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Abstract

Intraprofessionalism is vital to service delivery. This inquiry sought to develop and examine a college elective combining occupational therapy (OT) with occupational therapy assistant (OTA) students, to foster collaborative relationships, and to provide intraprofessional innovations in academia across an entire semester, immersing learners from multiple colleges/universities. Qualitative participatory action research (PAR) was used to determine ways to integrate OT and OTA students from four disparate programs in intraprofessional learning, and to understand students' perspectives regarding the immersive, learner-centered educational programming. The research cycled through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on topics related to OT/OTA integration, supervision, and role delineation. Inquiry took place in four accredited OT and OTA programs in Pennsylvania. Sixty-four (N=64; n=14 OT; n=50 OTA) students from four programs participated. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, journals, and critical incident questionnaires and systematically analyzed to answer: (1) How do OT/OTA students negotiate intraprofessional relationships? (2) What are their perceptions of successful collaboration? and (3) What affected their ability to develop intraprofessional relationships? Attributes of effective intraprofessional collaboration included professional communication, trust, respect, and empathy. Self-awareness and an understanding of the professional counterpart were pivotal. Learners preferred face-to-face over distance interactions and required time to develop skills. Immersive, learner-centered opportunities over time were beneficial in academia for the development of collaborative skills necessary for intraprofessional partnerships. Logistics, cost, and time commitments were challenges to this approach. Findings contribute to foundational knowledge surrounding intraprofessionalism, detailing skills, attributes, and preferred approaches to learning for OT/OTA collaboration in practice.

Keywords

Intraprofessional collaboration, teaming, OT/OTA immersion

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Intraprofessional Collaboration in OT/OTA Academia: Immersive Innovations for Skill Building

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ABSTRACT

Intraprofessionalism is vital to service delivery. This inquiry sought to develop and examine a college elective combining occupational therapy (OT) with occupational therapy assistant (OTA) students, to foster collaborative relationships, and to provide intraprofessional innovations in academia across an entire semester, immersing learners from multiple colleges/universities. Qualitative participatory action research (PAR) was used to determine ways to integrate OT and OTA students from four disparate programs in intraprofessional learning, and to understand students' perspectives regarding the immersive, learner-centered educational programming. The research cycled through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on topics related to OT/OTA integration, supervision, and role delineation. Inquiry took place in four accredited OT and OTA programs in Pennsylvania. Sixty-four (N=64; n=14 OT; n=50 OTA) students from four programs participated. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, journals, and critical incident questionnaires and systematically analyzed to answer: (1) How do OT/OTA students negotiate intraprofessional relationships? (2) What are their perceptions of successful collaboration? and (3) What affected their ability to develop intraprofessional relationships? Attributes of effective intraprofessional collaboration included professional communication, trust, respect, and empathy. Self-awareness and an understanding of the professional counterpart were pivotal. Learners preferred face-to-face over distance interactions and required time to develop skills. Immersive, learner-centered opportunities over time were beneficial in academia for the development of collaborative skills necessary for intraprofessional partnerships. Logistics, cost, and time commitments were challenges to this approach. Findings contribute to foundational knowledge surrounding intraprofessionalism, detailing skills, attributes, and preferred approaches to learning for OT/OTA collaboration in practice.

Introduction

Intraprofessional collaboration between occupational therapists (OT) and occupational therapy assistants (OTA) is vital to work relationships, service delivery and client outcomes. Such partnerships, where OT practitioners (OTPs) endeavor toward shared goals, are essential to daily therapy. Educational (Accreditation Council of Occupational Therapy Education [ACOTE], 2018), ethical (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020a), licensure and supervisory (AOTA, 2020b) mandates require integration of the OT and OTA. While collaboration is easily explained and assumed as a skill that all possess, it can be illusive if not learned in academia, prior to fieldwork and professional practice. Further, Vision 2025 extols collaboration as an exemplar pillar of focus for effective professional outcomes (AOTA, 2021).

Collaboration is necessary to intraprofessionalism and is defined as working together for a common goal, directed by values and abilities (Sullivan, 1998). Effective collaborations are generally mission-centric for both partners and beneficial to those served (Bellack & O'Neil, 2013). Each OTP brings distinctive contributions to teamed efforts per roles, values, and educational preparation. The intraprofessional relationship among OTPs, along with the execution of quality therapy, requires a collaborative skill set that includes two-way communication, respect, and professionalism (Dillon, 2001).

This qualitative, participatory action research (PAR) study integrated four university/college systems and 64 total OT/OTA (N= 64; n=14 OT; n=50 OTA) students in immersive, learner-centered education surrounding intraprofessionalism, including an innovative academic elective and other educational intraprofessional events (Dennehy, 2017). The purpose was to examine skill development of the students related to effective intraprofessional supervisory, collaborative, and working relationships.

Literature Review

Conceptual Underpinnings

As early as the 1980s, collaborative partnerships in OT were deemed necessary for success of working teams and for optimal service delivery (Blechert et al., 1987). By the 1990s, the Commission on Education produced the *COTA and OTR Education Unit*, a handbook promoting collaboration (AOTA, 1997). This publication demonstrated the field's commitment to intraprofessionalism and was precursory to AOTA's (2018a) position paper on the importance of OT/OTA intraprofessional education. While 20 years spanned both academic initiatives, no empirical work was isolated to demonstrate what higher education was doing to foster collaborative, supervisory relationships.

Several conceptual pieces discussed ways to integrate OT with OTA students for case-based problem solving, panel presentations, role playing scenarios or lectures focused on working together (Coleman & Riley, 1997; Costa et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2000). Scheerer (2001) successfully integrated OT/OTA student teams from two universities in a developmental partnering model where a three-tiered program included role delineation, case study and intervention activities to support lifetime habits of collaboration.

Fieldwork is also an integral part of the higher education process, where real-world experiences build practice and relational skills. With the abundance of therapy programs in some states (e.g., California, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas) and the shortages of fieldwork sites, collaborative models have become popular in meeting demands. This approach ameliorates placement challenges, and provides rich opportunities for collaboration, team-based learning, and authentic practice scenarios (Costa, 2007; Dour et al., 2007; Rosenwax et al., 2010). While interest in promoting these vital OT/OTA relationships is evident, a gap in research regarding best practices for learning how to collaboratively partner exists.

Empiricism and Intraprofessionalism

The seminal study in professional practice examining OT/OTA teams was conducted by Dillon (2001). Here, 22 pairs of working OT/OTA teams from a wide array of settings were interviewed to ascertain perceptions of effective and problematic relationship dynamics. Findings of effective two-way communication, trust, and professionalism as hallmarks of healthy teams, and of commitment from both cooperating parties who share common goals of optimal client intervention and outcomes were important (Dillon, 2001). Additionally in the realm of practice, 351 OTPs participated in survey research, rating 20 competencies for intraprofessional practice in the domains of teamwork, roles/responsibilities, communication, and values/ethics (Diamant et al., 2018). The four primary domains echoed those set forth by the Interprofessional Educational Collaborative (2016). Findings yielded ratings of all competencies as very important, indicated by up to 88% of participants; differences were seen between OT and OTA ratings on such areas as relational flexibility, communication of ideas and providing performance feedback (Diamant et al., 2018). Core competencies were suggested as informing guidelines for education.

Inquiry regarding fieldwork education has shown positive results when integrating collaborative student teams. In Canada, a qualitative study of eight OT/OTA fieldwork student pairs revealed respect and trust developed through partnership experiences, as seen in clinical skill development, and understanding of roles (Jung et al., 2002). Similarly, seven OT/OTA affiliate teams were paired, with findings pointing to relationship development, the impact of environment on learning and increased appreciation of respective roles (Jung et al., 2008). Fieldwork education is positioned optimally for pairing and partnering of OT/OTA students in addressing best practice from clinical, professional, and relational standpoints.

Academic preparation provides grounding for clinical education and practice, impacting OTP success. One community-based collaboration between OT/OTA students during didactic education occurred in a two-phase process, focusing on learning about role delineations and working together (Carson et al., 2018). Intraprofessionalism as a curricular thread can be embedded for collaborative skill-building and effective teaming.

A paucity of research on OT academic efforts surrounding intraprofessionalism supported the viability of this inquiry. A qualitative PAR approach was used to determine ways to integrate OT and OTA students from four disparate programs in immersive intraprofessional learning. Research was conducted across a full semester/term, immersing the students virtually and face-to-face, to learn about intraprofessional relationships (Dennehy, 2017). Knowledge is socially constructed, relating to individuals' lived experiences within context, and hence situated learning theory guided this endeavor in academia (Lave, 1991). Within this construct, communities of practice (CoP) define where participants or learners actively engage within their contexts, fully integrating or immersing in these environments for skill development and proficiency (Wenger, 1998). Collaboration does not occur in isolation, so this experience was designed for engagement and learning *with* teamed counterparts in an educational CoP. Research questions included: (1) How do OT/OTA students negotiate intraprofessional relationships? (2) What are their perceptions of successful collaboration? and (3) What affected their ability to develop intraprofessional relationships?

Methods

Qualitative design was chosen for its inductive and naturalistic capabilities (Yilmaz, 2013) in understanding OT and OTA students' perceptions and experiences related to intraprofessionalism in higher education (Dennehy, 2017). Within qualitative method is the applied typology of PAR which endeavors to identify and solve problems in practice (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). Here, the problem centered on how to best educate students to collaborate as partners for practice. PAR, a form of collaborative, descriptive inquiry, utilizes cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting within authentic environments (Kasl & Yorks, 2002; see Table 1). Institutional Review provided approval through the primary research institution, with cooperating approval at the graduate school and letters of agreement from each OTA program, prior to sampling.

Table 1

Overview of PAR Cycles

PAR Cycle	Research	Outcome
Planning	Selecting ways to integrate intraprofessional learning in participating colleges/universities	Developed intraprofessional elective
Acting	Implementing tasks established from planning	Immersed OT and OTA students in intraprofessional opportunities
Observing	Determining if/how learning was effective	Learners completed questionnaires; PI took fieldnotes
Reflecting	Understanding learner experiences	Learners completed reflective journals and actively processed in class

Participants

Institutions with Accredited OT and OTA Programs

Recruitment via convenience sought institutions in Pennsylvania within a 100-mile radius. Inclusionary criteria necessitated full-time students, from accredited OT and OTA programs, willing to integrate in face-to-face and distance learning. Four institutions (one masters and three associate degree programs) agreed to participate following active recruitment by the primary investigator (PI).

OT and OTA Students

Sixty-four students (N=64; n=14 OT; n=50 OTA) consented to participate in the study. Learner demographics varied across institutions. Institution A included a homogeneous group of 14 traditional college students, self-identified as female, Caucasian, and in their fifth year of study. While all 50 OTA students also reported being Caucasian, Institutions B, C, and D offered greater diversity in ages (range 19 through 45 years), self-identified genders (4 male and 46 female) and prior educational experience (38 high school diplomas, 11 undergraduate degrees and 1 graduate degree). Counterpart OT/OTA student teams were randomly assigned to approximate authentic professional partnering.

Ethics

Blind consent was implemented at each institution to successfully achieve student signatures and to prevent coercion. Participation status of the learners was revealed after all grades were submitted to uphold ethical best practice. Typical to PAR, emic researcher co-participation in problem identification and resolution throughout the inquiry and learning processes occurred. Primary investigator positionality as an OTA, then therapist and educator, was openly acknowledged to bracket bias and further support highest ethical practice.

Procedures Framed by PAR Cycles

Planning

In the planning phase, the PI interfaced with program directors/professors from all four institutions to find the best fit for inclusion of topics related to intraprofessionalism such as working cooperatively, supervision and licensure, understanding role delineations, and professional negotiation. Two formats were afforded for the study of intraprofessional relationships: (1) a semester/term-long elective involving one OT and one OTA program, and (2) the integration of those students with learners from two other disparate institutions enrolled in their own courses of study (Practice and Management respectively) where intraprofessional content was highly relevant (see Table 2).

Table 2*Overview of Participant Integration*

University/College	Program Type & Course	Student Participants N = 64	Integrations Between Institutions
Researcher's University	Research I Institution	Emic Primary Investigator	Facilitated all integrations A, B, C, D
Institution A	Graduate OT Program: Semester-long Elective	14	B, C, D
Institution B	OTA Program: Term-long Elective	4	A, C
Institution C	OTA Program: Practice Course	27	A, B
Institution D	OTA Program: Management Course	19	A

Note. Adapted from Dennehy (2017)

Active immersion was defined as integrating students together, predominantly in shared physical environments, as well as virtually, for the purpose of learning together. Immersive experiences provided opportunities for students from counterpart institutions to learn from each other while working on problems and assignments, as is the case in professional practice. Active immersion of students with counterparts varied based upon program, type of course, timing in semester/term and integration objectives. A core of learners (n=18; 14 graduate and 4 sophomore OTA students) experienced a semester/term-long full immersion together, engaging in an intraprofessional elective led by the PI. These graduate students also integrated with OTA students (n=19) enrolled in a management course within another institution. The core OT and OTA (n=18) students worked with additional OTA students (n=27) enrolled in a practice course at yet a different school.

Students from Institutions A (graduate OTs) and B (sophomore OTAs) integrated full-time, for every class, with a partnering of 7 OTs: 2 OTAs. While not an ideal ratio, it afforded opportunities for students to learn in partnership and this format was student selected. The four institutions integrated for teamed activities in both face-to-face and distance formats (phone conversations, texting, FaceTime or Skype, emails, Google Docs). For logistical reasons, students from Institutions C and D never interfaced, nor did learners from Institutions B and D. Students not enrolled in the elective (C and D) carried out tasks specific to their course content and objectives when not engaging intraprofessionally.

Acting

The acting phase involved implementing tasks established from the planning cycle (see Table 3), executing the study with immersive educational opportunities among 64 learners. The elective was learner-centered, co-constructed by students from Institutions A and B, and facilitated by the PI. An evolving syllabus was utilized to build content parameters, outcome measures and class norms. Group norms served as guiding expectations, were student developed, and included such examples as, we: (1) are all equals; (2) respect the opinions, thoughts, and values of everyone in the group; and (3) actively listen to each person, and do not talk until they are finished sharing. Areas of assessment, decided upon by student collaborators, included: (1) structuring and leading mixers, communication, and trust activities; (2) co-constructing each classes' discussions related to AOTA documents, licensure, supervision and roles; and (3) designing and presenting a full day conference on intraprofessional collaboration with Institution C. Additionally, graduate students worked with stakeholders at D to design and present a conceptual OT clinic. Active processing supported learning with every experience.

Table 3*Integrative Learning Activities*

College/University	In-Person Experiences	Distance Interfacing
A (OT) & B (OTA)	Full semester/term; Fully immersive course to study teaming, supervision, roles & partnered problem solving; Self-chosen social activities (alternating travel between Campus A & B)	None
A (OT) & B (OTA) With C (OTA)	Full Day "conference" on intraprofessionalism led by students from A & B with learners from C participating (traveled to Campus C)	iMovie meet & greet by students from A for C counterparts; Across semester, five email journal prompts between counterpart teams
A (OT) & D (OTA)	Event One: Teaming with trust, communication and other student led immersive activities; Event Two: Presentations of OT Clinic Designs by OT/OTA groups (traveled to Campus D for both)	Across semester virtual OT/OTA learner outreach; Management project to design OT clinic (email, Facetime, Skype, Google Docs per preference of learning teams)

Observing and Reflecting

To fully engage in reflective practice, the process is reflexive, iterative and dialogue rich (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). Time was afforded at the end of each class, giving all stakeholders a voice. Here, learners determined if a concept was mastered or needed further development. Periodic Critical Incident Questionnaires (CIQ), adapted from Brookfield (2005), gave students an opportunity to evaluate experiences, and were used to modify future classes. Reflective journals, with free and prompted writings, were completed by students in the elective course (Institutions A & B) to promote reflexivity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Triangulation was achieved for improved verification via several data collection measures utilized: CIQ forms, journals, PI fieldnotes, 64 demographic intake and reflective exit questionnaires and 12 semi-structured interviews, all modified or developed by the researcher. Audio-recorded and manually transcribed interviews of 12 randomly selected participants (six OT and six OTA students) by the PI occurred (10 in-person and two via phone) status post semester. Formatting for semi-structured interviews was adapted from Patton's (1987, 2014) process, with behavior, opinion, feeling, knowledge, and sensory questions surrounding intraprofessionalism. Open and axial coding was completed using constant comparative methods to arrive at thematic findings (Merriam, 2002). To ensure dependability and trustworthiness of results, peer debriefing and external auditing were accomplished with five terminally prepared researchers. Member checking for accuracy of themes was also conducted among interview participants.

Results

Key themes focused on attributes of intraprofessional collaboration and how they are learned over time and developed with practice. Results yielded the skill set for effective collaboration to include communication, various character traits of trust, respect, and kindness, as well as value-laden behaviors of empathy and diversity as strength (Dennehy, 2017).

Skills of Professional Communication

Communication between intraprofessional collaborators is pivotal to accurately convey information about a client's status. Complexity lies in the delivery (in-person versus distance methods), type (verbal or nonverbal), nuances (tone, emphasis), and ability to remedy miscommunication (negotiation, conflict resolution). Self-awareness regarding emotive stance, volume, and demeanor when communicating is imperative.

Interviewees, such as a second degree, OTA student, stressed the importance of communication in determining if team members were "able to work together...get the project done...and be open to...compromise." Give and take were important for consensus on how best to achieve an outcome in the partnership.

Discovering the preferred form of communication, in-person versus virtual outreach, is pivotal to expectations of each intraprofessional collaborator, and to licensure-driven requirements for supervision. Interestingly, face-to-face communication was the preferred form of interaction among all participants. A graduate student articulated "I

definitely thought [face-to-face] was the best type of communication...I got to know [my counterparts] much better and ...really build a relationship with them.” While in-person integrations were preferred, virtual ones are also needed for practice. The delivery of information was considered pivotal. “Sometimes it’s not what we say, but how we say it that makes all the difference” was stressed by an OTA student after leading a communication exercise with counterparts. Professional tone and delivery were essential to getting the point across and to building strong relationships.

Active listening was also found to be important to communication processes among intraprofessional collaborators, with one OT student sharing “this class...has definitely taught me to be more of a listener [instead of worrying about] what am I going to say next.” Being present with a fellow team member is part of mindful communication. An OTA student stressed the importance of honesty when communicating, sharing “you need to communicate... honesty...to be very clear...and voice your opinion in a very professional way” when working with others. Honesty fostered trust and respect which were identified character traits for effective collaboration.

Character Traits for Collaboration

The Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (AOTA, 2020a) highlights trust and strong professional relationships (veracity), as well as commitments for respect and loyalty (fidelity) as integral core values in the profession. Findings revealed trust, respect and kindness as traits necessary for optimum relationship building and collaboration. In structured questionnaires given to all 64 collaborators, 98% agreed that trust was important to developing effective working relationships (Dennehy, 2017). An OTA student poignantly stated “Without trust, there is no respect. With no respect, there is no relationship.” An OT student offered that trust “takes years to build and seconds to destroy,” emphasizing the importance of ethical behavior. While the majority corroborated the importance of trust, not all were as comfortable giving trust. Some participants were able to be vulnerable, and an OTA learner shared “I’m not one to trust easily...but there was a moment [in the immersive experience] when I just truly trusted my buddy...to get [the project] done, that it’s going to be great.” Trusting someone’s skill set and competence to get the job accomplished fosters positive regard and understanding of each other’s roles. A graduate student offered, “respect...goes along with knowing roles and understanding [and appreciating the other’s] experience.”

As assumptive as being kind may be to a good relationship, it was stressed repeatedly by stakeholders. “Kill them with kindness” was a recurring statement from class and in data collection. Kindness was pivotal to difficult communication outreach and conflict resolution, when broaching controversial topics and in solving problems together. One student discussed their perceived role “to be the most professional, nicest person I can be.... being open to working with people...for the betterment of the work relationship...the workplace...the patient [care].” These character traits are generally rooted in personal values and correlated to findings of the importance of empathy and of diversity as strength.

Value-Laden Behaviors

Empathy is often discussed in academia as necessary for working with client populations but is seldom framed as important when integrating with colleagues. The ability to consider how coworkers are feeling in the moment goes a long way in supporting awareness of the other, and in better understanding work behaviors and interactions. One graduate student shared “everyone’s got something going on [in their lives that] you might not know about...everyone has a bad day.” Having greater appreciation of a counterpart’s situation affords understanding and opportunities for support in delivering effectual service. Being empathetic toward a team member offers potential for reframing a situation which may have otherwise been viewed as a negative encounter. Interfacing with peers helped students gain insight into the lives and experiences of all team members and practice at providing empathy reciprocally. In a journal entry, one graduate student reported:

How you can apply [empathy] with your coworkers as well as your clients...is part of reframing where is that person coming from, what is their point of view and... why are they doing this? It’s really like psychosocial OT.

This awareness of others in the moment, understanding their perceptions, thoughts, and experiences was key when collaborating.

Immersive experiences were found to be effectual on many levels such as an appreciation for the diversity of perspective and roles each counterpart brought to an intraprofessional collaboration. Integrating several OT/OTA programs for learning opened students to experiences outside of their familiar cohort groups. Interfacing with counterparts who have varied work histories, additional degrees, different life commitments, broadened understanding of skills and experiences which others bring to professional endeavors. Additionally, learning about the educational trajectory and skill set of the OT and OTA was found to be an asset. One graduate student whose OTA counterpart had an advanced degree, reported, “I think...the biggest thing I learned...is how to appreciate other people’s knowledge [and]...respect for it.” Learning from each other within these relationships was found to be vital. Another OT student shared, in an exit survey, “with relationships you have to be flexible...because everyone is different, and you’ve got to learn from each other.” By nature, OTs and OTAs are trained with specialized skill sets. Learning specifics of these roles further helped solidify how OT/OTA partnerships supported each other’s skills. At the outset of the study, OT/OTA students were polled about their exposure to and understanding of key mandating documents, with 93% of OT students and 24% of OTA students reporting “NO” to exposure of role delineations documents (Dennehy, 2017). The immersive elective afforded opportunities to actively explore such information and make sense of it with counterparts. These integrations offered a glimpse into future working relationships.

Discussion

In a profession that relies on OT/OTA teams to provide highest level service, the notion of skill development surrounding intraprofessionalism is paramount. To this juncture, a dearth of empirical evidence regarding what the intraprofessional skill set entails, and particularly how to develop said proficiencies remains; hence, educational efforts in this area are open for interpretation and are inconsistent at best. The findings of this study corroborate the characteristics of effective working OT/OTA teams extrapolated by Dillon (2001), afford additional perspective surrounding traits and behaviors of intraprofessionalism, and demonstrate how immersive experiences of OT/OTA academic counterparts provide rich opportunities for learning/working together prior to fieldwork and professional practice.

Experiences for Shaping Intraprofessional Relationships

In response to research question one that examined how OT/OTA students negotiated intraprofessional relationships, a wide array of structured and unstructured opportunities, for in-person and distance formatting, were afforded (Dennehy, 2017). Formal assignments and projects were integrated outcome measures, as is typical in academia; but additionally, learners participated in unstructured, social activities to build teamed relationships. Both were viewed as important to the learning process related to roles, supervision, and intraprofessionalism. Noteworthy is the perceived value students expressed at being given independence in shaping many of their encounters. As a result, meaning and relevance were reported of the chosen teamed pursuits. Whether students immersed for a bonfire social or were working on a collective assignment, skills, such as communication, trust, and role regard, were honed. The opportunity to practice professional communication, to demonstrate kindness and empathy in the face of stressful academic rigor, and to learn from one another about their program's academic preparation, practitioner skills and roles were reported as rich for negotiating teamed relationships. Defining expectations in partnered OT/OTA situations, communicating reciprocally and professionally, and celebrating the diversity and strengths that each person brought to an endeavor were reported as pivotal to effective intraprofessionalism.

All students learned that not only is intraprofessional collaboration mandated in practice (AOTA, 2020a, 2020b, 2015; ACOTE, 2018), but it creates greater efficiency and successful outcomes in working together. When both counterparts valued the teamed relationship, the experience thrived. If any other agenda was held above the partnership, such as the outcome measure or details of an assigned task, the relationship and the process reportedly suffered. Affording time in academic curricula for students to develop skills of effective collaboration and for learning the importance of what each person contributes to a process was found to be critical. Similarly, Diamant et al. (2018) supported the notion of roles and responsibilities as one of four intraprofessional competencies, along with values/ethics, teamwork and communication, to be included in educational offerings.

Practicing and Developing Skills

Regarding the second research question which focused on the perceptions of successful or effective partnering, learners pointed to several important aspects. The available conceptual literature lauded the importance of providing opportunities for OT/OTA students to immerse for integrated experiences (Coleman & Riley, 1997; Costa et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2000). Likewise, this study immersed learners in multiple ways (face-to-face and several virtual formats), addressing the distinctive skills of collaboration to foreground these endeavors and practicing for skill development across experiences (Dennehy, 2017). During active immersion, understanding the different types of communication strategies and formats, modeling trust and respect of all OTPs, stressing reciprocity of exchanges between OT/OTA students alike, and integrating learners for more than an isolated opportunity were reported as key to supporting effectual intraprofessionalism.

“Occupational therapy literature to date tend to focus on content rather than an intentional process of instructional design” in reinforcing learning surrounding intraprofessional collaboration (Pitonyak et al., 2020, p. 18). Pitonyak et al. (2020) found that work is often where OTPs learned how to collaborate and recommended that intraprofessionalism be imparted in education through thoughtful, intentional means, guided by the four core competencies. Through this study, that utilized an immersive format and a learner-centered focus, students were able to live out the concepts and relational skills necessary for fieldwork and practice by “doing” in academia (Dennehy, 2017). Interestingly, these findings additionally centered around communication, roles, teamwork, and value-laden behaviors, all consistent with the intraprofessional competencies.

Time to develop the skills of intraprofessional was emphasized. Participants reported in-person exchanges as helpful to contextualizing a conversation, interpreting tone and body language, and providing greater sense of personal contact and immediate feedback. While virtual forms of integration are required in supervisory and partnered relationships, in-person interactions were most highly valued unanimously. Further research is needed to explore fully virtual, immersive learning for intraprofessional collaboration, as some states have few programs with which to interface in person (Delaware and Oregon for example).

Interfacing Outside of the Cohort

In the final research question, focused on aspects participants believe affected their ability to collaborate and develop intraprofessional relationships, findings were multifaceted. Prior to this research, none of the 64 students had ever integrated with students outside their program. This immersion provided real-world experiences, similar to working with new or unfamiliar colleagues in employment situations. Development of novel relationships across a semester/term promoted practice of communication, negotiation, active problem solving, group think, and collective reflection between counterparts as they carried out given activity-related roles. As Bellak and O’Neil (2013)

aply conveyed, effective collaboration manifests capacity and synergy for those involved that would not otherwise exist in isolation. By immersing OT with OTA students in academia, skills of collaboration were practiced *with* counterparts, and not merely conceptualized in segregated cohort groups at brick-and-mortar institutions. By connecting student teams for collaboration, many voices and minds contributed to the intraprofessional process and learning.

Challenges and Limitations

Logistical pre-planning, cost and time presented challenges to the experience. Work began a year in advance to build relationships with cooperating institutions and to plan approaches that were appropriate to all involved. Full academic course loads made finding the right fit for intraprofessional content imperative. Travel to cooperating institutions required time and resources. An institutional grant helped to defray costs of supplies and travel expenses. A homogeneous sample and uneven elective counterpart ratios (7 OT:2 OTA students) were limitations of the study. As is typical of qualitative inquiry, findings cannot be generalized to the population at large, however, they can provide valuable information in similar contexts for transferability.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Based on findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered to support the role of academia in grounding intraprofessional collaborative skills for practice:

1. *Actively immersing* OT/OTA counterparts, affording *both* in-person and virtual experiences, is recommended.
2. *Teaching, practicing, and developing the skills/traits* of reciprocal, professional communication, trust, empathy, kindness, and diversity as strength is pivotal to the intraprofessional educational experience.
3. *Increasing time and multiple experiences* for OT/OTA integration is ideal for developing skills and relationships, versus isolated or random interfacing.
4. When assigning collaborative projects, *articulating the value of the intraprofessional relationship as an important outcome* of the experience should be emphasized.
5. Preparing logistically for immersive OT/OTA learning takes advanced planning and communication between educators/program directors to find the best fit in all curricula. *Foregrounding and organized planning* is pivotal to the success of the experience.

Conclusion

The AOTA “asserts that entry-level occupational therapy curricula should...bring OT/OTA students into collaborative educational experiences” (AOTA, 2018a, p. 293). This PAR study did that, gaining insights regarding the specific skills required to foster effectual working relationships. While findings support the importance of OT/OTA learning intraprofessionalism in academia, continued research is needed to gain insights regarding how best to deliver intraprofessional education, when to introduce this content in the curricula and what specific immersive activities are optimal. Despite face-to-face experiences being preferred for promoting collaboration among students, virtual means of integration are also the reality in this technologically driven society. The

COVID-19 pandemic has created a shift in the delivery of education and practice in OT, relying on virtual platforms. Inquiry that examines the types and benefits of fully virtual student integration is timely and warranted.

The philosophy of OT education supports active learning within and beyond the classroom, as well as collaborative processes to build experience (AOTA, 2018b). By immersing OT and OTA counterparts in academia for experiential learning, future practitioners begin to better understand the dynamic skills each bring to service. The safety of educational context can promote processing, problem-solving, group think and reflection during immersive learning. Additionally, student practice of collaborative skills can build positive regard for counterparts, demonstrate value of the partnered relationship, and develop techniques to bolster teaming for best service to the individuals, groups and populations they will serve.

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