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## Characteristics of Occupation-based Education within Entry-level Occupational Therapy Programs: Professional Leaders' Perspectives

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# Characteristics of Occupation-based Education within Entry-level Occupational Therapy Programs: Professional Leaders' Perspectives

## Abstract

Occupational therapy is a profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation, and accordingly occupation should permeate all aspects of the profession. Entry-level education is the primary means by which new members of the profession become educated about occupation and its place in occupational therapy practice. Therefore, it is essential that education reflects the core concept of the profession. To date there have been individual opinions about occupation-based education but no studies have documented the characteristics that demonstrate this approach from the perspective of professional leaders. A qualitative descriptive study was conducted to explore professional leaders' views on, and strategies for, occupation-based entry-level education. Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and network sampling to ensure variation and depth. Six in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes duration each, were conducted with leaders from Australia, Canada, and the United States of America via telephone or internet conferencing. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Three themes emerged: embodied knowledge and understanding of occupation and its link to health and well-being; deliberate educators who value occupation; and rhetoric versus reality of professional practice. This research demonstrates the critical role individual academics play in the development of students' understanding of, and passion for, occupation and how it is enacted in practice. Educators must continue to develop their knowledge and skills of occupation as well as effective ways to teach this core concept.

## Keywords

Occupational therapy, occupational therapy education, student occupational therapy, education, teaching

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## Characteristics of Occupation-Based Education Within Entry-Level Occupational Therapy Programs: Professional Leaders' Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy is a profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation, and accordingly occupation should permeate all aspects of the profession. Entry-level education is the primary means by which new members of the profession become educated about occupation and its place in occupational therapy practice. Therefore, it is essential that education reflects the core concept of the profession. To date there have been individual opinions about occupation-based education but no studies have documented the characteristics that demonstrate this approach from the perspective of professional leaders. A qualitative descriptive study was conducted to explore professional leaders' views on, and strategies for, occupation-based entry-level education. Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and network sampling to ensure variation and depth. Six in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes duration each, were conducted with leaders from Australia, Canada, and the United States of America via telephone or internet conferencing. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Three themes emerged: embodied knowledge and understanding of occupation and its link to health and well-being; deliberate educators who value occupation; and rhetoric versus reality of professional practice. This research demonstrates the critical role individual academics play in the development of students' understanding of, and passion for, occupation and how it is enacted in practice. Educators must continue to develop their knowledge and skills of occupation as well as effective ways to teach this core concept.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The primary domain of concern of occupational therapy is occupation and its impact on health and well-being (Meyer, 1922; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2012). Occupation is the process of doing and being which is vital throughout a person's everyday life; it is a deeply individual part of a person's identity (Occupational Therapy Australia, 2016; Wilcock, 1998). The unique contribution of occupational therapy to health and social care is enabling individuals, communities, and populations to perform and engage in occupation (Polatajko et al., 2013). Occupational therapy originated around the time of the First World War as soldiers returned home with disabilities and required rehabilitation (Hoover, 1996). At that time, a focus on occupation distinguished the profession from others. In the late 1940s occupational therapy became more aligned with the medical perspective, and as a result, the profession lost sight of its core construct (Kielhofner, 2009). However, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a call for the profession to return to its roots, and thus the renaissance of occupation began (Whiteford, Townsend, & Hocking, 2000). This revival called for occupation to be at the forefront of all areas within occupational therapy, including research, practice, theory and education (Whiteford et al., 2000). Occupation-based practice describes ways of working that engage a person (or group or community) in occupation, particularly during assessment, intervention and evaluation (Fisher, 2013). Drawing on this terminology, occupation-based education was chosen to describe the phenomenon under investigation in this study. To that end, occupation-based education refers to occupational therapy education which includes occupation in all aspects of the educational process; including design and implementation of education, assessment practices, and curriculum evaluation.

Entry-level education of occupational therapists is a key factor in the ability of the profession to thrive, as it shapes the way future therapists think and practice (Palmadottir, 2003). In order to support occupation-based practice, the education that student occupational therapists receive must align with the profession's core philosophy (Hooper et al., 2015; Molineux, 2001; Whiteford & Wilcock, 2001). The development of entry-level education programs is impacted by different standards both locally (for example Occupational Therapy Council, 2015 in Australia) and internationally (such as the World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT], 2016). These standards require that occupation be incorporated into entry-level programs; however, they are not prescriptive and are open to interpretation. This means that the extent to which the principles of occupation-based education in these guidelines is operationalized can vary considerably between education programs. With the proliferation of entry-level programs in Australia and other countries, there is a growing need for occupational therapy academics and accrediting bodies to be clear about the distinguishing features of an occupation-based entry-level occupational therapy curriculum. Although different jurisdictions around the world have their own accreditation guidelines, in order to be recognized internationally, they must meet the standards set by WFOT (2016). In this way, the uniqueness of each country is tempered by the shared expectations of the international community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature showed that it was common for scholarship in occupation-based education between 1960 and 2005 to include opinion pieces or commentaries by individual authors (Fisher, 2000; Nielsen, 1998; Pierce, 2003; Yerxa, 1998). This is not to discredit their usefulness as many were written by experienced and expert occupational therapists, but it highlights the need for more rigorous scholarship in this area. For the most part, opinion pieces are written from the perspective of one person and their observations on the topic, and may include some supporting literature. This approach offered an introductory dialogue on the topic, however in order to advance understanding, new knowledge needed to be generated from more rigorous research inquiry.

The scholarship from 2006 to 2018 has included a number of qualitative studies, mainly in the United States of America, that focus on teaching occupation (Hooper, 2006; Hooper, 2008; Hooper, Krishnagiri, Price, Taff, & Bilics, 2018; Krishnagiri, Hooper, Price, Taff, & Bilics, 2017). The focus of qualitative studies has been on educator perspectives and identifying teaching strategies used by educators in the classroom. Hooper (2008) proposed that the push towards occupation-based education was in fact a push for a new implicit curriculum within the field – as many of the ways to implement an occupation-based curriculum are suggested based on adaptations to the implicit, rather than the explicit, part of the curriculum. This further highlights the importance of the educators' knowledge of occupation, and their values and beliefs, being congruent with that of the orientating philosophy of occupation, as educators without this overt view of the importance of occupation may fail to instill this in their students (Towns & Ashby, 2014). Additionally, Pierce (2001) suggested that “the field requires educational programs that have been specifically constructed with a focus on teaching effective occupation-based practice” (p. 251). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the perspectives of professional leaders about characteristics of, and strategies for, occupation-based entry-level education. The knowledge obtained from this study will support educators in the construction of curriculum that is centered on the profession's core philosophy of occupation.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive study design was employed to facilitate the exploration of leaders' perspectives on occupation-based education in entry level occupational therapy programs. This approach was chosen for its ability to gather insights regarding a concept that is not fully understood or previously researched in depth (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2016). According to Sandelowski (2000), qualitative descriptive studies enable production of a comprehensive summary of a concept and elicit an account of the phenomenon with which most people would agree. Stanley and Nayar (2015) proposed that the aim of this methodology is to implement a practical design that provides rich data. Additionally, this approach allows researchers to move from pure description of data, to deeper interpretation. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Griffith University Human Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2016/862). All participants provided informed consent to take part in the study.

## Participants

This study utilized two stages of sampling to recruit participants. Purposive sampling, in particular expert sampling, was used to identify initial participants; followed by snowball sampling in order to further expand the sample (Noy, 2008). During the purposive sampling stage, potential participants were identified using a number of inclusion criteria; professional achievements such as qualifications and awards in occupational therapy entry-level education, experience within occupational therapy education and curriculum development, and contribution to the profession through research and publications or roles in professional organizations. All participants were actively contributing to occupational therapy pre-entry education at the time of interview. Therefore, as experts on occupational therapy education they were well-placed to provide insights on the topic of occupation-centered education. When a potential participant was identified (using either sampling method) the first author (GC) located their email address and emailed them to invite them to participate in the study. The invitation email included the Participant Information and Consent Form. Participant recruitment ceased when data saturation was achieved.

## Data Collection

Participants were interviewed for approximately 60 minutes by the first author (GC) using a semi-structured interview schedule. This addressed possible conflicts of interest due to existing relationships of the other members of the research team with potential participants. A semi-structured approach was chosen as it provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of a topic than is usual with more structured formats (Fylan, 2005). The interview schedule was developed for the study based on a review of the literature, the expertise and experience of the researchers, and examples of interview schedules from other studies exploring perceptions and characteristics. The draft interview schedule was trialed with an experienced academic and minor refinements were made before its use with participants. Table 1 provides indicative questions from the interview schedule. Interviews were conducted either via telephone or using a web-based platform. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1

### *Example Questions from Interview Schedule*

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What are your views on how the profession is embracing occupation in practice generally?

And specifically within practice, research and education?

How do you think that the core philosophy of occupation:

Influences curriculum planning, design and delivery at the moment?

Should influence curriculum planning, design and delivery?

What might be some characteristics demonstrated by an occupation-based, entry level program?

Could you share any strategies or examples of how you would ensure that an occupational therapy program is occupation-based?

What would be some characteristics of an occupational therapy curriculum that was not occupation-based?

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## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically to develop themes or patterns, as is common in qualitative descriptive studies (Kim et al., 2016). The well recognised and used process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. For this study, two researchers analysed each interview transcript independently to maximize rigor and reliability of analysis (Barbour, 2001; Saldana, 2015). First, transcripts were read multiple times as 'wholes' by the two individual researchers, to gain an overall sense of the participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers then documented their initial thoughts, before re-reading the transcript line by line to identify initial codes made up of sentences and statements. Second, the researchers met and reviewed each transcript together, in order to collaborate and agree on general codes. The third stage involved all three researchers meeting to identify categories from within the codes. In the fourth stage all researchers met to compare and discuss categories to review similarities and differences, in order to reach consensus regarding the final themes and the best illustrative quotes for each theme.

Trustworthiness was addressed through the use of multiple coders, an audit trail of research process, and regular team meetings. Multiple coding involved several researchers cross-checking coding of data to support rigour and reliability of the results (Barbour, 2001). The audit trail included detailed documentation of the research design, and ensuring alignment of the research design and data analysis approaches. This included documentation of the emerging coding of each researcher through annotations of initial thoughts and emerging codes on each of the individual transcripts. The research team met regularly to discuss all aspects of the research process.

## RESULTS

One of the seven leaders invited declined and so six leaders participated in the interviews. Participants were occupational therapists from Australia (4), Canada (1), and the United States of America (1). As the participants in this study were recognized as experts, it is likely that if detailed descriptions were provided for each of them, they would be identifiable. Instead we provide the following information to demonstrate the depth and breadth of participants' occupational therapy educational expertise. All names used are pseudonyms. Participants in this study were all women and included individuals who:

- were from Australia, Canada, or the United States of America.
- were, at the time of the interview, working as occupational therapy academics in higher education institutions, some holding senior positions such as program directors or head of department. Those who were not currently working in higher education, had done so in the past.
- had received awards and prizes in recognition for their contribution to occupational therapy education.
- held leadership positions in occupational therapy and/or occupational therapy education national or international organizations, or had done so in the past
- had significant funded research on occupational therapy education and had extensive peer-reviewed publication records

Three themes emerged from the interview data: embodied knowledge and understanding of occupation and its link to health and well-being, deliberate educators who value occupation, and rhetoric versus reality of professional practice.

### **Embodied Knowledge and Understanding of Occupation and Its Link to Health and Well-Being**

Participants identified the need for education programs to clearly have occupation at the core of the program philosophy, prioritized above everything else. It was noted that often a program's philosophy statement includes a number of concepts and ideas, including "learning styles, theories, and intertwining of other terms" (Susan), and so occupation is not always central.

*"[core philosophy of occupation] should be fundamental, and we should have clear statements of our philosophy [of occupation] being fundamentally communicated." (Heather)*

Participants felt that an explicit and coherent philosophy that is repeatedly articulated to students was of key importance within an occupation-based curriculum. Additionally, the philosophy should include overt statements about the relationship between occupation, health and well-being as well as how all other content areas relate to occupation as the core construct.

*"I would expect a really explicit statement about the importance of occupation for health and that this is our reason for being. It's about enabling people to do the things that they have to for their health and well-being." (Patricia)*

Participants identified that the importance of a program philosophy centered on occupation, was that it would drive the development and delivery of a curriculum. Furthermore, one of the main objectives for students must be developing a deep understanding of occupation and its importance, therefore participants felt it should be clearly articulated and reinforced by educators throughout the program. In essence, occupation should be taught in a way that students realize its relevance.

*"Time and time again students actually don't even remember studying occupation... because they were overwhelmed with other stuff and we probably didn't support those subjects with philosophical statements about what they're there [for] and why they're there." (Heather)*

With occupation truly at the core of education, it should be clear how all other content within a curriculum relates and is connected to it. Participants thought that occupation should be integrated coherently throughout all courses from the very beginning of the program.

*"I think it should be clear to students that every class and every course and every topic within that course is related to occupation. And if the program can't show that relatedness or help students discover that relatedness, then I think that content is questionable." (Susan)*



Participants felt that occupation should be valued and respected as a concept in its own right within a curriculum by students and educators alike and that there should be an 'air of excitement' around learning, experiencing and using occupation in practice.

*"There [should be] a dynamic excitement around occupation as a thing that really deserves respect and study that has a lot to offer the world, that there's a real passion for it in a curriculum." (Susan)*

Occupation should also be present throughout assessments – participants discussed the importance of directly assessing students' knowledge of occupation and their ability to apply occupation within the university curriculum and during practice education.

*"I would expect the educator to base their assessment of the student's performance on the degree to which that student can link what goes on in a practice setting to occupation." (Susan)*

Participants suggested that in addition to a diversity of practice education experiences required by international education standards, students should complete more placements that exposed them to occupation in contextualized and naturalistic ways. This would enable students to gain a deep understanding of how and where occupational needs occur, and to connect what they learn at university to their experiences in practice.

*"I'd really like to see more practice education in areas where people engage in occupation in everyday and naturalistic ways, so I'm probably saying in a nutshell I'd rather see less practice education in hospitals. I'd rather see people in community centers...in schools, businesses, in detention centres." (Heather)*

Participants spoke of the need for students to stay linked to the curriculum, and its occupational focus, during practice education. One suggestion to achieve this was to assess students' ability to make the links between their practice education experiences and occupation.

*"I would imagine a way in which the curriculum also stays very tethered to each student during [practice education] to prompt them, prod them, to not forget to attempt and make occupation central their practice." (Susan)*

In summary, participants felt it was imperative that students developed a fundamental understanding of, and respect for, occupation – both as a "complex situated phenomenon" (Heather) and its importance within therapy. Additionally, this understanding must include knowledge, but students must also develop the skills required to use occupation in practice.

### **Deliberate Educators who Value Occupation**

Participants suggested that educators must have and maintain a deep understanding of occupation and be able to clearly articulate its relationship to other topics, in order to be as explicit as possible in their teaching.

*“If we can clearly articulate how the construct relates to all the other things in the curriculum and in our professional repertoire, then we can teach it... Educators would, themselves, be grounded in knowledge of occupation and its relationship to health and its relationship to all other issues and things that we teach in the curriculum.” (Susan)*

It seemed that of particular importance was for the team of educators to have a mix of experience across different areas of clinical practice, research, teaching, and advancing the profession through advocacy and lobbying. In this way, educators are able to bring their own unique knowledge, skills and experiences together in developing and delivering a curriculum that focuses on occupation but also the team can identify the common aspects of what might otherwise look like a very disparate range of practice experiences. This diversity can be a catalyst for the team to focus on the core concepts that unite the profession regardless of practice context experience.

*“If you’ve got that diverse knowledge and experience then, as a team, that can be a very rich way of pulling together what are the core principles, what are the key aspects that need to be contained or communicated to students to fit all those areas of practice.” (Robyn)*

Participants highlighted the importance of the team of educators having a shared occupational philosophy, in that all members of the team must subscribe to this philosophy in order for an occupation-based curriculum to be delivered effectively. Importantly then, new educators that join the team must be orientated to that shared vision.

*“That’s one of the biggest things about the framework [philosophy], that you create and you create together, and then you have to inoculate anyone new coming in to the way we do things, and you’ve got to devote time to it.” (Helen)*

Well managed curriculum development and review was identified as an important way of ensuring a program continued to be occupation-based. If not managed well there is a risk that new staff or changes to courses, could erode the occupation-based program.

*“If some things don’t work and they want to make changes then that comes back to the team... So I guess some of that is about managing curriculum drift, because you might design these fabulous curriculums, all occupational, and then people are going to go ‘Oh, that doesn’t quite work for me. I think I’ll do this instead’. And you get this drifting away from how it’s meant to be.” (Patricia)*

Additionally, participants felt that individual educators must take time to reflect on their own teaching and how occupation is integrated within their content areas, teaching methods and assessments.

*“Educators would take time to map out that connection between what they teach and occupation and that they would build their learning tasks and their learning assessments at that juncture.” (Susan)*

Participants believed that there was not one, single teaching method that would best characterize an occupation-based curriculum. However, most participants did value the use of active methods that were centered on ‘doing’ and learning about occupation, particularly from a personal perspective. Specific teaching methods mentioned included active learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and scenario-based learning. Several participants noted that didactic approaches to teaching and learning, which promote one-way transmission of information, would be alone insufficient to convey the complexities inherent in an occupation-based curriculum – thus the need for varied and active learning strategies.

*“I think we actually need to do occupation [throughout a curriculum] – and we can’t be experts in all of them, but if we can experience some and then examine them from... a bit more of an insider perspective, then you can use that process across anything you might encounter.” (Patricia)*

*“There would be a tremendous amount of integrated doing of things, not learning from traditional pedagogy, like lectures.” (Mary)*

The rapid increase in occupational therapy education programs was seen by some participants as posing a particular challenge to occupation-based education, given the difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified and experienced academics with experience in, and commitment to an occupational perspective.

*“[The core philosophy of occupation] does rely on the expertise of the educators and we’ve seen a fairly rapid growth of education programs in Australia... I know that some programs are being set up by people who don’t necessarily have a strong background in occupation-based education.” (Robyn)*

Accreditation standards were also discussed by participants, and it was proposed that while the standards require a program to demonstrate they include occupation within the curriculum, there was variability in how this was executed in individual programs.

*“...everybody has that content. However, the extent to which it’s coherent throughout the program varies.” (Heather)*

### **Rhetoric Versus Reality of Professional Practice**

Participants identified two ways in which there was sometimes a mismatch, or a risk of a mismatch, between what was planned or intended, and what actually occurred.

**Lack of congruence between curriculum and professional practice.** Participants identified a perceived lack of congruence between clinical practice and university curricula. Some participants went so far as to suggest that what students learn in the classroom and experience on practice education were at odds with each other.

*“And that’s really confusing for students in that they... engage in discussions that are all about being occupational and then they’d go on placements or go into practice... there’s some of that that gets lost and so I think that’s a real challenge.” (Patricia)*

*“I think there seems to be a gap between education and practice, and that’s most acutely seen in hospital settings... between what education and theory is saying and what is actually expected of people in a hospital context.” (Karen)*

**Educators’ espoused versus enacted value of teaching occupation in the classroom.** Participants also identified differences in education across programs, stating that students could have different levels of exposure to occupation and occupation-based education depending on which university they attended.

*“Depending on which university you’ll go to... you will either get a strong and clear message about the centrality of occupation, in your exposure to the curriculum and as you progress through your education. Or you won’t, it’ll be you get a chunk here and then it’s not really interwoven through any of the other subject areas.” (Heather)*

A number of participants suggested that although educators and programs might identify as being occupational, this may not always be evident in how the curriculum is operationalized.

*“All the programs in [this country] would say that they’re occupational and they use contemporary theories – so they all have that rhetoric but then when it comes down to what is included in class and what you actually do, I think there’s that dissonance there.” (Patricia)*

Susan suggested that although occupation might be the intended core focus of an education program, this may not always get fully translated.

*“I do believe [occupation is] a core focus... it’s the way that they understand their work as educators and they understand their curriculum...[but] it’s sort of more a core intention, and that core intention does not get enacted so explicitly.” (Susan)*

In general participants described inconsistencies in the profession between the curriculum and current practice, and between what occupational therapy educators say they do, compared with how they enact their practice in the classroom.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study provide a unique insight into characteristics of occupation-based education and some potential strategies for implementing these, from the perspective of leaders in occupational therapy education. This knowledge about emphasizing the importance of a strong and clear focus on occupation in all aspects of

entry-level curriculum, from international experts is an important contribution in the literature about teaching and learning in occupational therapy and is particularly relevant during this time of rapid growth in the profession.

The notion that, upon graduating, students must have an internalized knowledge of and passion for occupation both as a construct, and as a therapeutic tool, was strongly held by participants. However, a recent study by Di Tommaso, Isbel, Scarvell, and Wicks (2016) suggested that this is not consistently being achieved in Australia, for example. New graduate occupational therapists are entering the workforce feeling uncertain about the role of occupation within their practice. Throughout this research, participants had many suggestions of how occupation should be integrated within a curriculum: occupation as the core concept ought to be presented to students from the moment they commence their education, it should permeate all aspects of a program's curriculum and philosophy, including learning objectives and assessments; and students should be given opportunities to engage in occupations themselves throughout their studies in order to fully experience its value.

The use of occupational language throughout a program is another strategy for ensuring occupation is at the forefront. If the names of subjects/courses are occupational in nature, then it could be assumed that these are in alignment with the core values of the program itself. Whiteford and Wilcock (2001) discussed using occupation when naming and framing subjects, suggesting it provides countless opportunities to educate and inform others about the profession's purpose and direction. Additionally, Wilcock (2000) stated that for a healthy academic culture to exist within our education programs, academics must be comfortable with, and must use occupational language to empower students and demonstrate an occupationally grounded academic program.

Occupational therapy continues to be a rapidly growing profession both nationally and internationally. For example, the number of registered occupational therapists in Australia has grown by 43% in the past five years (Occupational Therapy Board of Australia, 2012, 2017). In Canada, the profession has grown 21.11% since 2011 (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2017). And, within the United States, the projected employment growth within occupational therapy is expected to increase by 23.8%, which is more than three times the average rate of national job growth (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The increase in the number of entry-level programs has increased demand for skilled educators. As highlighted in this study, a team of educators having a shared vision of an occupation-based curriculum is imperative to its success. In fact, Hooper (2008) stated that "effective practice depends on therapists who believe in and act on the guiding belief and fundamental values of the field" (p. 229). Additionally, it is vital that the program director has a strong grounding and belief of occupation as the core of a curriculum (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2004).

The theme of incongruence came through strongly in the results in different ways. One was the recognition of a lack of congruence between the intention of a curriculum and how it was enacted. Marzano (2003) outlined three types of curricula that must be

considered in order for students to achieve the desired outcomes of a program: the intended curriculum, which relates to the content that the program sets out to teach; the implemented curriculum, being the content that is actually delivered by the educator; and the attained curriculum, which is the content that, at the conclusion of the program, students have actually learned (Marzano, 2003). Participants in this study suggested strategies such as having clear learning objectives for every class; educators taking time to explicitly link every topic to occupation and being able to articulate this connection to students; the program director should have strategies in place for ensuring the program and courses are achieving what they set out to achieve. It could be useful for educators to undergo peer review of their teaching practice in alignment with these recommended approaches. As a result, these strategies could address the gap between the intended, implemented, and attained curriculum – and as such, support the efforts to deliver an occupation-based curriculum.

A further incongruence in the results was between the occupation-based nature of university curricula, and how this does not necessarily match with how occupational therapy services are delivered in the world of practice. This was perceived to be a particular issue in hospital settings, where occupational therapists may be expected to deliver impairment-based services or function as a hospital discharge planner (Britton, Rosenwax, & McNamara, 2015). Di Tommaso et al. (2016) identified the difficulties in incorporating an occupation-based approach to service delivery in the acute hospital setting, due to the focus on biomedical approaches and the short length of stay which is characteristic of this context (Britton et al., 2015). This can result in students having difficulty in understanding and applying the occupation-based approaches taught at university, particularly during practice education in hospital settings. Therefore, it is vital that academics, students, and practice educators learn from each other and collaborate to minimize the gap between theory and practice. For example, enabling occupational therapists in clinical settings to undertake periods of work in education programs. Similarly, academics might benefit from greater exposure to the demands of modern clinical practice. Collaboration of occupational therapists from all sectors in curriculum design and research, might also address the current perceived gap.

In considering curriculum design, consistency between the philosophical approach, goals of the curriculum and shared assumptions of the education team are vital for its success (O'Connor & Walker, 2003). Participants discussed the need for ongoing reflection and curriculum management in order to ensure a program continued to deliver the learning objectives it set out to deliver. This evaluation is critical to delivering a successful curriculum and should be a regular feature of an entry-level occupational therapy program. Networking with other educators was suggested as a strategy for professional development. With so many education programs in most countries, the sharing of information and strategies could be a powerful way of learning new approaches to occupation-based education. Other strategies identified by participants to support academics to engage in critical reflection and evaluation included peer review and class-based observations involving the identification of missed opportunities for engaging students with links to an occupational perspective.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include that the participants were drawn from Australia, Canada, and the United States of America, which means other perspectives may not have been identified. However, the themes from this study are consistent with the existing literature focussed on approaches to teaching occupation. The use of semi-structured interviews can provide results that are impacted by social desirability bias, therefore future research into this topic should take a more in-depth approach, using methods such as extended observation of teaching practices to identify specific strategies for occupation-based education, as well as student perceptions of occupation-based education. These methods afford researchers the opportunity to observe occupation-based education that is contextualized. Further research could also gain the perspectives of new graduates on the occupation-based strategies they perceive were used in their pre-entry education, and how these have influenced their practice following graduation.

### **Implications for Education Practice and Future Research**

If occupation-based practice is essential to occupational therapy and its future, then students, as future practitioners, should be educated within an occupation-based curriculum. A vital step in securing a future of occupation-based practice within the profession is through the adoption of occupation-based education. There is an ever-growing number of entry-level occupational therapy programs with increasing expectations that curricula are grounded in occupation. Findings from this study provide the growing numbers of occupational therapy academics with information about characteristics of, and strategies for, occupation-based education. In particular this research has exemplified the importance of academics in the development of a student's understanding and passion for occupation and occupation-based practice. Future research into this topic could take a more in-depth approach, using methods such as extended observation of teaching practices in the classroom to identify specific strategies for occupation-based education, as well as student perceptions of this type of education. These methods afford researchers the opportunity to observe occupation-based education that is contextualized. Further research could also gain the perspectives of new graduates on the occupation-based strategies they perceive were used in their entry-level education, and how these have influenced their practice following graduation.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research demonstrates the critical role individual academics play in the development of students' understanding of, and passion for, occupation and how it is enacted in practice. Educators must continue to develop their knowledge and skills of occupation as well as effective ways to teach this core concept. Further research into occupation-based practice in education programs will have positive implications for students and future graduates in terms of their ability to be occupation-based in professional practice.

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