ISSN print 2414-4517, ISSN online 2710-1487, https://ecm.knmu.edu.ua, ecm.journal@knmu.edu.ua

UDC: 615.851:376-056.34

COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOL-BASED OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY FOR AUTISTIC STUDENTS (LITERATURE REVIEW)

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Background. Teaching students with autism spectrum disorders in mainstream classrooms exposes school staff to high risks of professional burnout during pedagogical stress. While traditional school-based occupational therapy focuses primarily on direct, individual student interventions, contemporary international research indicates an institutional paradigm shift toward collaborative consultation, multi-tiered systems of support, and professional coaching for teachers.

Aim. To investigate professional development programs designed by occupational therapists to train school staff in working with students with autism spectrum disorders.

Materials and Methods. The study was conducted using bibliosemantic and comparative methods, as well as systems analysis. A literature search was performed in PubMed and Google Scholar covering the period from 2001 to 2023. The research was carried out as a private academic initiative of the authors, without external grant funding or state registration of the topic.

Research Ethics. For the literature review, studies whose authors adhered to bioethical standards were selected.

Results. Data analysis revealed a critical need for teacher training in working with students with autism spectrum disorders to develop staff-safe behavioral strategies. Evaluation of such models indicates a need for a transition from direct individual help to collaborative consultation models, which reduces teacher burnout and isolation and improves the educational process. Data from quasi-experimental pilot studies demonstrate that short-term, structured occupational performance coaching combined with specialized workshops provides a statistically significant improvement in teachers' perception of their effectiveness (Wilcoxon $Z=-3.30$, $p=0.001$) and clinical-educational satisfaction ($Z=-3.31$, $p=0.001$). These data validate coaching as a powerful mechanism to enhance professional self-efficacy.

Conclusions. Implementing multi-tiered and collaborative coaching strategies in the school environment creates a sustainable, hierarchical support framework that prioritizes universal communicative and protective solutions. Since school-based occupational therapy is not yet institutionalized within the Ukrainian educational system, international experience can be used to create conceptually scalable models for local educational policy-makers to optimize interdisciplinary cooperation.

Keywords: *autism spectrum disorder, inclusive education, school-based occupational therapy, teacher coaching, multi-tiered systems of support, professional development.*

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ISSN print 2414-4517, ISSN online 2710-1487, https://ecm.knmu.edu.ua, ecm.journal@knmu.edu.ua

Цитуйте українською: Нешко СІ, Єгоркіна ДМ.
Спільний професійний розвиток у шкільній ерготерапії для учнів із аутизмом (огляд літератури).
Експериментальна і клінічна медицина. 2025;94(4):181-9.
https://doi.org/10.35339/ekm.2025.94.4.ney [англійською]

Cite in English: Neshko SI, Yehorkina DM.
Collaborative professional development in school-based occupational therapy for autistic students (literature review).
Experimental and Clinical Medicine. 2025;94(4):181-9.
https://doi.org/10.35339/ekm.2025.94.4.ney

Introduction

School workers who teach students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are at high risk of professional burnout and job-related exhaustion [1]. Extra evidence-based training, collaborative guidance, and ongoing structural support are urgently required to assist teachers in dealing with the complex needs of such students. A series of international studies utilizing diverse methodological approaches highlights significant gaps in current educational settings. Specifically, qualitative investigations based on semi-structured and in-depth interviews with educators and teaching assistants reveal that school staff frequently feel isolated and structurally unsupported in mainstream classrooms [2; 3]. These findings are further corroborated by comprehensive case study evaluations and qualitative focus-group analyses, which emphasize that general education teachers lack systemic readiness to design inclusive environments and manage specialized classroom events [4; 5].

Moreover, large-scale quantitative surveys utilizing targeted questionnaires confirm that a vast majority of school professionals struggle to effectively respond to the specific socio-communicative, academic, and behavioral requirements of students on the autism spectrum [6]. This systemic lack of training and confidence is consistently reported by educators across various geographic and socio-cultural educational frameworks [7; 8].

It is quite understandable that educators who teach pupils with autism in their classrooms typically experience higher degrees of stress than their colleagues, and that some of them express low professional self-efficacy [9; 10]. Driven by these workplace challenges, school professionals express a strong, explicit desire to receive comprehensive interdisciplinary support and specialized professional development to optimize their teaching strategies and improve inclusive classroom management [8; 11; 12].

Aim of this research was to review the current literature and evaluate a professional development program offered by an occupational therapist to help a school staff team facilitate the participation of learners with autism spectrum disorders and their peers.

Material and Methods

The study was conducted utilizing biblio-semantic and comparative methods, as well as systems analysis. A comprehensive literature search was performed across the PubMed and Google Scholar databases covering the publication period from 2001 to 2023. The search strategy relied on the following mandatory keywords and phrases: autism spectrum disorder, inclusion, mainstream classrooms, school-based occupational therapy, multi-tiered systems of support, response to intervention, teacher training, collaboration, evidence-based practice, partnering for change, coaching, developmental coordination disorder, self-efficacy, professional development, service delivery.

The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed scientific articles, methodological frameworks, and empirical studies that evaluated collaborative educational models, professional development strategies for school teams, and interdisciplinary interventions involving educators and occupational therapists.

This research was carried out as a private academic initiative of the authors, without external grant funding or state registration of the topic.

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Research Ethics

During the literature review, studies were selected, the authors of which adhered to ethical standards. The study was conducted without human participation, so the approval of the ethics commission was not required.

Results

Based on the analyzed literature, modern researchers emphasize the critical necessity of developing training programs tailored to the actual demands of school staff supporting the inclusion of pupils with autism [11; 12]. Empirical data indicate that due to the high prevalence and comprehensive needs of students with ASD, a systemic educational approach is required. This framework must include training the entire school team [13; 14] and facilitating close collaboration among school staff in selecting interventions [15]. Such integrated support helps stabilize the generalization of behavioral strategies across various school situations and allows educators to better deal with complex classroom challenges [16; 17].

Today, despite growing awareness, there remain significant unsatisfied needs regarding professional support for the inclusion of learners with autism. Various interdisciplinary specialists can support school communities. Specifically, occupational therapists are well-positioned to assist children with special educational needs within their learning environment [18; 19]. Regarding the practical integration of these models, our review closely examined the breakthrough project "Occupational Therapists for Inclusive Schools: Autism", conducted by Rajotte É. et al. (2023) [1] in Quebec, Canada. The primary goal of this research was to develop, implement, and evaluate a novel, collaborative practice model for school-based occupational therapists to enhance the school inclusion of autistic students. The authors utilized a robust qualitative descriptive design rooted in a participatory action research framework. Data collection was performed through multiple methods, including semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and reflective logbooks. The study closely monitored a purposive sample of school teams, tracking their evolving collaborative experiences. Qualitative data analysis was executed using dynamic thematic analysis, where verbatim transcripts were systematically coded and cross-referenced by independent researchers to ensure trustworthiness and inter-rater reliability. While the study captured qualitative trajectories rather than quantitative metrics, the thematic saturation confirmed a 100% consensus among participants that the model significantly reduced teacher isolation and enhanced their capacity to modify classroom environments. The authors concluded that transitioning from direct individual interventions to structured, collaborative consulting models is highly effective and sustainably empowers the entire school team.

The project integrated multi-tiered and coaching approaches, which are increasingly recommended to stimulate professional development among school staff and meet the needs of diverse learners [18–20]. Historically, these models evolved from general inclusive education frameworks [21; 22] and universal school-based occupational therapy services [23–26]. In a classic Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), students are provided with three distinct levels of assistance [27; 28].

Tier 1 promotes universal design actions to enhance the participation or well-being of all pupils in the classroom. Tier 2 actions specifically target small groups of pupils who are experiencing mild difficulties or are at risk of developing them. Finally, Tier 3 offers intensive, individualized interventions for pupils for whom Tier 1 and Tier 2 actions prove insufficient. The practical execution of a multi-tiered approach inherently requires close, structurally embedded cooperation between occupational therapists and general education teachers [28; 29].

Several foundational investigations have confirmed the high administrative and clinical effectiveness of these collaborative frameworks in general school settings [30; 31]. However, prior occupational therapy literature has noted a lack of clear protocols on how a multi-tiered approach can be systematically operationalized to answer the highly diverse and complex behavioral needs of students with autism [15].

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A structured coaching approach for school staff usually accompanies the rollout of these multi-tiered intervention models [18; 22; 25]. Under this paradigm, the occupational therapist does not work in isolation; instead, the therapist collaborates directly with meaningful adults involved in the children's daily lives, such as teachers and parents [28; 31; 32]. This collaborative interaction assists adult educators in identifying independent environmental solutions to promote children's active participation in chosen school activities [19; 32; 33].

A critical quantitative validation of the coaching paradigm is found in the study conducted by Hui C. et al. (2016) [19] in Montreal, Canada. The study aimed to evaluate the impact of a combined intervention – consisting of a professional development self-regulation workshop and subsequent Occupational Performance Coaching (OPC) – on primary school teachers. The researchers employed a rigid pretest-posttest quasi-experimental pilot design involving 14 primary school general education teachers. The intervention consisted of a 3-hour workshop followed by 4 individual OPC sessions per teacher over an 8-week period. Data collection utilized standardized clinical instruments, including the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM) and the Measures of Processes of Care for Service Providers. Quantitative data were processed using non-parametric statistical analysis via SPSS software. Due to the small sample size, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied to calculate changes in scores before and after the coaching intervention, with the statistical significance threshold set at a=0.05. The statistical analysis yielded a highly significant improvement in teachers' perception of their performance in implementing self-regulation strategies, with the median COPM performance scores jumping significantly (Wilcoxon Z=–3.30, p=0.001). Similarly, teachers' satisfaction with their clinical-educational management increased dramatically, showing a major statistical shift (Wilcoxon Z=–3.31, p=0.001). The investigators concluded that short-term, structured Occupational Performance Coaching provides a statistically powerful mechanism to boost teachers' professional self-efficacy, actively lower classroom stress, and drastically improve the behavioral engagement of students with diverse special educational needs [19; 34].

Discussion

The findings analyzed in this review highlight a critical paradigm shift in school-based occupational therapy: moving from a traditional direct-service model (where the therapist works only with an individual child) to a collaborative consultation and coaching model (where the classroom and the school team are the primary clients) [20; 26].

The integration of MTSS and OPC [19; 27] provides a robust methodological framework to reduce teacher burnout, which is exceptionally high among professionals working with students on the autism spectrum [11; 16]. However, a critical challenge identified during our analysis involves the generalization of research findings.

As rightly pointed out in contemporary evaluation contexts, several foundational studies validating the effectiveness of models like Partnering for Change (P4C) were originally conducted on distinct pediatric populations, such as children with developmental coordination disorder [18; 28; 31] or general physical and learning disabilities [29; 34].

Erroneously generalizing these outcomes as direct evidence for autism intervention constitutes a logical oversimplification. Students with ASD present unique socio-communicative, sensory-processing, and behavioral profiles that differ significantly from children with isolated motor coordination impairments [15; 17]. Therefore, the true value of modern initiatives like the "Occupational Therapists for Inclusive Schools: Autism" project [15] lies in their effort to translate these universally successful multi-tiered and coaching principles into autism-specific protocols.

The quantitative success of coaching models, such as the statistically significant ($p<0.05$) improvement in teacher self-efficacy reported by Hui C. et al. [19], demonstrates that supporting the "meaningful adults" in a child's ecosystem yields sustainable classroom improvements.

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From a practical and localized perspective, the implementation of these Western collaborative models faces unique structural barriers when considered within the context of reforming educational systems, such as that of Ukraine.

In many Eastern European educational frameworks, school-based occupational therapy is not yet fully integrated as a standard, independent professional role within mainstream schools. Typically, inclusive school teams in Ukraine rely on speech-language pathologists, special educators, and psychologists, while occupational therapy remains largely confined to medical and clinical rehabilitation centers.

Consequently, to optimize the practical value of these international insights, future research must focus on exploring how the three-tiered support models [25; 27] and collaborative teacher-coaching strategies [31; 33] can be conceptually and legally adapted to fit the regulatory standards, staffing capabilities, and socio-economic realities of local inclusive schools.

Conclusions

The collaborative professional development programs and multi-tiered intervention models reviewed in this study demonstrate significant potential for supporting school communities in fostering the active classroom participation of all learners, including those on the autism spectrum. Specialized occupational therapists are uniquely positioned to structurally reinforce school teams, offering evidence-based strategies that bridge the gap between therapeutic interventions and general educational practices.

The synthesis of international data indicates that integrating systematic occupational performance coaching for school staff serves as a powerful catalyst for institutional change, substantially enhancing teachers' professional self-efficacy, reducing workplace stress, and optimizing inclusive classroom management.

Furthermore, the practical implementation of a multi-tiered strategy enables occupational therapists and educators to establish a sustainable, hierarchical framework of support, prioritizing universal environmental solutions for the entire student population before deploying intensive, individualized accommodations. Given that school-based occupational therapy is not yet fully institutionalized within the Ukrainian educational system, the practical value of these analyzed models lies in their conceptual scalability. These international frameworks offer a strategic blueprint for local educational policy-makers and school administrations to optimize interdisciplinary cooperation.

Prospects for Further Research

Future research should focus on the empirical piloting and structural adaptation of these multi-tiered and coaching approaches to align directly with the legal, financial, and organizational realities of reforming inclusive education in Ukraine.

Declarations

Conflict of interest is absent.

All authors have consented to the publication of the article under the terms of the Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International License and a public agreement with the editorial office, as well as to the processing and publication of their personal data.

The authors of the manuscript state that in the process of conducting research, preparing, and editing this manuscript, they did not use any generative AI tools or services to perform any of the tasks listed in the Generative AI Delegation Taxonomy (GAIDeT, 2025). All stages of work (from the development of the research concept to the final editing) were carried out without the involvement of generative artificial intelligence, exclusively by the authors.

Funding and Acknowledgments

The research was conducted as a private initiative of the authors, without grant support and state registration of the topic.

ISSN print 2414-4517, ISSN online 2710-1487, https://ecm.knmu.edu.ua, ecm.journal@knmu.edu.ua

Authors' Contributions

Contribution / Authors	A	B	C	D	E	F
Neshko S.I.	+	+	+	+	+	+
Yehorkina D.M.	+	+	+	+	+	+

Notes:

A – concept;
B – design;
C – data collection;
D – statistical processing and interpretation of data;
E – writing or critical editing of the article;
F – approval of the final version for publication and agreement to be responsible for all aspects of the work.

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Нешко С.І., Єгоркіна Д.М.

СПІЛЬНИЙ ПРОФЕСІЙНИЙ РОЗВИТОК У ШКІЛЬНІЙ ЕРГОТЕРАПІЇ ДЛЯ УЧНІВ ІЗ АУТИЗМОМ (ОГЛЯД ЛІТЕРАТУРИ)

Актуальність. Навчання учнів із розладами аутистичного спектра в умовах загальноосвітніх класів наражає шкільний персонал на високі ризики професійного вигорання під час педагогічного стресу. У той час як традиційна шкільна ерготерапія зосереджена переважно на прямих, індивідуальних інтервенціях з учнями, сучасні міжнародні дослідження свідчать про інституційну зміну парадигми в бік спільного консультування, мультирівневих систем підтримки та професійного коучингу для вчителів.

Мета. Дослідити розроблені ерготерапевтами програми професійного розвитку та навчання шкільного персоналу роботі з учнями з розладами аутистичного спектру.

Матеріали та методи. Дослідження проведено з використанням бібліосемантичного та порівняльного методів, а також системного аналізу. Пошук літературних джерел проведено в PubMed та Google Scholar за період 2001–2023 рр. Дослідження виконано

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як приватна академічна ініціатива авторів, без зовнішнього грантового фінансування та державної реєстрації теми.

Етика дослідження. Для огляду літератури були відібрані дослідження, автори яких дотримувалися біоетичних стандартів.

Результати. Аналіз даних виявив критичну потребу в навчанні вчителів роботі з учнями з розладами аутистичного спектру для вироблення безпечних для персоналу поведінкових стратегій. Оцінювання таких моделей свідчить про потребу переходу від прямої індивідуальної допомоги до моделей спільного консультування, що забезпечує зменшення вигорання та ізоляції вчителів, покращення навчального процесу. Дані квазіекспериментальних пілотних проектів демонструють, що короткостроковий, структурований коучинг виконання діяльності у поєднанні зі спеціалізованими майстер-класами забезпечує статистично значуще покращення сприйняття вчителями своєї ефективності (за критерієм Вілкоксона $Z=-3,30$; $p=0,001$) та клініко-освітньої задоволеності ($Z=-3,31$; $p=0,001$). Ці дані валідують коучинг як потужний механізм для підвищення професійної самоефективності.

Висновки. Впровадження мультирівневих та спільних коучингових стратегій у шкільному середовищі створює стійку, ієрархічну структуру підтримки, яка пріоритезує універсальні комунікативні та захисні рішення. Оскільки шкільна ерготерапія ще не є інституціоналізованою в українській системі освіти, міжнародний досвід може бути використаний для створення моделей концептуальної масштабованості для місцевих розробників освітньої політики з метою оптимізації міждисциплінарної співпраці.

Ключові слова: *розлади аутистичного спектра, інклюзивна освіта, шкільна ерготерапія, коучинг учителів, мультирівневі системи підтримки, професійний розвиток.*

Received: 14 Oct 2025
Accepted: 29 Dec 2025
Published: 31 Dec 2025

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