EMBRACING AN OCCUPATIONAL PERSPECTIVE TO PROMOTING LEARNING IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, occupational therapy (OT) practice in schools has been dominated by clinical interventions with children with disabilities or barriers to learning. These practices do not confront many of the challenges facing learners in the dual economy of schooling. This article advocates that critical OT, through an occupation-based community development (Ob-CD) approach to practice, is
better positioned to address schooling challenges. The value of this approach in unpacking the transactional nature of occupation for learners attending schools in a low-income area is described. The integrated lens provided by interpreting human occupation in context and framing practice through Ob-CD is highlighted. This is significant for the nature of the relationships formed and the design of interventions within a university-school partnership. A case example illustrates how Ob-CD provides a framework for confronting hegemonic ways of thinking and doing so that fresh perspectives are created for the emergence of new ways of participating. It is advocated that these new pathways provide an impetus for contextually relevant OT practice while promoting partnerships that foster development.

**Keywords:** school improvement, human occupation, occupation-based community development

**INTRODUCTION**

The profession of occupational therapy (OT) has evolved so that it is increasingly being seen as one that promotes health and social development through applying a transactional perspective of human occupation. This view of occupation has broadened the profession’s focus in school contexts, where the occupational therapists’ (OTs) contribution has previously been exclusively focused on clinical practice with disabled children as well as those who experience barriers to learning. In response to societal needs, the re-conceptualisation of what OT can offer in school contexts has led to the development of an occupation-based community development (Ob-CD) approach in OT practice (Galvaan and Peters 2013, Introduction).

The university-school partnerships at the University of Cape Town (UCT) provided the platform for the authors to shape a framework for practicing Ob-CD. In this way the practice framework emerged from research, theorising and reflections on experiences in practice. This article describes how academics in the Division of Occupational Therapy at UCT have conceptualised their contribution to improving the learning and life chances of primary and high school learners.

**THE EVOLUTION OF OCCUPATION-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Ob-CD has emerged as a form of critical OT practice. The historical origins of Ob-CD can be traced to work initiated by Galvaan in primary schools in the community of Lavender Hill in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2000. As an academic activist, Galvaan began working with primary schools in this community when she recognised the social injustices faced by many children in this context. She took cognisance of the constraints of a medically oriented OT approach that did not respond substantially
enough to the educational and social challenges faced by learners in schools. Guided by this critique of the OT profession's position, and informed by an appreciation that the university can make a positive contribution to promoting citizenship through addressing societal challenges, she initiated an OT practice site for fourth-year undergraduate OT students situated at primary schools. Here students could explore and develop a critical OT contribution within the basic education system. Fourth-year undergraduate OT students from UCT have, as a result, been placed at different schools in Lavender Hill since 2000. These placements have flourished as a consequence of the investment in building the relationship between the university and the school. The way in which this relationship is nurtured is informed by the nature of Ob-CD, which according to Galvaan and Peters (2013, Introduction), is

a value-based form of occupational therapy practice with communities where doing is both the means and ends of actions that are aimed at bringing about changes in human connection and occupational engagement. Ob-CD involves long-term discursive processes where discourses and practices in and of everyday life are challenged.

As a work in progress, Ob-CD has involved a constant dialogue between, and ongoing development of, occupational science theoretical constructs and engagement with contextual realities. This process informs practice and generates critical views on and of occupation and associated constructs (such as occupational choice which is explained later in the article). The practice of Ob-CD is informed by the use of a transactional perspective of occupation (Cutchin et al. 2008), a perspective that contributes significantly to the benefit derived for learners through the university-school partnership. The transactional perspective is described below in order to offer some explanation into the useful way that this influences OTs’ approach to the partnership.

THE UTILITY OF A TRANSACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF OCCUPATION

Occupation is a term commonly used to refer to paid work. However, occupation in occupational science and OT is more than just paid work. Occupation is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon with many definitions. One definition refers to occupation as the ‘ordinary and extra-ordinary things that people do every day’ (Watson 2004, 3). The simplicity of such a definition, however, also belies the complexity of this concept. Dickie (2010) acknowledges that occupation is something that is difficult to explain because it is deceptive in the numerous, interrelated and complex processes that it often involves. These processes become difficult to simplify, even though the final product – the doing of the ‘occupation’ itself – appears simple at face value. Another definition, which reflects this complexity, draws on Dewey’s transactional perspective. Occupation is viewed as
a type of relational action through which habit, context and creativity are coordinated toward a provisional yet particular meaningful outcome that is always in process; the type of occupation is defined by the particular combination of habit, context, creativity and provisional outcome (Cutchin et al. 2008, 164).

Here, the everyday situatedness of occupation refers to not just the immediate environment, but also to the embodied histories that are ever-present in day-to-day experiences. Thus, a transactional view gives occupation qualities that involve an appreciation for the way in which collective histories and emerging identities influence occupation (Galvaan 2010). This idiosyncratic, yet patterned nature of occupation informed the way in which occupation was conceptualised to be both a means and end to action in Ob-CD. Within a university-school partnership, the transactional view would draw attention to the way in which the histories of people and institutions, such as the teachers, and the lecturers together with the university and the school would influence the exhibited patterns of occupations in the particular context.

Drawing on the perspectives of Dewey and Bourdieu in occupational science, a transactional perspective of occupation (Cutchin et al. 2008) highlights the improbability of an object, an event or a person ever being completely separate from the situation in which this object, event or person arises (Frank 2011). This results in multiple complex transactions with the numerous parts that make up a situation at any given point in time. This means that when people engage in occupations, that is, when they are doing, their doing is embedded in and reflective of the place in which it occurs, the culture associated with it and, finally, the experience of doing. This perspective provides layers of understanding that may be particularly helpful when considering the occupation of learning, which then, is not limited to formal, academic learning. Instead the way in which the context of the learning shapes who the child is able to be and become as a human being who is able to ‘do’ in the world becomes salient. This is congruent with the view of education in terms of its social location and value, ‘what it does to one and what one does with it’ (Soudien 2012, 82). Therefore, the ways in which the context influences and supports the child’s unfolding identity is viewed as crucial for the way that education supports human development. Sen’s definition of human development is used here and refers to the development of capabilities that offer the promise of a life that a person has reason to value (Robeyns and Brighouse 2010). Consequently, consideration has to be given to the diverse contextual aspects that influence learner success at any given point in time. This view of the occupations of learning, brings together the demands of the school as a context with the community within which the school is embedded and the person as a learner. Appreciating this context provides a situated frame for the university-school partnership.

The layers of the context that have to be taken cognisance of in relation to occupation are: the classroom; the school; the community; and its associated sub-
groups. All of these should be viewed in relation to the national education system, while paying particular attention to the dual economy education system (Shalem and Hoadley 2009) in South Africa. The prevailing ideologies and discourses extending between and underlying each of these aspects of the context are of particular significance to occupations, such as those involved in learning. These ideologies behind what and how occupations are performed serve as the reference point for understanding how what people do shapes their potential human development. The application of these insights shapes the establishment of understanding and the development of relationships between the university and the school in a way that allows for the collaborative and emergent design of interventions to occur. Designing interventions thus occurs through negotiation and experience with regard to the intent, focus and content of interventions.

Within the school context, a key aspect that influences the ideologies associated with occupations is that of the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum consists of the values, norms and beliefs that are diffused to the teachers and learners through the structure of the schooling system (Giroux and Penna 1979). This structure conveys implicit messages about occupations to learners and teachers. The dominant narratives and messages that teachers enact because of the hidden curriculum parallel the learners’ experiences of the same curriculum (Langhout and Mitchell 2008). Teachers and learners tend to reproduce the dominant narratives, even when these are not in their favour or when they actually disagree with the messages. Consequently, learners and educators remain trapped in cycles of interaction, which, in turn, perpetuate the learners’ poor academic performance. The subsequent system of education reproduces ways of thinking and being that restrain learners’ potential, maintaining the status quo. The work of OTs is to uncover how these dominant ideologies may shape learners’ occupations and find strategies to overcome this. Engaging in occupations at the schools provides a powerful way of uncovering and recognising how dominant ideologies influence learning. Simultaneously, applying occupations as a means for change while working for a changed occupational outcome facilitates the innovative design of relevant strategies. These strategies are often aimed at developing the learners’ occupational potential which is people’s ‘capacity to do what they are required and have opportunity to do, to become who they have the potential to be’ (Wicks 2005, 130).

THE LAVENDER HILL HEROES CAMPAIGN AS A STRATEGY TO COUNTER HEGEMONIC FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Facing Up is an OT project that utilises an Ob-CD approach to intervention and, in its current form, is the product of a long-standing partnership between a local primary school in Lavender Hill, Cape Town, and the Division of Occupational Therapy at
UCT. Fourth-year undergraduate OT students provide services at the school and the school provides a practice learning site for these students. This creates a platform for students to develop their skills in the practice of Ob-CD and for further theorising. The school’s support of an emergent model of service delivery has meant that the university-school partnership, in this case, has offered the opportunity to develop a theoretical basis for novel and innovative ways of practising OT through intervening in the complex problems faced by many schools and communities in South Africa.

Lavender Hill is situated on the Cape Flats in Cape Town and bears the scars of the system of forced removals enforced through the *Group Areas Act, No. 41 of 1950* (Republic of South Africa 1950) during the apartheid era. This has resulted in a community with poor infrastructure and a perpetuated lack of opportunities, most notably for the youth who grow up in this context (Peters 2011). This is evident in the lack of opportunities for enriching participation within school contexts in this community. Facing Up takes cognisance of the inequalities faced by the youth in Lavender Hill and, in line with the approach of Ob-CD, challenges the realities that act to limit their ways of participation in daily life. Dominant ways of thinking and acting in Lavender Hill are influenced by apartheid ideologies, which frame the way people living there view their possibilities in terms of their choices for participation. As has been discussed above, these deep-rooted mindsets constrain the potential of youth in this context so that their plans for progressing to secondary education and into the world of work are often ill-conceived. Students practising at Facing Up are required to develop creative ways to liberate the youth’s hegemonic ways of thinking (Galvaan and Peters 2013) so that fresh perspectives and ways of doing may be considered to shape their participation differently.

The Lavender Hill Heroes campaign was an Ob-CD intervention that created a platform for learners to reconsider their futures and how this related to their current academic success at school. On entering into the school context and while performing an analysis of how the context influenced learners’ participation in occupations, the OT student responsible for the development of this campaign was initially critical of the reasons why and the way that learners were not being supported to optimise their academic performance. Her concern was with how well learners would be able to compete and be prepared for high school entrance. She was initially seduced by the ease with which she thought she could recommend, develop and implement more efficient systems. Her ideas included the possibility of beginning homework groups after school hours and implementing the use of homework diaries at the school. Her assumption was that these activities and structures would enable improved academic achievement. Although these strategies were potentially promising, Peters (the second author of the article), in her role as the OT university practice educator was unconvinced that these actions would bring about substantial change. Peters’ view was based on her previous experience of working in Lavender Hill and familiarity with the way that the existing ideologies influenced the prevailing system and hidden...
curriculum at the school. Despite that, the teachers who partnered with the student, identified logistical barriers to implementing her ideas, but nonetheless agreed to support these actions. The barriers that the teachers identified included assuming that the learners lacked interest in staying for any activities after school and that parents were disinterested and unsupportive with monitoring homework. Puzzled by the resistance that she faced when considering positive options for change, the student was obliged to reconsider her approach.

Following the theoretical interpretation of occupation as applied in Ob-CD, the student adopted a transactional perspective of occupation. She began to consider the hegemonic thinking and practices that created the kinds of barriers identified by the teachers. This way of considering occupation created the opportunity for her to consider the embodied histories that shaped the Grade 7 learners’ participation in the occupation of learning and its associated tasks, such as homework. The subsequent deeper analysis revealed far more sinister influences on learners’ participation. It exposed the low value that learners associated with school, and its outcomes, and the influence that this had on the way that they chose to participate as learners. Their participation reflected that their choices of occupations did not follow a process of rational choice informed by the drive for good academic performance. Rather, learners’ occupational choices were shaped by their practical consciousness (Galvaan 2010). Their practical consciousness both framed and reflected what they saw as being possible for someone living in Lavender Hill, namely, that the majority of people in Lavender Hill either did not finish school or struggled to access further educational opportunities after finishing school. In the minds of many Grade 7 learners was the consideration of whether they would go to high school, how long they would stay at high school and what they could do instead. The kinds of work occupations with which they were most familiar, were precarious working-class jobs where there is little emphasis on career success, enjoyment or satisfaction. The reality of unemployment was intimately familiar to many. This is, and always has been, a predominant reality for people living in Lavender Hill. It was no surprise, then, that learners viewed few, if any, other possibilities for themselves and that this view was reflected in the occupational choices that they made in relation to their school performance. From this perspective, it made sense that, if learners viewed their invested efforts in schoolwork as fruitless, then they would be reluctant to further invest of themselves. Instead, learners made choices in accordance with their practical sense of what was appropriate and expected in Lavender Hill (Galvaan 2010).

Arriving at this more critical perspective set in motion a process that fully appreciated these interrelated aspects influencing learners’ participation. This meant that Peters was able to design an intervention that focused more accurately on what was influencing the learners’ success in learning, rather than simply implementing strategies that would fail and reproduce the stereotypes associated with how learners
engage in the school context. This involved creating a strategy that challenged the way the learners thought about their futures in relation to what they saw as possibilities for people in Lavender Hill. Together with the learners and teachers, the OT student had to think deeply about how to shape a different view of these learners’ possibilities for current and future participation. Thus, the Lavender Hill Heroes campaign was born.

Peters began by initiating a dialogue with teachers where alternative possibilities for life trajectories in Lavender Hill were examined. Teachers shared stories of past learners of the school who had built the kind of lives that contradicted the usual patterns of participation associated with this community. Celebrating these individuals – who were considered ‘Lavender Hill Heroes’ – emerged as an important part of challenging the usual discourse regarding how children who attend school in Lavender Hill should and would participate. The stories of these heroes were not often told, but amongst them were amazing individuals who did not fit the mould of characteristic work occupations associated with Lavender Hill. Instead these individuals had become pilots, university students, teachers, activists, radio DJs and non-profit organisation directors. In partnership with the teachers it was decided that providing learners with an opportunity to examine an alternative discourse would be a valuable means to beginning a conversation intended to challenge, and thus counter, current hegemonic forms of participation in occupations associated with subordinate identities.

A process was crafted that was intended to begin to shift Grade 7 learners’ thinking about their future possibilities. In so doing, an opportunity was created for them to begin to think beyond the constraining ways of their subordinate identities. This was designed and implemented systematically so that small groups of learners were given the opportunity to interact with and reflect critically on the stories of a diverse set of Lavender Hill Heroes. This was done through the use of an action-learning approach (Taylor, Marais and Kaplan 2005), which operated as a form of critical conscientisation, similar to that proposed by Freire (2005). The OT student prepared each hero prior to their session with a group of learners so that the way in which they told their stories highlighted the possibility for a different life, but also linked this strategically to their occupational choices that had shaped this life in significant ways. Since each hero was in most cases a past pupil of the same school they were asked to describe their own experience of learning at school as a mechanism for enabling learners to identify with them. Learners were given the opportunity to ask the particular hero questions and to interrogate their choices. Where necessary the OT student helped the learners to think of questions and prompted them to ask these. Through this process an opportunity was created for learners to make a final decision regarding the status of the hero, as someone who should be celebrated. This is significant since learners took control in a context that does not usually promote this. When learners decided upon a hero they were involved with each hero
in constructing the ‘Lavender Hill Heroes Walk of Fame’, similar to the glamorous ‘Hollywood Walk of Fame’. Understanding how symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977), such as popular culture, influences occupational choice (Galvaan 2010) informed this aspect of the design of the campaign. The learners participated in the campaign through painting a star on a particular area of the quadrangle at school, and adding the hero’s name to this. This process appealed to learners because of its novelty, generating excitement about the campaign. Simultaneously it offered an opportunity to extend the conversations with the hero that had begun when he/she shared his/her story. It also could be used as a representational device as learners were encouraged to consider what they would need to do to have their star on the walk of fame in the future. After this part of the session occurred, the OT student continued the process with learners by engaging them in an opportunity for critical reflection. Learners were amazed at the similarities that they shared with the heroes. They looked the same, used the same language, had similar experiences growing up in Lavender Hill and attended the same school. Yet, they acknowledged that the heroes had landed up in fundamentally different positions to those which they saw for other adults around them every day. This realisation assisted in challenging the assumptions that they held about the possibilities at play for them, and how this was related to the ways in which they currently engaged at school. These renewed ways of thinking provided an impetus for learners to begin to shift their patterns of participation. When the teachers were asked to comment on the changes they had witnessed they shared stories about the learners showing a renewed interest in school work as they participated more actively in class; more regular completion of homework tasks; and more regular school attendance.

Although the shifts described here are small and were not present for all involved, they should be understood in relation to the school and community context, and should thus be celebrated as a signifier of hope. They are significant because the context is one where high rates of absenteeism are the norm, learners do not always automatically progress to high school and in many cases drop out of school. An interview with a local newspaper prompted learners to comment on the changes that they had undergone during their participation in the campaign. Here they indicated their determination to shift their participation at school in line with their renewed attitude and positivity about the potential that their futures held.

Although the success of the Lavender Hill Heroes campaign has been foregrounded, cognisance remains with the complexities that remain to be engaged with in substantially shifting learners’ occupational choices as learners and their unfolding identities as human beings. This, we acknowledge, is essential in order to more forcefully challenge the entrenched ways of doing that are the product of the practical consciousness and operant habitus (Bourdieu 1977). The campaign worked similarly to the way that a match does when it lights a fire. Its work is done at the outset and it is a critical component of the process but it cannot sustain
what it has started unless appropriate fuel is provided for the fire to continue to burn. The challenge in continuing the work that has begun through the Lavender Hill Heroes campaign is to understand the appropriate mechanisms of support that learners require in maintaining and improving the shifts that have been described. This is no easy feat given the contextual complexities. The reality is that learners need to be enabled to ‘do’ differently now in order to be and become the people who they began to imagine that they could be through the Lavender Hill Heroes campaign. To do this, ongoing opportunities for learners to critically evaluate their current daily occupational choices and the manner in which these link to what may be possible in their futures. It is envisioned that once this has occurred the process of supporting them in these new occupational choices through ongoing advocacy for changes in the landscapes of opportunities would be needed. Although many mechanisms of advocacy and layers of change would be needed, one possibility is through the development of parents and guardians as champions (Peters 2011) within the school community. This strategy acknowledges the exceptional role that parents play when considering a transactional view of occupation. It is envisaged that the capacity of parents would be developed so that they would be enabled to act in ways encouraging renewed choices for participation while at the same time enabling learners to strategically consider the opportunities available to them that would help them to attain positive possibilities for their future participation.

DISCUSSION

In the article, we have concentrated on occupation in relation to the university-school partnership and the value that this brings. By doing this we have not intended to downplay the value of the partnership for the development of the OT profession. Indeed, the opportunity to apply different theoretical perspectives during OT interventions has enabled the development of the critical occupational therapy approach in the form of Ob-CD. This has offered immense gains for the university in the form of curriculum development and the building of a professional OT identity in schools that goes beyond an individual impairment focus. As the OT profession expands its focus to include societal issues that impact on the experience or attainment of justice for the people it serves, its role in schools has shifted. Practice, such as that described in the article, has shaped and directed the development of occupational science and OT theory. While research to understand occupational choice emerged from a critical ethnographic study with young adolescents in Lavender Hill (Galvaan 2010), the application of this knowledge in the Lavender Hill Heroes campaign has generated knowledge about how to apply insights into occupational choice in practice. This seamless production and application of knowledge is cogent to the development of critical practice. This is important for the OT profession, as it is repositioned as one that has a worthwhile and essential contribution to make to societal
change. In addition to growing the contextual relevance of the OT profession, it provides a model for how the creative process of knowledge generation can serve learners, schools and the university.

A key element for the OT profession has been the contribution that an occupational lens offers in terms of how schools may reproduce dominant ideologies that leave the learners in subordinate positions. The reproducing roles of schools in entrenching dominant messages and limiting learners imaginations of what they could possibly achieve, has been noted to warrant attention (Soudien 2012). The work of identity making is proposed as a way for young people to recast themselves beyond the constraints of the current race and class social imaginations (Soudien 2012). The article has described how the delivery of Ob-CD through a university-school partnership created the opportunity to intervene in the way in which schools socialised learners into subordinate positions.

The way in which the principles of successful university-school partnerships are delineated (Thorkildsen and Scott Stein 1996) does not reflect how the politics associated with participation in occupations of learning could be dealt with effectively in order to promote change. This occurs since the notion of the partnership is located as situated between the school and university without taking into account the historied location of these entities in relation to that of communities. The Lavender Hill Heroes campaign provides a practical example of how spaces may be created within schools to challenge the dominant narratives while enabling learners to consider what may be possible for them beyond their and their teachers’ limited imaginations. Reframing ideas through doing provides learners with tangible experiences of the varied possibilities of what could lie ahead in their futures. Let us consider what would have been different if the OT student had chosen to implement her initial strategies of homework groups and homework diaries. Although these factors contributed to the learners’ lack of academic progress and success at school, they did not challenge the root causes. As a result, the learners and teachers might have made an effort to use these strategies initially but their purpose would not have served to challenge the limiting dominant messages. The redirected focus of the OT student in the form of the Lavender Hill Heroes campaign created an opportunity to intervene more directly in the learners’ ways of thinking. The different view of the occupation of learning that is proposed in the article is thus subtle, but powerful, and fundamentally shifts the way in which practice is approached. The dialectic between the community and the context (which includes the school and the school-university context) has to be factored into the way in which interventions aimed at changing hegemonic practices in schools are conceived.
CONCLUSION

The article has offered an opportunity to consider the utility of applying an occupational perspective in the context of a university-school partnership. Evidence has been provided to illustrate that this perspective can contribute to challenging the existing hegemonic practices in schools, ensuring that education leads learners towards a life that they have reason to value. In sharing this case example, a glimpse of the contribution from occupational science and OT to education and schooling in South Africa has been demonstrated. Simultaneously, mutuality was demonstrated in that university-school partnerships have allowed the OT profession to benefit.

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NOTE

1. ‘A campaign is a form of intervention, implemented with a population of people that is focused on intervening into a problem identified to be of importance from the perspective of all key role players who have a stake in the resolution of the problem. It employs strategies that involve some or all of the key role players in taking strategic actions that involve counter-hegemonic ways of “doing” in daily life’ (Galvaan and Peters 2013, Campaign).

REFERENCES


