Enhancing Professionalism Among OT Students: The Culture of Professionalism

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Abstract

Occupational therapy (OT) students are likely to experience generational differences when interacting with faculty and clients. Each generational group has a shared culture and unique set of experiences that influence their behavior, expectations, and perceptions surrounding professionalism. When teaching professionalism to OT students, the cultural underpinnings and influences related to generational groups and their differences become important considerations. This manuscript explores the relationship between culture and professionalism and describes how generational culture influences professional behaviors. It presents a reflective process and guide developed by the authors to enhance professionalism and cultural effectiveness among OT students and guide them in meeting generational expectations related to professionalism.

Enhancing Professionalism Among OT Students:

The Culture of Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy (OT) students are likely to experience generational differences when interacting with faculty and clients. Each generational group has a shared culture and unique set of experiences that influence their behavior, expectations, and perceptions surrounding professionalism. When teaching professionalism to OT students, the cultural underpinnings and influences related to generational groups and their differences become important considerations. This manuscript explores the relationship between culture and professionalism and describes how generational culture influences professional behaviors. It presents a reflective process and guide developed by the authors to enhance professionalism and cultural effectiveness among OT students and guide them in meeting generational expectations related to professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism, cultural humility, and cultural effectiveness are considered lifelong, developmental, context-specific processes, and over the course of academic programs, students require nurturing to develop in these areas. For faculty in occupational therapy (OT) academic programs, the challenges associated with educating students about professionalism and cultural effectiveness involves more than simply teaching students about these terms and their application to clinical skill performance. The responsibility also includes working with students on the development of self-understanding, critical thinking, and the ability to reflect on their personal beliefs, values, capacities, skills, and practice (Schuessler, Wilder, & Byrd, 2012). Each generation has a unique culture, making it important for students to learn how to adapt to the various generational groups they will encounter in practice. The development of these adaptive abilities in students

is a crucial part of the professional skill-building process necessary for entry-level practice. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between culture and professionalism and describe how generational culture influences professional behaviors. Additionally, a reflective process and guide is presented to enhance professionalism and cultural effectiveness among OT students and guide them in meeting generational expectations related to professionalism.

Professionalism

Allied health programs often refer to graduates as healthcare professionals; therefore, demonstrating professional behavior is an expectation and considered a professional obligation to society (Mak-van der Vossen, Peerdeman, Kleinveld, & Kusurkar, 2013; Sullivan & Thiessen, 2015; van Mook et al., 2009). Teaching professionalism has become a fundamental part of educational curricula in nursing, pharmacy, medical, dental, veterinary schools, and physical therapy programs (Birden et al., 2013; Fejzic & Barker, 2015; Shepard, 2013-2014; van Luijk, Gorter, & van Mook, 2010; Youdas, Krause, Hellyer, Rindflesch, & Hollman, 2013). Many of the accreditation standards established by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE, 2018) focus on preparing the OT student for the professional roles and responsibilities they will assume in practice, while the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process*, 3rd edition (*Framework III*; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2014), describes how student fieldwork experiences are designed to "develop professionalism and competence in career responsibilities" (p. S47).

Professionalism is a fundamental component of the OT profession. Many of the AOTA official documents and position statements, including the *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics* (AOTA, 2015a), *Standards for Continuing Competence* (AOTA, 2015b), and *Standards of Practice for Occupational Therapy* (AOTA, 2015c) reference professionalism. None of the guiding documents within the OT profession provide a specific or clear definition of professionalism. Research that specifically focuses on defining and conceptualizing professionalism within the OT literature is scarce, yet practitioners and educators continue to hold high expectations for students regarding their professionalism. The literature within the OT profession focuses on describing professionalism through values and behaviors.

Professional Values and Behaviors

Professional values are described within the OT literature as the core beliefs held and maintained by members of a profession (Kanny, 1993), while professional behaviors are considered the display of actions based on a profession's values (Kasar & Muscari, 2000). Kasar and Muscari (2000) noted that professionalism requires "specific knowledge, attitudes, and values - all manifested by professional behaviours" (p. 43). Kanny (1993) was the first in the OT literature to identify several distinct values of the OT profession. She described values as being an important foundational component of a profession to be "developed and reinforced" (p. 1085). Kanny's (1993) list of professional values included altruism, equality, freedom, justice, dignity, truth, and prudence. In 2007, Peloquin added to this list by including values such as courage, imagination, resilience, integrity, and mindfulness. In more recent OT literature, Aguilar,

Stupans, Scutter, and King (2012) defined professional values as a "principle or standard that an individual perceives as important to their professional role" (p. 210).

Generational Differences Regarding Professionalism
In addition to values, beliefs, and behaviors, researchers in the health fields commonly describe professionalism as consisting of many elements. These may include "communication; loyalty; membership and participation in professional organizations; appropriate dress and mannerisms; respect, behavior towards peers, patients, and those in authority; and work habits such as time management and stress management;" however, there seems to be a distinct difference in how various generations "interpret and display" these behaviors (Gleeson, 2007, p. 23). A study conducted by OT researchers Robinson, Tanchuk, and Sullivan (2012) found that faculty members from previous generations appeared to comprehend professionalism at a more profound level as they have had more experiences and opportunities to integrate and internalize professionalism, compared to students who tend to rely on concrete concepts and view professionalism as a "trial and error process" (p. 280). Sullivan and Thiessen (2015) expanded on the work of Robinson et al. (2012), exploring the perspectives of first-year and second-year OT students. This study found that OT students from younger generations often reported having difficulty understanding and conceptualizing professionalism. Hills, Ryan, Smith, and Warren-Forward (2012) explored the perspectives of practice educators on the impact of younger generations of OT students on practice education. They found that educators from previous generations reported that many students from younger generations struggled with skill acquisition or had a skewed perception of their professional abilities.

There is currently a high enrollment of students in entry-level OT programs from Generation Y, often referred to as Millennials. Hills et al. (2012) found that many OT practice educators agree there is a 'Generation Y' OT student and reported concerns about their casual style of communication, unprofessional behavior, poor ability to professionally reason, and difficulty with receiving constructive feedback. Millennials are also described as having issues with time management, overconfidence, motivation, boredom, entitlement, use of technology at inappropriate times, and casual dress (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011; Hills, Boshoff, Gilbert-Hunt, Ryan, & Smith, 2015; Hills, Ryan, Warren-Forward, & Smith, 2013; Kelly, 2010; Rickes, 2009; Twenge, 2009; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

Most OT program faculty and clinical supervisors are part of previous generations that have differing expectations, perceptions, values, and beliefs related to professionalism compared to those of younger generations of students. Each generational group has a shared culture and set of experiences, characteristics, values, attitudes, and beliefs that influence their behavior, expectations, and perceptions surrounding professionalism (Boudreau, 2009; Pendergast, 2009; Twenge et al., 2010). This generational gap can lead to misunderstanding, assumptions, frustration, disconnect, disappointment, and conflict (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011). When teaching professionalism to OT students, the cultural underpinnings and influences related to generational groups and their differences become important considerations for educators.

Generational Culture
A culture emerges when groups of people share the same values and norms. Generational cohorts consist of individuals who were born around the same period, and "share a set of experiences during their formative years" (Pendergast, 2009, p. 507). Mannheim (1952) was the first to propose that each generation demonstrates similarities in their views of the world due to their exposure to the same social, historical, economic, and political conditions. Individuals born around the same period seem to form a "generational persona" or "generational culture" (Pendergast, 2009, p. 507).

To address the generational differences that influence academic and clinical settings appropriately, it is crucial to first develop an understanding of the various generations that populate these arenas. Today's client population, workforce, and higher education environments consist of six distinct generational cohorts that OT students will encounter including the: "G.I. Generation" born 1901-1924; "Silent Generation" born 1925-1942; "Baby Boomers" born 1943-1960; "Generation X" born 1961-1982; "Generation Y" born 1983-2002; and "Generation Z" born 2003 onwards (Rickes, 2009; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

The G.I. Generation is viewed as civic-minded and team-oriented (Rickes, 2009). The Silent Generation values stability and security, and is polite and respectful (Gleeson, 2007). Baby Boomers are viewed as competitive, curious, and value regularity and predictability (Makely, 2017). Members of Generation X are direct with communication, dislike being micromanaged, and are adept at using technology (Gleeson, 2007; Pendergast, 2009; Rickes, 2009). In comparison, members of Generation Y and Z are described as multi-taskers, 'techno-savvy', and embody a sense of entitlement (Jones et al., 2007; Nimon, 2007; Rickes, 2009; Twenge, 2009).

Self-Reflection and Self-Awareness
As one begins to consider the characteristics and formative experiences of each generation, it becomes apparent that each group's respective views, opinions, stances, behaviors, expectations, and perceptions regarding professionalism may differ. Judgments and assumptions about individuals from other cultures or generational groups occur when that person's behavior filters through one's own set of cultural norms (Makely, 2017). These assumptions often result in misinterpretations, with students characterized as unprofessional, when the problem may be due to a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the nuances associated with other generation's expectations of professionalism. It may be valuable for students to understand and increase their awareness of others' expectations and reflect upon their own thoughts and views to gain a sense of the attitudes, beliefs, and cultural perspectives they bring to the situation (Makely, 2017).

Aguilar et al. (2012) highlighted self-reflection as a valuable tool for students to increase self-awareness about their skills and limitations regarding professionalism. In a study exploring OT student and faculty perceptions about professionalism, Robinson et al. (2012) revealed that faculty respondents thought having self-awareness about how others viewed professionalism, was in fact "a key element of professionalism" and

defined self-awareness as "the ability to identify one's limits and boundaries" (p. 281). Student participants acknowledged self-awareness as a requirement of professionalism and noted that having the ability to recognize their personal limitations and biases were aspects of professionalism. The faculty respondents commented that other individuals and groups often defined professionalism, and that regardless of one's own intentions and personal definition, others' understanding, and definition of the term ultimately determined professionalism. Faculty participants reported that consistent reflection on one's own strengths and weaknesses promotes self-awareness, and that this practice was essential "in upholding one's professionalism" (p. 281).

Cultural Humility
Within the recent literature, the practice of self-reflection to increase one's self-awareness about cultural differences has been referred to as cultural humility, as this concept focuses on students' and practitioners' attitudes and beliefs regarding cultural differences rather than knowledge and skill level. When teaching professionalism in the healthcare fields, Cruess, Cruess, and Steinert (2010) reported that cultural humility was an essential concept to consider. In their concept analysis, Foronda, Reinholdt, and Ousman (2016) highlighted self-awareness, self-reflection, and critique as key attributes of cultural humility and described the term as a lifelong process that requires continual reflection and refinement. Researchers also noted that therapists must be able to evade "the natural tendency to view one's own worldview as superior, and instead be open to the beliefs, values, and worldview" of clients or individuals that are culturally different from our own (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, p. 354).

Cultural Competence/Cultural Effectiveness
The ability to interact effectively with individuals from other cultures and generations is a crucial professional skill for OT students and practitioners. In his 2007 study, Muñoz stated, "culture permeates every clinical encounter in OT. The practitioner and the person seeking care each bring their own personal and familial cultures, whereas the context where care is provided adds yet another layer of culture" (p. 256). Muñoz's (2007) study explored the perceptions of OT practitioners' conceptualization of culture, along with their personal understanding and interpretation of a client's culture in order to provide culturally-responsive caring. He revealed that experienced practitioners working with the culturally diverse continuously seek to generate a knowledge base of cultural data. These findings reinforce the importance of using self-reflection in the development of cultural awareness and that the process of becoming culturally competent is an evolving process.

There has been a push in the OT profession to strive towards culturally competent practice (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2009) or cultural effectiveness. AOTA (2011) defined cultural competence as "the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant, and sensitive strategies and skills in interacting with culturally different persons" (p. 2). The term cultural competence has been criticized within the occupational therapy literature. Gupta (2008) commented that its definition implies that a "hypothetical end-point exists that can be reached by acquiring the right knowledge and skills and attitudes needed to work with persons of different cultures" (p. 3). Instead,

cultural effectiveness has recently been a more accepted term as it requires students and practitioners to engage in critical reflection on their practice before, during, and after their encounter with an individual from a different culture or generational cohort. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2009) revealed that prior exposure to cultural training is correlated with cultural awareness/knowledge and cultural skills demonstrating a relationship between training in cultural competence and higher levels of cultural competence. Findings indicated that cultural competence is an important professional skill to address while students are in academic programs and reinforced the importance of exposing students to cultural competence training prior to their transition to entry-level practice.

There is currently a dearth of literature within the OT profession that describes a structured process or method to assist students in understanding and navigating the nuances and complexities associated with professionalism and intergenerational interactions. Similarly, it is difficult to find literature supporting effective and consistent methods that promote and support the development of professional behaviors in OT students. As a result, professionalism has been difficult to teach and assess in OT programs as researchers have found that students are often confused by its complexity and unsure of others' professional expectations (Robinson et al., 2012; Sullivan & Thiessen, 2015). There has been a call within the literature for academic programs to address these key topics. Hills et al. (2012) noted there is a responsibility for OT education providers to work explicitly with students to address concerns regarding professional behaviors. Robinson et al. (2012) also called for academic programs to provide "explicit expectations and conversations" regarding professionalism throughout OT programs (p. 283), while a study conducted by Murden et al. (2008) suggested that academic programs should provide a "more extensive cultural education" (p. 201). Results of the Murden et al. study suggested that both students and entry-level practitioner participants agreed that understanding different cultures was a key element in preparing for entry-level practice. In addition, respondents agreed there was limited inclusion of cultural education in their educational curricula. Participants reported having limited knowledge about different cultures and commented that educators should address cultural competence both in the classroom and during fieldwork experiences. The call within the literature has prompted these authors to develop a self-reflection guide and process to promote the development of professional behaviors and generational cultural effectiveness in OT students.

DESCRIPTION

Self-Reflection Guide and Process
The proposed self-reflection guide and process is based on the language and organization of the *Framework III* (AOTA, 2014), since students are already familiar with the language from foundational and theoretical OT courses, and faculty already embed it within curricula. The cultural aspects of professionalism relate directly to the *domain* section of the *Framework III* (AOTA, 2014). When *domain* elements including *client factors*, *performance skills*, *performance patterns*, and *contexts and environments* are considered, faculty can guide students in learning how to respond effectively to generational differences by using self-reflection to adjust their reactions, attitudes, and

behaviors in response to the expectations and perceptions the educator, client, or peer may have regarding professionalism (AOTA, 2014). Students learn cultural humility as they begin to consider their own and others' beliefs, values, and worldviews.

Students engage in a four-step cyclical reflective process (see Figure 1) that helps them recognize the differences between themselves and others as they navigate intergenerational interactions within various contexts in academic and clinical practice
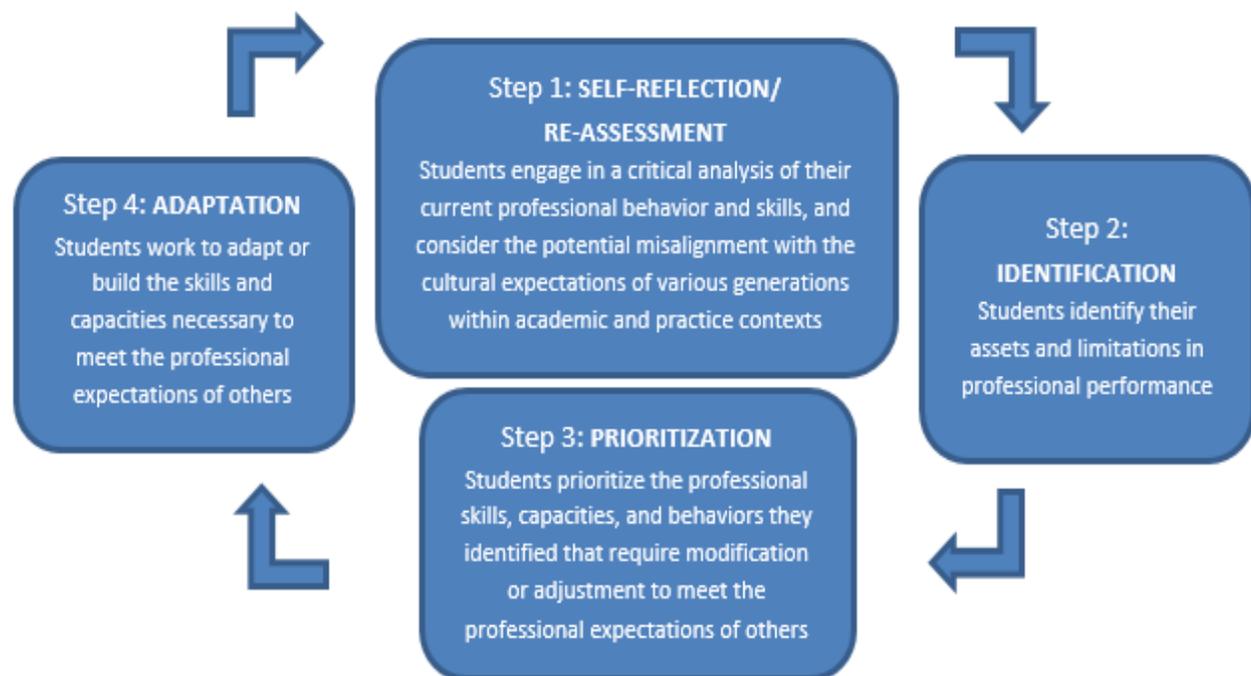

Figure 1. Self-reflection process to promote professional skill development and generational cultural effectiveness in occupational therapy students.

Step 1: Self-reflection. The process begins with students engaging in self-reflection. The students consider how his or her generational norms and professional expectations compare to those of an educator, peer, co-worker or client from another generational cohort. Through critical analysis, students work through a self-reflection guide (see Table 1), considering *domain* elements such as *client factors* (values; beliefs)*, performance skills* (process skills, social interaction skills), *performance patterns* (habits, routines) and *contexts and environments* (cultural, physical, social, temporal, virtual; AOTA, 2014). This language guides students in determining the alignment of their level of professionalism compared to the generational expectations of others, encouraging students to consider their views and beliefs and the generational perspectives of others. As students practice engaging in self-reflection, their level of self-awareness regarding their level of professionalism begins to emerge.

Step 2: Identification. Students identify their assets and limitations in professional performance when interacting with individuals from another generational cohort.

Step 3: Prioritization. Students work to prioritize the professional skills, capacities, and behaviors they identified that require skill-building, modification, or adjustment to meet others' professional expectations.

Step 4: Adaptation. Students work to adapt, adjust, or build the necessary skills to meet the professional expectations of the client, peer, or educator from a different generational cohort.

Re-assessment. Students return to the self-reflection phase of the process and assess their level of success in meeting the professional expectations of the individual or group involved in the encounter. Students continually engage in this self-reflection process, as professionalism is a developmental and transformative process that continues to evolve over the course of one's academic and professional career. Engaging in this process teaches students to think about where their cultural competence and professionalism lies on a continuum, and how to adjust their filters and professional behaviors accordingly. In each new situation, students may be in a new stage of competence. Students learn how to respond effectively by using self-reflection to adjust their reactions, attitudes, and behaviors in response to the professional expectations and perceptions of the client, peer, or educator from a different generational cohort. This process also promotes the development of cultural humility and cultural effectiveness. Students' self-awareness about their level of professionalism increases, assisting them in meeting the generational expectations of others, while reducing potential for conflict, disappointment, and frustration.

Table 1

Self-Reflection Guide to Promote Professional Skill Development and Generational Cultural Effectiveness in Occupational Therapy Students

Student Name: _____

	STUDENT	CLIENT FACULTY FIELDWORK SUPERVISOR CO-WORKER PEER OTHER (circle one)
Generational Cohort		
Self-Reflection: Comparison of Generational Perspectives and Expectations of Professionalism		
Values		
Beliefs		
Process Skills		
Social Interaction Skills		
Habits		
Routines		
Cultural		
Personal		
Physical		
Social		
Temporal		
Virtual		
Identification: Assets and Limitations		
Prioritization		
Plan for Adaptation		

The intent is for faculty or fieldwork supervisors to collaborate and assist students in developing a habitual thinking process regarding professionalism. For example, an OT student from Generation Y could believe that the client from the Silent Generation they are interacting with is polite and respectful (*belief*). While the student's communication norm may be to use first names (*culture*), this might be considered disrespectful (*value*) to the client from the Silent Generation. Using the self-reflection guide, in collaboration with the supervising professional, the student identifies their high level of comfort engaging with individuals from the Silent Generation as an *asset*, as they have a close relationship with their own grandparents. In contrast, the student identifies their informal style of communication as a *limitation* that may impact their interaction with a client from this generational cohort. The student prioritizes that a more formal style of communication should be used when interacting with this client. The student's *plan for adaption* is to use Mr. or Mrs. Last Name and wait to see if the client invites the student to use his or her first name.

Figure 2 shows the developmental progression that occurs as a student progresses through formal education to entry-level practice. The proposed process guides students in the development of professional skill-building and generational cultural effectiveness within the educational setting through formal education participation to prepare for the occupation of entry-level job performance.
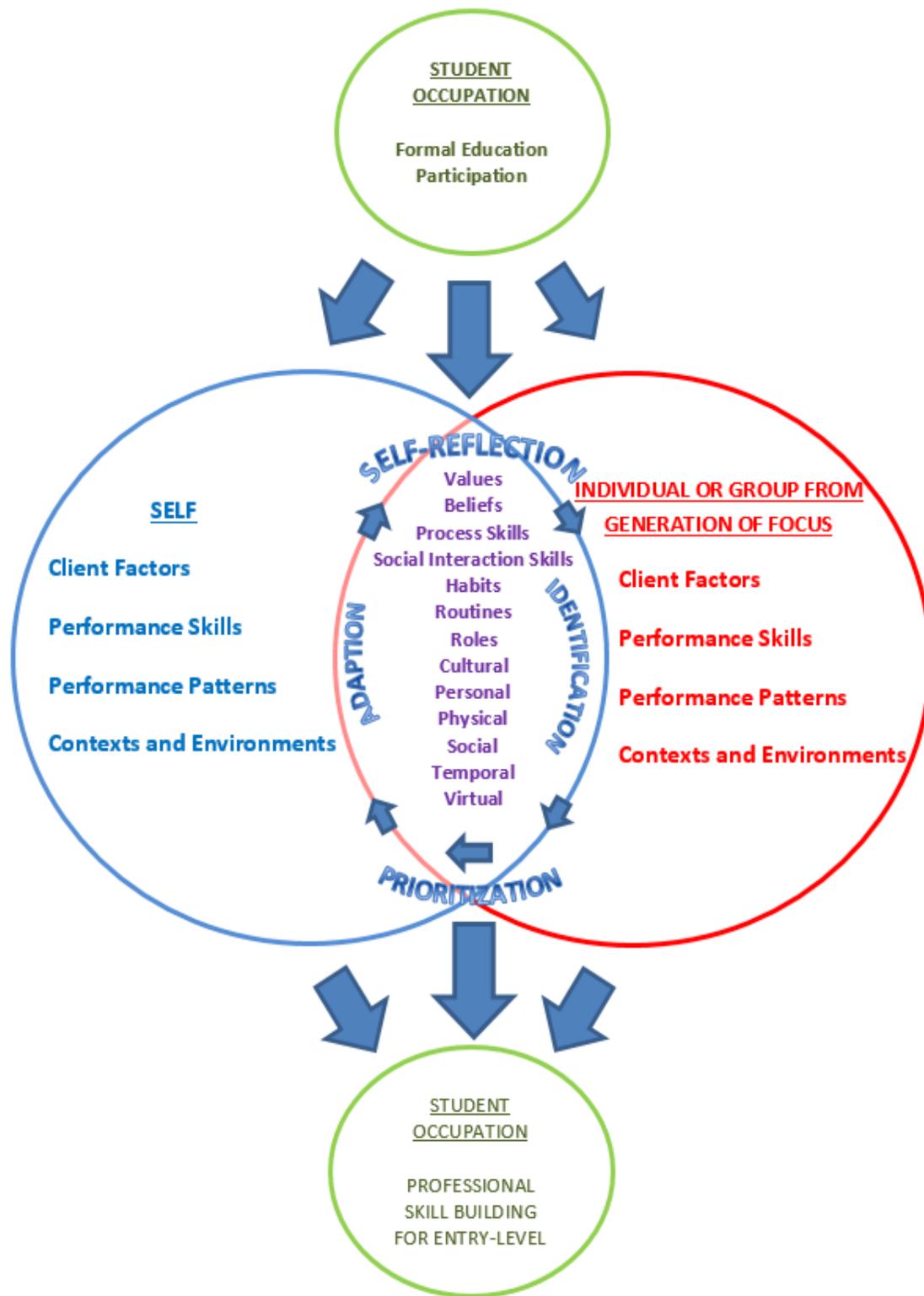
Figure 2. Developmental progression that occurs as a student progresses through formal education to entry-level practice.

DISCUSSION

Reflection is integral to the development of professionalism. Despite a wide range of reflective strategies available to guide professional development and practice such as reflective writing and journals (Bolton, 2010), reflective dialogue (Bolton, 2010; Brockbank & McGill, 2007), Model for Structured Reflection (Johns, 2009), and Model of Structured Reflection (Driscoll, 2007), none of them specifically addresses the gap between generational culture and professional behaviors. The proposed reflective process and guide fills the need because it directly addresses these key concepts in a structured and systematic way. It is a unique and innovative approach integrating the language and organization of the *Framework III* (AOTA, 2014) to enhance student professionalism in areas that often cause conflict and disconnect between generational groups that have differing expectations and levels of understanding regarding professionalism.

It is important to explore each of these concepts individually, as well as the direct relationship between professionalism and culture and its impact on OT academic and practice arenas. These authors welcome research on this proposed guide and process, along with feedback on this construct's strengths, weaknesses, effectiveness, practicality, applicability, and appropriateness as a teaching tool. This proposed construct may also serve as a helpful guide in the development of additional evidence-based methods to assist academic programs and students in teaching and learning professionalism.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OT EDUCATION

An OT entry-level program should design its curriculum to ensure that professionalism is explicitly embedded in a course, integrated, and reinforced across all years. Implementing this reflective process will be more effective after students have learned about generational culture and the *Framework III* (AOTA, 2014) within their educational curricula. Initial instruction with concrete learning experiences of the reflective process should start early on within the first year of the curriculum and be faculty-guided and -driven, as many students lack the insight and skill-set to independently self-reflect. These skills should then be reinforced throughout later years of the curriculum. The OT academic program should also collaborate with clinical fieldwork sites to ensure that these professional skills are strengthened during students' clinical affiliations.

CONCLUSION

Professionalism is an expectation and essential skill for OT students in today's practice and education arenas. Influenced by culture and context, professionalism is difficult for students to conceptualize and understand (Sullivan & Thiessen, 2015) and challenging for educators to teach and assess (Robinson et al., 2012). Although previous generations often describe students from Generation Y as unprofessional, researchers contend they have the potential to become a positive and influential generation with the proper support from academic programs and fieldwork experiences (Pendergast, 2009). Students from Generation Y rely on explicit expectations and guidelines to help navigate the complexities and nuances associated with professionalism as they lack the confidence, awareness, and experience necessary to modify or make adjustments in

their behaviors (Robinson et al., 2012). As a result, many authors have called for academic programs to start explicitly incorporating professionalism into educational curricula (Hills et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2012; Sullivan & Thiessen, 2015).

The proposed self-reflection guide and process described within this manuscript is an attempt to respond to the call within the literature. It provides OT academic programs and clinical educators with a cost-effective teaching tool/method, based on a language they are familiar with and already embed within curricula. The construct encourages self-reflection and self-awareness in OT students to promote the development of professional behaviors and generational cultural effectiveness. The development of this proposed process fosters a culture of professionalism within OT educational settings and assists students in developing a habitual thinking process regarding professionalism. The construct can guide students as they navigate intergenerational interactions within various contexts in both academic and clinical practice arenas.

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