Handwriting with Adult with Developmental Delays

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I was offered an opportunity to work with a man in his early 20s who has Down’s Syndrome. His mother was interested in working with occupational therapy to improve his cursive handwriting skills. After an initial phone call with my instructor Rebecca Bahnke, we decided to meet once a week on Wednesday mornings from 10am to 11am at the Parkland College Health Professions building on Mattis Ave between the dates of March 4th through April 29th. To ease the transition from being complete strangers to familiar teachers, it was decided to have the first session at his home. It was explained to Rebecca and me that although this young man was non-verbal and had difficulty expressing himself using a picture board, he was still able to produce legible handwriting with a hand-over-hand guidance from his mother or father.

Our initial meeting was a great opportunity to watch this young man’s actions and reactions in his natural home environment. Although, we were able to probe into his ability to produce handwriting, we were excited to be able to gather an inside perspective on his daily routines, his preferences and his preferred occupations. After reflecting on this initial visit, I was left with an impression that this young man did not have a structured routine to his day: he was allowed to wake when he chose, he had very few-- if any-- chores or responsibilities, and had a casual part time job that did not require any commitment for attendance or production. His daytime care giver said “my instructions are ‘if he doesn’t want to do something, we don’t have to do it’”.
From my perspective, this presented an obstacle to my efforts to help this young man; if there is no structure to his day, and he is able to do--or not do--whatever he wants, why would he choose to challenge himself with the skill of cursive handwriting? I saw the need for structure and routine as a prerequisite to learning handwriting. In addition, I felt that it was imperative that we develop a way for him to learn and use a way to communicate with us. With Rebecca Bahnke’s help, we put together a small picture book using a small photo album and pictures taken with my cell phone. The pictures consisted of areas of the building that he might need access to during therapy: the bathroom, water fountain and coat rack. There were also pictures of activities and items that would be involved in during therapy: coloring pages, markers, dry-erase boards, paper and pencil, as well as other turn taking activities such as drumming, ball bouncing, trampoline and swinging. During the beginning of each therapy session, I would lay down three pictures on a table and ask him to identify one particular picture by pointing at it. If he chose incorrectly, I would cover up two of the incorrect pictures and ask again to identify the correct picture. Once the correct picture was identified we move on to that activity. After the activity was over, we would go back to his book and put the picture away and repeat this process until the session was over. I was aware that we needed to follow a structured pattern to our therapy sessions in order to build familiarity and trust. With each session, I observed him to be more consistent with identifying pictures and at times going to the book independently to show me a picture of the bathroom or drinking fountain. We were slowly making progress towards communication.

Therapy was originally intended to focus on handwriting, but it was obvious to me after our initial session that we had other work to do before we could take on that goal: I was unable to get him to produce anything that resembled handwriting, even when I used a hand-over-hand technique. This remained constant throughout the entire nine week program. Instead of focusing
on what he could not do, we took a step back and tried to determine what he could do. What he could do was take turns in an activity—for a few minutes—before becoming bored or uninterested. I wanted to expand upon this with the hopes that we could transition this to handwriting. We took turns playing drums: I would hit the drum 3 times then say “your turn”. He would then hit the drum a few times and then I would echo back the exact number of hits he had just done. Then we would repeat this process. He seemed to enjoy this activity and eventually we moved on to exploring other instruments as well: tambourines, rainsticks and maracas. After each non-handwriting activity, we would go up to the dry-erase board and work on making shapes; mostly circles, involving hand-over-hand. Again, always returning to our picture book before moving on to the next activity.

By the end of the nine weeks, he had made noticeable progress in his ability to stay focused and centralized in an activity for longer than a few minutes although no noticeable improvements were made toward his goal of handwriting. Unfortunately, it was obvious to me that handwriting was more of a long term goal that would require multiple weekly sessions over a longer period of time to produce results and we just did not have that kind of time.

Nonetheless, I feel that this experience was fun and informative. I was able to learn more about the need for structure, familiarity and trust when working with this population. I was very proud to be a part of this young man’s development even if in the scheme of things it was just a small part. I’m confident that given the tool of the picture book and continued use of it at home and in the community, he will be able to express his wants and needs independently instead of relying on an interpreter.