakeholders. A lack of communication, exclusion, unclear role expectations and resistance to change emerged as key challenges. These issues limited collaboration and undermined opportunities for shared learning and mutual support.

Conclusion: Collaborative school-based OT requires deliberate investment in relationship-building and role clarification.

Contribution: Without these, inclusive and effective implementation of interventions remains unlikely, and learner development may be compromised.

Keywords: educators; occupational therapists; collaborative partnerships; handwriting; fine motor programme.

Introduction

The development of fine motor skills in early childhood education is widely recognised as a cornerstone for academic and functional success (McClelland & Cameron 2019). These skills underpin essential classroom tasks such as handwriting, drawing, manipulating tools, cutting and construction activities, all of which are critical for academic performance and for the development of cognitive, social and emotional competencies (Rule & Smith 2018). When adequately supported, fine motor proficiency increases school readiness, fosters independence and enhances learners' confidence in engaging with learning tasks. However, where such support is lacking, children may struggle to meet curriculum demands, which can negatively impact their academic trajectory from the foundation phase onward.

In low-quintile South African schools, a structural mismatch exists between learner developmental readiness and institutional capacity to provide targeted support. Many learners enter formal schooling with delayed fine motor skills as a result of socioeconomic disadvantage, which includes limited access to early learning and inadequate stimulation at home (Sayed & Motala 2012; Spaull 2013). Concurrently, schools operate under high learner-to-teacher ratios, limited material resources, minimal access to specialist services and insufficient curriculum support that hamper their ability to deliver differentiated instruction and to identify or address early signs of developmental delay (Tobin & Tippet 2014). As a result, foundational skills like fine motor coordination are often under-prioritised, despite their centrality to long-term educational outcomes.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) provides time allocations and guidelines for foundational academic competencies, including a recommended daily 15-min handwriting practice (Republic of South Africa, Department of Basic Education DBE 2014). However, its successful implementation is deeply contingent on educators' ability to adapt their teaching to a wide range of learner readiness levels, which is an expectation made especially difficult by high learner-to-teacher ratios, a lack of teaching assistants and heavy administrative burdens (Harvey & Kamvounias 2008). These systemic limitations have spurred calls for a more collaborative and holistic approach to curriculum delivery (Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu 2013). Teachers, however, remain marginalised in policy-making processes and are often expected to implement reforms without sufficient support, training or clarity on their roles (Govender & Hugo 2018). This disconnect between what the policy intends to do, and practical application continues to affect the quality of foundational education in South Africa.

Occupational therapists are uniquely positioned to support fine motor development, particularly in identifying underlying difficulties with visual-motor integration, hand dominance, kinaesthetic awareness and motor planning (Owens 2008). Traditionally situated in special needs settings, occupational therapy (OT) in South African public schools has shifted under Education White Paper 6 (2001) to become more inclusive and integrated within mainstream environments. Therapists now serve as part of District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs), tasked with screening, consulting and implementing classroom-based interventions (Sonday et al. 2012). Yet, in practice, the implementation of inclusive education is constrained by the limited availability of therapists, especially in lower-quintile schools (Pillay & Di Terlizzi 2009). Many of these schools lack consistent access to OT services owing to workforce shortages, poor infrastructure and the prioritisation of acute social or medical crises over developmental needs (National Health Insurance Policy 2017). Hence, the system cannot meet demand through specialist intervention alone.

Where OT is available, collaborative models between educators and therapists have demonstrated potential in improving learner outcomes and enhancing classroom practices (Hutton 2009). Programmes that integrate therapist-led screening and consultation with educator-implemented activities show promise in building sustainability and addressing learner needs in a timely manner (Galvaan, Peters & Gretschel 2015; Gretschel, Damonse & Francke 2017). However, for such collaborations to be effective, roles must be clearly defined and mutual respect cultivated. Without these foundations, partnerships may flounder because of misunderstandings, miscommunication, or differing pedagogical paradigms (Orentlicher et al. 2014; Sonday et al. 2012). Educators are primarily accountable for curriculum delivery and assessment outcomes, whereas therapists focus on developing the foundational skills required for learning through structured interventions (Moore & Lynch 2018; Murphy 2008). When these priorities are not explicitly aligned, intervention efforts may become fragmented, limiting coherence and long-term sustainability.

Fine motor development, and particularly handwriting, is a multidimensional process requiring coordinated integration of sensory, motor and cognitive skills (Feder & Majnemer 2007; Goyen & Duff 2005). Handwriting milestones such as the development of the dynamic tripod grasp are expected by the end of Grade R (Reid et al. 2006), following a progression of gross-to-fine motor control. However, learners in low-quintile schools often lag behind because of socioeconomic constraints and lack of early intervention (Grissmer et al. 2010). Educators in these contexts report heightened stress when required to address fine motor challenges without adequate support or training (McNamee & Patton 2018). In some cases, they are unaware of developmentally appropriate practices or lack access to resources and structured programmes that could guide their instruction (Medwell & Wray 2008; Sharp & Titus 2016).

Research highlights the effectiveness of early fine motor interventions such as beading, tracing and finger painting in supporting the development of handwriting readiness (Bhatia, Davis & Shamas-Brandt 2015; Dankert, Davies & Gavin 2003). Culturally relevant environmental factors, like clothing styles that limit fastener use, also influence fine motor development and should be considered in designing interventions (Li-Tsang 2003). Educator-led, classroom-based programmes offer a promising model, especially when therapists provide ongoing consultation and resources that support the integration of these activities into everyday teaching (Seo 2018; Tennyson 2006). Co-teaching, in particular, allows for collaborative lesson delivery and mutual skill-sharing between professionals (Yalon-Chamovitz et al. 2017).

Reports emanating from annual occupational therapy screenings conducted in various low quintile schools in the Western Cape detailed considerable difficulties with fine motor skills among Grade R and Grade 1 learners (Gretschel et al. 2017). Harnessing opportunities to address the above stated difficulties, a collaborative fine motor, educator led intervention was implemented in TLC Primary School (pseudonym), a quintile 3, no-fee institution with over 1150 learners and only 29 teachers. Given the absence of consistent occupational therapist availability, responsibility for addressing fine motor needs could not remain therapist dependent. The focus of the intervention therefore shifted towards strengthening educator agency, positioning teachers as central actors in embedding fine motor development within routine classroom practice to sustain foundational skill development.

Ultimately, the success of this model depends greatly on how well collaboration occurs. Teachers must be empowered not only through training, but also through shared decision-making, structured resources and regular consultation with therapists (Bryan, Kreuter & Brownson 2009; Villeneuve 2009). Models such as Canada's Partnering for Change

(Missiuna et al. 2012) and the 3:1 service delivery model (Garfinkel & Seruya 2018) offer valuable frameworks for balancing workload and maintaining therapist involvement. Challenges remain, including role ambiguity, institutional constraints and uneven power dynamics (Kennedy & Stewart 2011; Patton, Hutton & MacCobb 2015). Nevertheless, with shared vision, trust and sustained dialogue, collaborative approaches may serve as a vehicle for systemic transformation.

To examine how such collaborations function in practice, this study explored the implementation of an educator-led fine motor programme in the TLC school context, foregrounding foundation phase teachers' experiences of integrating and facilitating the programme within their daily classroom routines. The focus was explicitly on educator engagement, implementation processes and contextual influences, rather than on the OT students or the nature of the training received. By highlighting their perspectives, it seeks to illuminate the barriers and enablers of such interventions in resource-constrained environments. It also contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education by offering practical, context-sensitive strategies for integrating therapeutic support within mainstream classrooms. Ultimately, it advocates for a systems-level approach in which educators are equipped, supported and recognised as central agents of inclusive developmental practice ensuring that all children, regardless of background, can acquire the foundational skills needed for learning and life.

Research methods and design

Methodology

A descriptive qualitative research design was used in this study. According to Lambert and Lambert (2012), this approach enables researchers to explore and document the lived experiences of individuals or groups, providing rich, detailed accounts of events as they unfold. Descriptive qualitative research is particularly well-suited for investigating unfamiliar phenomena or emerging areas of practice, thus making it an appropriate choice for this study. Using this approach, educators could articulate and critically reflect on their experiences of the training provided, as well as the implementation of the classroom-based fine motor programme. It also provided a platform for them to share their perceptions, thoughts and emotions within the specific school context in which the intervention took place.

Research setting

TLC Primary, previously described, served as the research site for this study and is one of the partner schools within the University of Cape Town. Over time, the school has received student-led interventions from divisions within the Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences (DHRS). The researcher, in her capacity as a clinical educator at the school, possessed in-depth contextual knowledge of the learning environment and the learners' occupational performance. This insight was informed by several years of experience in co-designing fine motor programmes in partnership with OT students during their clinical placements at the school.

Sampling

A convenience sample comprising three Grade R educators at TLC Primary was strategically selected by the researcher for participation in the study. The decision to focus exclusively on Grade R educators was informed by educational policy directives that emphasise the importance of early identification and intervention in the development of pre-writing and handwriting skills (Education White Paper 6 2001). Furthermore, the intervention programme aligned with the pedagogical emphasis on play-based learning in Grade R, providing a valuable opportunity to integrate play as a meaningful occupation to support foundational learning and skill development.

Data collection procedures

Access and Recruitment: Following the receipt of ethical approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Reference: 435/2018), the researcher sought and secured permission from the Western Cape Education Department. Following this permission was sought from the school principal. Upon agreement, the principal was asked to share the details of the study with Grade R educators. Educators who agreed to take part, along with the coordinator, were fully briefed on the study's purpose, the methods of data collection, and the potential risks and benefits involved. Before the commencement of data collection, they were required to provide written informed consent.

Educator training and programme implementation

As part of their final-year practice learning, OT students from UCT's Division of Occupational Therapy conducted training for Grade R educators, details in Table 1, at TLC Primary School. This training focused on equipping educators with practical knowledge of fine motor activities that could be integrated into daily classroom routines to support learners' handwriting development. Conducted in

TABLE 1: Demographic information of participants.

Educator	Age (years) and gender	Demographic information	Years of experience	Years of teaching at TLC
Educator Z†	49 Female	Married, living in Khayelitsha isiXhosa speaking	19 ECD	17
Educator Y†	51 Female	Married, living in Khayelitsha isiXhosa speaking	18 ECD	16
Educator X†	37 Female	Single, living in Stellenbosch isiXhosa speaking	6 Gr. R	6

Source: Damonse, S., 2021, 'Educators' perspectives of the implementation of a classroom based, educator led occupational therapy intervention for fine motor skills', Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, viewed from http://hdl.handle.net/11427/35706

TLC, a low quintile primary school in the Western Cape, South Africa.

†, Denotes that pseudonyms have been used.

small groups over 5 weeks, the training sessions were held twice weekly for 75 min after school, totalling 12.5 h of instruction. The structured programme was designed to be implemented by educators four mornings per week for 15 min per session. Activities followed a developmental sequence aimed at improving muscle strength, perceptual skills and fine motor control, particularly pencil grip. Each lesson focused on a specific skill, with built-in consolidation before introducing new content. Reproducible worksheets and clearly stated objectives were provided to guide educators. To ensure objectivity, the researcher did not participate in the training or related discussions. Instead, the coordinator managed all logistical and educator-related matters and monitored the training sessions. The coordinator also led the consolidation of the programme at the start of Term 3 in 2018, ensuring continuity and consistency in its implementation.

Data collection tools

As the primary data collection tool, focus groups enabled the exploration of educators' experiences, reflections and perspectives related to the training they received and the classroom implementation of the fine motor programme. Two focus groups were conducted to gain insight into how the programme influenced their teaching and supported learners' handwriting development. This method was chosen for its efficiency in gathering rich, interactive feedback in a limited time frame, especially after school hours. Focus groups also allowed for group dialogue and the expression of differing views not always captured in one-on-one interviews. An independent facilitator, fluent in both isiXhosa and English, led the sessions to ensure open discussion and a deeper understanding of participants' language use and intentions. Each group met for 90 min in the school library after classes. Discussions were guided by questions developed using Smart's (2006) Multidimensional Model of Clinical Utility, focusing on the appropriateness, accessibility, acceptability, and practicality of the intervention. Although the training itself was not the study's focus, it became a recurring theme in the focus groups. The researcher later interviewed the coordinator for additional insights. All focus group data were transcribed by the researcher and verified by the facilitator for accuracy.

Data management

Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and the university's secure online platform, accessible only to the researcher and supervisors.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this study was guided by the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves a structured process of immersion, coding, categorisation and theme development. The researcher began by deeply familiarising herself with the data, transcribing the audio recordings and repeatedly reading through the transcripts whilst listening to the recordings. During this phase, initial observations and potential patterns were noted. Following familiarisation, the researcher generated preliminary codes by identifying significant and meaningful segments of the data that captured the context and essence of participants' responses. These codes were then organised into categories, reflecting commonalities across the data. Related categories were further refined and grouped into overarching themes that captured the broader narratives emerging from the educators' experiences. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and coherence, ensuring that they accurately represented the data and maintained alignment with the original codes and categories.

Informed consent

Participants received detailed information about the study, including their rights, and signed consent forms.

Justice

Participation was voluntary and non-disruptive. The site was chosen for its readiness to support research, and participants were acknowledged throughout.

Trustworthiness and rigour

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the principles of credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability were upheld throughout. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the findings, and through collaboration with the experienced focus group facilitator, who also verified the analysed data. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail documenting the research process, with all data securely stored on a password-protected platform. Confirmability was ensured by triangulating data through discussions with the facilitator, peers, the coordinator and the deputy principal, as well as through reflective journaling and referencing relevant literature and policy. Transferability was addressed by using purposeful sampling and providing a detailed account of the educators' profiles, their teaching context, and the implementation of the intervention, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar settings. To minimise bias, all educator-related planning and communication were conducted through the coordinator.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town on 08 October 2018. The ethical clearance number is 435/2018.

Results

The findings revealed significant challenges faced by Grade R educators in implementing a classroom-based OT fine motor programme. Although they were trained by OT

TABLE 2: Theme and categories.

Theme	Categories
Them and us	• Left out and side lined but still expected to do • Pedagogical conflict

Source: Damonse, S., 2021, 'Educators' perspectives of the implementation of a classroom based, educator led occupational therapy intervention for fine motor skills', Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, viewed from http://hdl.handle.net/11427/35706

students in 2018, the programme was only implemented 8 months later, in early 2019. This was attributable to higher education and public school holidays as well as stipulations as to when research may be conducted made by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Weekly refresher sessions were introduced and led by the coordinator in an attempt to support the educators, but tensions remained. Two focus groups conducted during implementation highlighted key concerns. The overarching theme, 'them and us':, emerged from educators' feelings of exclusion and pedagogical conflict. They felt sidelined in the decision-making process and burdened by the added responsibility without sufficient support or integration into their existing workload, as seen in Table 2. Rather than fostering collaboration, the programme inadvertently deepened divisions between the educators and the OT team. These strained dynamics were further impacted by communication and relationship difficulties involving the school management team and coordinator, revealing a broader disconnect among stakeholders.

The Grade R educators at TLC Primary felt excluded from meaningful participation in a fine motor programme initiated by OT students from UCT. Although the programme aimed to empower educators to implement a classroom-based intervention, educators were not involved in the initial decision-making. They described the process as top-down and authoritarian, expressing frustration at being sidelined and not recognised as equal partners. Educator Z remarked, 'We are repeating the same thing but from my side it's like the outside … they still taking our kids and they don't tell us'.

Educators were unaware that what they experienced as informal meetings were intended as training. 'We did not know that was a training … we just had a small meeting', said Educator X, highlighting a lack of clarity. They recalled receiving 'just the A4 page with the big monkey', reducing the programme to worksheets rather than a structured intervention. Students were perceived as inexperienced and unfamiliar with the school context. Some educators mistook them for learners, which affected the authority and credibility of the training. Educator Z stated, 'I know nothing about training by three occupational therapy students'. Owing to logistical constraints and heavy workloads, training sessions were often disrupted, and follow-up was minimal. 'They didn't come back to us for the challenges, to ask us', Educator X noted.

Educator Y struggled to contextualise the training materials provided and saw them as disconnected from their teaching. Educator Z said, indicating disengagement:

> 'We didn't go the extra mile … we only photocopy the papers'.

Whilst students made efforts to make the programme culturally relevant, for example, they invited educators to name the character used in the programme, the educators' activities were seen as an added burden. '… We in our own understanding of them thought they will come and they will try to slot in our daily program so we don't have extra work to do', Educator X

Occupational therapy students also expressed frustration, noting educators' minimal participation during training. One journal entry indicated that the educators merely observed and participated minimally, which affected how the students perceived their facilitation abilities.

The educators' overall frustration with the process was also reflected in their limited engagement in the focus groups. Attempts by the researcher to hold reflective focus groups were often met with cancelled or late attendance. Educators appeared irritated and disengaged: 'Why you asking me now, nobody asked us', Educator Y said. However, educators did not reject collaboration entirely. They expressed willingness to share information about learners and proposed joint planning that aligned with their existing curriculum. 'We can sit together and share what [*the student*] has picked up … maybe my eyes will be open', said Educator X. They preferred OT students to focus on one-on-one interventions rather than group activities, stating that 'they must come to see us and know our programme already', Educator X.

Ultimately, the initiation of process of partnering with the educators with respect to the programme was flawed, and this led to the limited integration of the programme into the classroom. Educators perceived it as an external imposition rather than a co-developed initiative. As Educator Z noted, 'Sometimes you feel like they just dumping work … and then you do other things'. Their lack of motivation to implement the programme stemmed from feeling excluded and unsupported from the onset of the process. Their experiences emphasise the need for early, meaningful collaboration and mutual respect to ensure sustainable, integrated educational interventions.

Pedagogical conflict

Educator Z's question, 'May I ask? What is the main thing the students do here in our school?' captures a broader disconnect between Grade R educators and OT students during the implementation of a fine motor programme. This question reflects the educators' uncertainty and the lack of clarity around the students' roles, the programme's purpose, and how it was supposed to align with classroom teaching. The OT programme often clashed with educators' mandated CAPS schedules, which integrate pre-writing into broader themes rather than presenting it as discrete daily activities. As Educator X observed, '… those activities it didn't fit into my program … we have our own activities', suggesting a perceived misalignment with their daily teaching goals.

Educator X could not clearly recall the training sessions and struggled to see how the programme could be pedagogically useful rather than an external add-on. One commented vaguely, '… maybe you … with the story time with the monkey or something …'. There was a clear desire for better collaboration. 'They can ask us what we are going to do for the day … so they can make their program fit into our program', suggested Educator X. However, repeated scheduling delays and a lack of structured planning meetings limited these opportunities. One journal entry highlighted this tension, noting that the focus group facilitator, Thembi, made a concerted effort to attend, while the educators appeared uncomfortable and lacked confidence when being questioned. This suggested feelings of discomfort and confusion, particularly among educators without formal training.

The purpose of the programme also remained vague. As Educator Y stated, 'The problem is the training, I don't understand the training … they did not clearly explain to us'. Even the coordinator recalled walking into sessions to find educators 'completely confused'. Occupational therapy students attempted to bridge this gap with demonstrations, but without structured explanation or relationship-building, confusion deepened. Educators felt their informal yet valuable classroom practices which they implemented, such as correcting posture were overlooked. 'We don't label them … but I help the child to sit up straight', said Educator X, suggesting a gap between practical knowledge and formal acknowledgement.

A recurring frustration was the lack of communication about individual learner needs. 'Even during the activity, they didn't tell me about the sitting, they didn't tell me about anything … why am I there?' said Educator Y. Materials like the 'monkey' illustrations were seen as irrelevant. 'Our biggest challenge are those monkeys and other pictures, they are not fitting into our programme', said Educator Y and activities were treated as optional extras: 'We just add, when we finish our activities', noted Educator Y, illustrating the programme's marginal status in classroom routines.

The educators also misunderstood the role of the students, expecting a pull-out model or consistent in-class delivery. 'We thought they will always come and do the programme in class', said Educator Z. When this did not happen, it caused confusion and a sense of abandonment. They expected follow-up and continued guidance. 'They will come again … because they were showing us the activities', said Educator X. Despite these tensions, educators remained open to collaboration, but only within a co-planned and aligned framework. 'If they can be here so we can all plan … we are doing the same things', concluded Educator Z. This reflects shared goals across professions, but without a collaborative structure, true integration and mutual learning were never realised.

Discussion

This study examined the implementation of a school-based OT programme aimed at enhancing Grade R learners' fine motor skills, primarily to improve handwriting. Although the initiative was underpinned by strong pedagogical intentions and supported by evidence-based practice, it became clear that the partnership between stakeholders was fragmented and fraught with challenges. These challenges subsequently, significantly compromised the success of the implementation and sustainability of the programme.

Having observed persistent handwriting difficulties among learners, the OT team proposed a classroom-based intervention as the most context-appropriate strategy (Nye & Sood 2018; Sayers 2008) to overcome these difficulties. The initiative was designed not only to support learners' development, but also to contribute to educators' professional growth (Bush et al. 2010). However, whilst well-intentioned and evidence-informed, the introduction to the partnership lacked the necessary inclusivity and collaborative attitude. Although the deputy principal, coordinator and clinical educator had approved the implementation of the intervention, the Grade R educators and their Head of Department (HOD) did not feel that they had been sufficiently included in the planning process. This top-down approach triggered resistance among educators, who felt sidelined and disempowered. As Bose and Hinojosa (2008) emphasise, effective collaboration is difficult to establish when communication is limited, and stakeholders do not share a unified vision. In this context, educators fell back on familiar practices and displayed reluctance to accept change, a pattern noted by Du Plessis (2016) as common when new strategies disrupt longstanding routines.

This resistance was compounded by poor clarification of roles and responsibilities. The educators were unaware of the OT students' evolving roles, especially their position as trainers and classroom collaborators. Without a shared understanding of these dynamics, educators entered the programme confused and uncertain. Quinn and Mullally (2008) stress that stakeholder involvement from the outset is essential to build mutual understanding and shared ownership. This was missing, and the lack of defined roles created friction between the role players. The coordinator, intended to act as a bridge between disciplines, was unable to assert influence or mediate effectively because of limited authority and a lack of rapport with older staff. Tay, Ang and Hegney (2012) describe effective communication as a two-way, relational process; yet, what unfolded at the primary school was a breakdown in dialogue, marked more by disconnect than collaboration.

This struggle continued through the programme's execution, reinforcing an entrenched 'them and us' dynamic. Central to this division was a mismatch in professional paradigms. Occupational therapists and educators come from different training backgrounds where therapists approach handwriting from the lens of human occupation and developmental function (American Occupational Therapy Association 2008), while educators often lean on practical, experiential strategies shaped by years in the classroom (Britzman 2012). The OT students, trained in adult

learning principles, attempted to bridge this divide, but they struggled to translate the content in a way that educators found relatable or relevant. As a result, the educators responded with passive resistance showcasing nonverbal disengagement, superficial participation and incomplete implementation. Feder and Majnemer (2007), as well as McNamee and Patton (2018), argue that environmental and instructional contexts play a significant role in fine motor skill development. However, despite the programme's focus on sustainable, integrated strategies, educators viewed it as an unnecessary imposition (Zhai, Raver & Li-Grining 2011), further alienating them from its goals.

Complicating matters, the Grade R educators at the school had between 6 and 18 years of teaching experience but lacked formal qualifications in Grade R teaching. Their pedagogical approaches were largely shaped by practical knowledge and classroom survival, not academic theory. Du Plessis (2016) suggests that many teachers replicate the methods by which they were taught, creating a rigid pedagogical blueprint. Fernandez (2014) and Annandale (2019) emphasise that while experience is valuable, theoretical understanding can broaden instructional repertoire and offer targeted solutions to challenges such as handwriting. Yet, the educators' disengagement meant they missed opportunities to expand their understanding of pre-handwriting skills, pencil grip techniques and the development of visual-motor integration, which are all critical components of the programme.

The educators experienced a lack of agency throughout the process, which left them feeling unheard and disempowered. Galvaan et al. (2015) argue that in many institutional cultures, educators operate within a cycle of passive compliance, shaped by top-down mandates and institutional inertia. While educators did share concerns in focus groups, they did not actively resist the programme and this could most likely be because of an unspoken fear of jeopardising the school's partnership with the university. Despite attempts to foster inclusivity by using a culturally and linguistically matched facilitator, the educator engagement remained minimal. Their withdrawal, evident in behaviours like missing focus groups and unenthusiastic feedback, strained their relationships with the students and disrupted the programme's rhythm.

Looking deeper at this disengagement reveals broader issues of power and resistance to change. As documented by Lorenzi and Riley (2000) and Bartholomew and Sandholtz (2009), resistance often stems from a perception that change is externally imposed and inadequately contextualised. The educators saw the programme not as a professional development opportunity but as an extra workload 'dumped' on them. This misinterpretation obscured the programme's core goal in supporting learners with barriers to learning. The co-teaching and in-class support model directly challenged the educators' traditional perception of OT as a pull-out service. Consequently, they felt threatened by what they perceived as a loss of their classroom autonomy, consistent with findings by Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2013), who note that change is often met with defensive bravado.

Power dynamics further complicated the partnership, where educators leveraged their experience, age and insider status to assert control over the programme's direction. Language also became a tool of resistance, with educators insisting on communicating in isiXhosa during sessions, thereby asserting cultural and positional authority. Though there was some initial progress in isiXhosa-led focus groups, resistance remained entrenched. Even small requests such as making the programme file available were met with hesitation or delay. Wallerstein et al. (2019) note that such behaviours signal deeper issues of mistrust, control and professional insecurity. These patterns of resistance, both overt and subtle, contributed to the programme's delay.

The ultimate breakdown of this initiative illustrates the difference between collaboration in name and collaboration in practice. The programme had a strong conceptual foundation and an evidence-informed design, but it lacked the collaborative coherence required for success. Planning occurred in disciplinary silos, with educators and OT students preparing separately, rather than through integrative dialogue. While Asher and Estes (2016) acknowledge the importance of intra-professional preparation, they emphasise that inter-professional collaboration is essential for effective school-based practice. Hart (2015) also highlights the difficulty but necessity of aligning different disciplines towards a common goal.

The student facilitators had been trained to apply adult education strategies, but these were introduced only after the programme was underway, which was too late to recalibrate initial misunderstandings. Orentlicher et al. (2014) caution that therapists, often unintentionally, adopt an expert position that can silence or marginalize educators. This dynamic played out when educators came to see the programme as externally imposed, rather than something they had shaped. As Crooks et al. (2018) and Doyle and Cruickshank (2012) suggest, sustainable implementation of new interventions requires strong, consistent leadership, open communication and active engagement across all levels. These elements were missing, and without them, the programme floundered in a sea of good intentions, unmet expectations and missed opportunities for genuine transformation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the need for a more nuanced and contextually aware approach to collaboration in school-university partnerships. Simply placing students into schools with the expectation of

knowledge transfer fails to consider the complexity of pedagogical identities, power relations and historical experiences of the educators involved. True collaboration requires more than logistical coordination; it demands mutual respect, shared agency and deep engagement with each other's pedagogical perspectives. Sustainable implementation of new interventions requires strong, consistent leadership, open communication, and active engagement across all levels. These elements were missing in this initiative, and without them, the programme floundered in a sea of good intentions, unmet expectations, and missed opportunities for genuine transformation.

Future partnerships must prioritise co-construction from the outset. This includes involving educators in the planning and decision-making processes, recognising the legitimacy of experiential knowledge, and ensuring that new programmes are introduced with sensitivity to existing classroom dynamics and workloads. Programmes must be positioned not as additional tasks, but as integrative opportunities that support both learner development and educator empowerment. This study demonstrates that pedagogical conflict is not inherently negative. If harnessed correctly, such conflictual situations can become a site of transformative learning for all involved. But for this to happen, the tools must not only be offered, but also held together firmly and fairly by all the role players in the partnership.

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Competing interests

The authors, Shireen Damonse; Pamela Gretschel and Adele Ebrahim, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Shireen Damonse: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. Pamela Gretschel: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Adele Ebrahim: Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author, Shireen Damonse, on reasonable request.

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