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The Role of Occupational Therapy in Supporting Special Education Staff in Self-Regulation for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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The Role of Occupational Therapy in Supporting Special Education Staff in Self-Regulation for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project

Presented to the Faculty of Western New England University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Entry-Level Doctorate

in

Occupational Therapy

by

Sinead O'Brien 2022 July 2022

The Role of Occupational Therapy in Supporting Special Education Staff in Self-Regulation for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project

By

Sinead O'Brien OT/s

July 2022

APPROVED BY:

Amy Burton Faculty Mentor Name (typed)

Debra Batour

Faculty Mentor

7/26/2022

Date

APPROVED BY:

Debra Latour, OTD, M.Ed., OTR/L Doctoral Experiential Coordinator

Date

July 27, 2022

Abstract

Self-regulation is a person's ability to establish and maintain an optimal state with their emotions, thoughts, attention, and behavior to meet the needs of the environment. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may have difficulties with communication, social interactions, or engage in repetitive patterns of behavior that influence their ability to self-regulate (Watling & Spitzer, 2018). In most elementary schools, special education teachers and paraprofessionals do not receive evidence-based training on self-regulation strategies. The goal of this DEx capstone project was to determine if occupational therapy (OT) could support special education staff to improve confidence with implementation in the area of self-regulation. Through creative and evidence-based strategies, the OT DEx student was able to support, train, demonstrate, and provide a toolkit on self-regulation strategies to the staff. This quantitative study was conducted using a methodology that consisted of a pre-survey, thirty minutes of training on the self-regulation toolkit, followed by a post-survey. Findings from this study reveal confidence improved with implementation, identification, and modification of self-regulation strategies.

Keywords: Occupational therapy, self-regulation, autism spectrum disorder, elementary schools, teachers, paraprofessionals

Introduction/ Background

The use of self-regulation and supports to clients have increased within the field of occupation therapy (OT) research and literature practice (Martini et al., 2016). Self-regulation interventions have been used in a variety of practice settings including neonatal, sensory integration clinics, schools, and adult settings. For example, with preterm babies, sensory integration with toddlers, school-age children, adults, task-oriented interventions, and driving behaviors for seniors. OT practitioners should not assume each person has the same understanding of self-regulation. Instead, OT practitioners should facilitate and specify the term in the specific context to ensure proper usage in practice and in the literature. Additionally, school paraprofessionals do not typically receive training on sensory dysfunction or strategies to help students with regulation (Stocks, 2019).

For the purpose of this Doctoral Experiential (DEx), the working definition for self-regulation is the ability of a person to establish and maintain an optimal state to meet the needs of the environment (Watling & Spitzer, 2018). Self-regulation is the ability to manage one's attention, thinking, emotions, and behavior in response to a situation. This is a fundamental life skill that is required to successfully participate in occupations. Students at a young age require assistance with learning positive ways to self-regulate, also known as co-regulation. Research has documented that up to 86% of children with ASD have self-regulatory problems in the first 12 months of life and challenges with emotional and behavioral regulation are a core characteristic of adults with ASD (Watling & Spitzer, 2018). OT practitioners can use various programs and activities to assist students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in improving self-regulation, behavior, social skills, and communication.

The LINKS program is a program throughout the Springfield Public School District. Students who are considered for placement in the LINKS program have a diagnosis of ASD. Instruction is individually tailored to meet the needs of each student. Instruction uses evidencebased approaches such as Applied Behavioral Analysis, Floortime, Verbal Behavior, Social Skills training, use of visual supports, and assistive technology. These methodologies are incorporated throughout the day and are aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework. Each child's program focuses on his or her academic and behavioral needs. Some of the strategies that are integrated into the classrooms consist of token economies, schedule boards, transition boards, visual and auditory timers, and social stories and checklists. Although the LINKS program strives to meet the needs of each student, disruptive behaviors can arise. At Mary Walsh Elementary School, there are three LINKS classrooms with three teachers and ten paraprofessionals. Each classroom has their own system or approach to self-regulation and behaviors. With this, the staff has very different backgrounds ranging from teaching in special education for three years and teaching for over twenty years. Likewise, some paraprofessionals have been working in this profession for three months to over ten years. Overall, with the staff's various backgrounds, new evidence evolving on self-regulation strategies for students with ASD, and different classroom approaches to self-regulation, a training course could be beneficial for the staff to improve the student's self-regulation skills.

Doctoral Experiential Project Overview

Experiential Overview

The goal of this doctoral experiential was to support the special education staff in the LINKS program while promoting the role of OT in schools. The experiential component of this project took place at Mary Walsh Elementary School for a duration of five weeks. The main

purpose of the experiential was to help the staff with academic, behavioral, social, and emotional support. Over the course of the five weeks, the LINKS classes experienced a COVID-19 outbreak, which resulted in the absences of staff and students. With this, having additional assistance was beneficial. Some experiential activities included OT supporting the paraprofessionals by leading math and reading centers. Some centers included reading about lantern festivals and the rainforest. Additional centers included learning about temperature, sequencing numbers, fractions, and decimals. Other centers included promoting life skills such as the skills needed to go grocery shopping. These skills included having centers with following a recipe, creating a shopping list, and learning about money management. This activity prepared the students for a walking field trip to the local grocery store in which the OT student supported the staff on this trip. The OT DEx student provided recommendations for a calming corner, including a list of suggestions with various sensory tools. The scholarly component focused on self-regulation which, was translated into the experiential component as well. The OT student demonstrated techniques by running a large group breathing activity in the outdoor classroom. The staff was able to observe and learn how to teach a strategy to a group of students. During this experiential, the OT student observed the staff implementing the breathing techniques which were successful in improving the student's self-regulation skills. During the final weeks of the school year, the OT student was able to support student concerns with self-regulation during the field day, splash day, graduation, the end of the year classroom cleanout.

Scholarly Overview

The scholarly project titled "The Role of Occupational Therapy in Supporting Special Education Staff in Self-Regulation for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder" was approved by the Western New England University institutional review board (*See Appendix A*) and

approved by the Springfield Public School District. This scholarly DEx project conducted using pretest-posttest, survey design with special education staff who work in the LINKS program at Mary M. Walsh Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts. Participants were selected using convenience sampling of those who met the inclusion criteria and those who work in the LINKS program at Mary Walsh Elementary School. The research was designed to determine if training special education staff on self-regulation strategies improves confidence with implementation. The researcher hypothesized that training should improve the staff's confidence in the implementation of self-regulation strategies. Seven participants signed consent forms to participate in the study. The study consisted of researcher-developed survey using Google Forms. Survey questions included participants' background, confidence, and knowledge about self-regulation. The researcher developed a self-regulation toolkit (See Appendix B for the online version) with a variety of strategies in sections such as self-regulation programs, evidenced-based strategies, group-based strategies, tools, apps, or devices, and a section for additional resources and references. After the pre-surveys were completed, each participant participated in thirty-minutes of training on the materials in the toolkit. One week later each participant completed the post survey to determine if their confidence changed. Confidence related questions were rated on a semantic scale from one to five (1: not confident, 2: slightly confident, 3: somewhat confident, 4: quite confident, and 5: extremely confident). Data was analyzed using pre-post comparisons of each participant's responses and by determining a mean increase. All seven participants were able to complete both the pre and post surveys and attend a thirty-minute training session on the self-regulation toolkit of strategies. The results indicated that 71.4% of participants report an increase in overall confidence with the implementation of self-regulation strategies. Additionally, 85.7% of participants reported their

confidence improved with adapting and modifying strategies. Participants were asked how confident they are when they trial a new strategy. After receiving training, 100% of participants reported an increase in confidence. When comparing pre and posttest means, there was a mean increase of 1.8. Lastly, when participants were asked how confident they were to be able to identify self-regulation tools, apps, or devices, 85.7% of participants reported an increase in confidence. When comparing pre and post means for this question the pre-mean had an average answer of 2.5 while the average post-mean was 4.6, indicating a 2.1 mean increase. Overall, the participants' confidence with self-regulation improved in the areas of implementation, identification, and modification or adapting strategies.

Discussion and Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that with training, support, and demonstration of self-regulation strategies confidence with implementation, identification, and modifications in special education teachers and paraprofessionals increased. As stated in the literature, paraprofessionals do not receive training on sensory dysfunction or regulation (Stocks, 2019). It is essential to provide training to help teachers support students with self-regulation. The ability to identify and modify strategies with self-regulation is an important factor that plays a large role in self-regulation. Strategies require practice to determine the strategies that work best for the child. Furthermore, on the post survey participants were asked "After receiving training, do you think you need more training on self-regulation tools and strategies to improve implementation?" With this, four participants indicated "maybe", and two participants responded "yes". These results indicate that more training may be needed because of limited time to implement strategies. On the survey, 6 out of 7 participants noted Mary Walsh Elementary School could use more tools, equipment, and devices to provide the students with. If more equipment is provided, proper

training on these regulation tools may be needed as well.

A limitation for this capstone project was the limited number of hours the OT DEx student was able to support the staff on campus. Another limitation included starting a research project towards the end of the school year which could have influenced the results. During the end of the year, the school schedule changed with activities outside of the typical routine which, consisted of events such as field trips, field day, and other outdoor activities. In addition, it was difficult to organize participants' availability for training and a lack of carry over occurs due to the summer break. Considerations for future practice include implementing this project at the beginning of the school year to ensure that these strategies can be carried out throughout the school year. Other recommendations include following up with participants in the future to determine the effectiveness of the toolkit and to determine if the toolkit is continuously being utilized and receive feedback on it. Future recommendations can include having a follow up training once a year or possibly implementing training as a professional development course.

Learning Outcomes

A major lesson learned throughout this experience was to be flexible and adaptable. Not only does this pertain to the delays in paperwork but also with the on-site opportunities with the staff and students. Some days there was more support needed and opportunities to participate in learning activities with the students compared to other days. However, each objective was able to be met and evidence of completion was noted (*See Appendix C*). Additionally, being able to spend time in the LINKS classroom was a great learning experience to be able to observe how visual supports, coping strategies, sensory equipment such as noise-canceling headphones, and flexible seating play a large and helpful role in these classrooms. Being able to gain experience working with an interdisciplinary team consisting of the principal, teachers, paraprofessionals,

OT practitioners, speech therapists, and an Autism specialist was a valuable learning experience. Working with this interdisciplinary team provided insight on how to successfully communicate and collaborate with a large team. When working with students with ASD who have varying needs, one gains insight and appreciation with the teams that support this population. To be able to integrate into this setting was a significant learning experience that will help guides future clinicians a with this population and setting.

Comments/ Additional Information

Upon completion of this DEx project, the OT DEx student submitted an article awaiting publication within OT Practice (*See Appendix D*).

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Appendix A

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE of PHARMACY and HEALTH SCIENCES

Subgroup of the IRB & Human Subjects Committee FWA00010736 Approval Form*

Responsible Director:Dr. Diptiman Bose
Title of Project:The role of occupational therapy in supporting special education staff in self-regulation for students with Autism spectrum disorder. College Proposal Number:COP-IRB#161
_X This research proposal is exempt under Federal Regulation _46.104.d.1
It is deemed acceptable according to the Belmont Principles and the American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Human Participants for a period of one year.*
This research proposal has undergone an expedited review under Federal Regulation It is deemed acceptable according to the Belmont Principles and the American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Human Participants for a period of one year.*
This research does not qualify for exemption or expedited review and will need to be reviewed by the entire board.
Signature
Renewal requests due before5/11/2023

[&]amp; Note: Authority to approve exempt or expedited research originating within the College of Pharmacy.

^{*} Note: It is your responsibility to notify the IRB of any adverse events that occur during your research. You must also request an additional review before you introduce changes to the proposed protocol. Maintain a copy of your original application, any requested changes, and this signed approval form. You will need to submit these if you apply for a renewal.

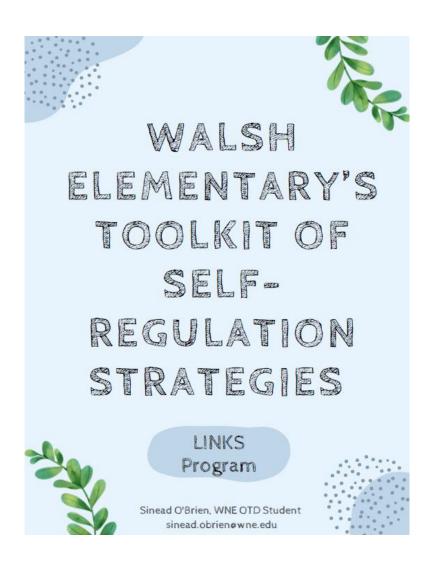
Appendix B

Online Toolkit

Link to online toolkit:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/13SndzZktO19qKNmM_zbRY6AchSVmdVVd/view?usp=sharing

Front cover of toolkit:



Appendix C

Evidence of Learning Objectives:

WNE OTD Objective	Collaborate with various professionals as part of an	
<u>#1</u> :	interprofessional team to advocate the role of occupational	
	therapy in a nont	•
		ent will meet with interprofessional
team members (Princip	al, special ed sta	off) weekly.
Resources Needed:	1 1 · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	
		S staff members to determine areas of need
OTD student will help	p and assist stair w	nen needed
Evidence of Accomplishmen	t:	
-		LINKS staff including teachers,
paraprofessionals, and	d an autism special	ist OTD student observed each LINKS
		ach team member. OTD student collaborated
		with running centers/ individualized
instruction with stude		ted with the LINKS staff members to promote
		n routine. Staff has communicated roles and
responsibilities neede		
Midterm:		Final:
□ Accomplished		□ Accomplished
☐ Making Progress		☐ Making Progress
☐ Not progressing, needs attention		☐ Not progressing, needs attention
WNE OTD Objective #2:	Document a need	s assessment for a particular population and
		ent as the foundation for planning a
	successful Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project. Additional	
	evidence will include feedback from consumers that indicates	
D1 1 4 (* ' ') M (1 1		project on the population they represent.
Planned Activity or Methodology: A needs assessment will be conducted during the first few weeks of the DEx, a written report will be created by week three.		
inst lew weeks of the DEx, a written report will be created by week three.		
Resources Needed:		
 Laptop, Word, and notes from observations 		
Evidence of Accomplishmen	t:	

- By midterm, OTD student has compiled notes from observations and has created a needs assessment based on her onsite experience during weeks 5 and 6. OTD student will have to add to this once she observes LINKS room 4.
 By final, the OTD student has created a well written needs assessment based on the observations conducted during the first few weeks of the onsite portion of the DEx.
 Midterm: Final:

 Accomplished
 Making Progress
 Not progressing, needs attention
 Not progressing, needs attention
- Demonstrate proficiency and professionalism with the use of **WNE OTD Objective** #3: personal computers, learning platforms, zoom meetings, etc. to fully document and implement Doctoral Experiential Project for WNE as well as for members of the population served. Planned Activity or Methodology: OTD student will become accustomed to the learning platforms by week two and will be professional by being on time, having camera/mic on and using proper online etiquette. Resources Needed: Technology, e-mail, text messaging Evidence of Accomplishment: By midterm, OTD student has been on time, dressed professionally, interacts, and communicates articulately, and uses technology appropriately. By final, OTD student has demonstrated professionalism across all aspects such as learning platforms, interactions, and being on time. Midterm: Final: ☐ Accomplished ☐ Accomplished ☐ Making Progress ☐ Making Progress □ Not progressing, needs attention □ Not progressing, needs attention

WNE OTD Objective #4:	Recognize and be able to describe the diverse systems of service delivery that are most cost-effective and considerate for health, social, and educational settings, both traditional and nontraditional. Through both clinical and

reflective writing, be able to articulate a sensitivity to cultural, linguistic, and

Planned Activity or Methodology: **OTD student will deliver cost-effective services** such as educational trainings or resources to the targeted population.

other diversities and describe solutions for care disparities.

Resources Needed: • OTD student created a self-regulation toolkit			
 Evidence of Accomplishment: By midterm, OTD student has created a self-regulation toolkit for the LINKS staff to utilize. In the next few weeks, the student will present the toolkit during an in-service to the staff. By final, the OTD student has conducted in person educational self-regulation trainings with each participant. 			
Midterm:		Final:	
☐ Accomplished		\square Accomplished	
□ Making Progress		☐ Making Progress	
☐ Not progressing, needs att	tention	☐ Not progressing, needs attention	
WNE OTD Objective #5:	Demonstrate the ability to work with others to identify meaningful objectives, organize, manage, and motivate people and resources, communicate effectively, and oversee action to		
	and resources, co	mmunicate effectively, and oversee action to	
Planned Activity or Methodology: OTD student will work closely with the special education staff to organize and communicate self-regulation needs and strategies to meet the given needs.			
Resources Needed:	16 1		
OTD student created	a self-regulation to	olkit	
 Evidence of Accomplishment: By midterm, the OTD student has created a toolkit for the LINKS staff to utilize. Once fully IRB approved and pre-surveys are completed by participants, LINKS staff can utilize the toolkit. In the next few weeks, the OTD student will collaborate and communicate effective strategies to staff and students. By final, the OTD student has conducted trainings with each participant, the OTD student also sent out post surveys to each participant to complete in order to determine the effectiveness of the training program. 			
Midterm:		Final:	
☐ Accomplished		□ Accomplished	
□ Making Progress		☐ Making Progress	
☐ Not progressing, needs at	ttention	□ Not progressing, needs attention	

WNE OTD Objective Demonstrate the ability to implement in existing programs, and #6: plan for in developing programs, an occupational therapy process that is occupation-based, client-centered, culturally sensitive, and ethically appropriate. Planned Activity or Methodology: OTD student will design and plan an informational toolkit on regulation strategies that can be carried over within the special education program. Resources Needed: • Technology, CANVA, evidence-based literature, literature review Evidence of Accomplishment: By midterm, OTD student created a 60-page toolkit of resources, activities, and recommendations to improve LINKS staff members confidence with self-regulation using evidence-based practice. In the next few weeks, staff will be able to utilize the toolkits. By final, the OTD student has trained each participant on the self-regulation toolkit. The OTD student has practiced implementing strategies with the staff and students. Midterm: Final: ☐ Accomplished □ Accomplished □ *Making Progress* ☐ Making Progress □ Not progressing, needs attention □ Not progressing, needs attention

WNE OTD Objective # 7:

Document an experiential and scholarly project that reflects the literature in restorative justice/community re-entry

and use responsive, ethical methods. The scholarly process and results should be made accessible to the college and the community, especially to the population served by the project. A report of the project, presented in a professional format that others can replicate or build upon, will be evidence of accomplishment.

Planned Activity or Methodology: **OTD student will use evidenced based research to determine appropriate regulation strategies that are well documented in the literature.**

Resources Needed:

• Laptop, Wi-Fi, scholarly search engines (PubMed, AJOT, ERIC, etc.)

Evidence of Accomplishment:

• By midterm, the OTD student completed a literature review in the format of an annotated bibliography on effective regulation strategies. The OTD student also completed the toolkit with those references attached.

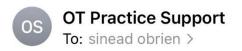
By final, OTD student organized evidenced based research to provide effective self-regulation strategies in the toolkit. OTD student has created an annotated bibliography and references for the toolkit.			
Midterm:		Final:	
□ Accomplished		□ Accomplished	
☐ Making Progress		☐ Making Progress	
□ Not progressing, needs attention		☐ Not progressing, needs attention	
WNE OTD Objective # 8:	WNE OTD Objective # 8: Through both clinical and reflective writing, be able to articulate a clear awareness of my own personal and professional strengths and boundaries identify supports and strategies for goal achievement.		
Planned Activity or Methodology: At midterm, OTD student will meet with DEx mentors to determine strengths and areas in need of support to guide the project to fruition.			
Resources Needed: • OTD student and mentors			
 Evidence of Accomplishment: By midterm, OTD student has met with mentors to discuss progress. By final, OTD student has met with mentors to discuss the outcomes of the DEx project. 			
Midterm:		Final:	
□ Accomplished		□ Accomplished	
☐ Making Progress		☐ Making Progress	
☐ Not progressing, needs attention		☐ Not progressing, needs attention	
Student Objective # 0.	Collaborate with	spacial advection staff to identify students?	
Student Objective # 9:	Collaborate with special education staff to identify students' needs and barriers associated with implementation of self-regulation strategies.		
Planned Activity or Methodology: OTD student will communicate with special education staff about the regulation needs of the students and strategies currently used that will be included in the written needs assessment.			
Resources Needed: • Observation notes			
Evidence of Accomplishme	ent:		

By midterm, OTD student has collaborated and observed each LINKS classroom to identify regulation needs. OTD student has written a needs assessment to document these needs. By final, OTD student has collaborated and collected data on the regulation needs to include in the toolkit. Examples include staff inquiring about tools for a calming corner which was included in the toolkit. Midterm: Final: ☐ Accomplished □ Accomplished ☐ Making Progress ☐ Making Progress □ Not progressing, needs attention □ Not progressing, needs attention Conduct a pre and post survey with special education staff on **Student Objective** #10: current self-regulation knowledge to identify program success. Planned Activity or Methodology: **OTD student will e-mail online pre-survey** during week 1-2 and will send a post survey during the last week of the onsite portion of the DEx to identify program outcomes. Resources Needed: Participants e-mail addresses Evidence of Accomplishment: By midterm, OTD student has not been able to send out pre-surveys due to a delay with the MOU, IRB, and SPS IRB request. OTD student hopes to have consent forms signed and surveys sent out by week 8. By final, OTD student has received pre-survey information from participants in order to collect baseline data. Midterm: Final: □ Accomplished ☐ Accomplished □ *Making Progress* ☐ Making Progress □ Not progressing, needs attention □ Not progressing, needs attention

Student Objective #11:	Develop a toolkit for special education staff that consists of regulation strategies to implement in the classroom.	
Planned Activity or Methodology: OTD student will create an on-going toolkit of strategies that will be presented to the special education staff.		
Resources Needed:		

 Canva, Internet, Evidence-based research Binders 		
Evidence of Accomplishment:		
	nree toolkits, one for each LINKS classroom.	
OTD student is working on creating an	toolkits to each LINKS classroom to utilize for	
current and future practices. Each partic		
Midterm:	Final:	
□ Accomplished	□ Accomplished	
☐ Making Progress	☐ Making Progress	
☐ Not progressing, needs attention	☐ Not progressing, needs attention	
Student Objective # 12: Provide an educational in service to special education staff on toolkit of regulation strategies.		
<u>Planned Activity or Methodology</u> : OTD student will provide an educational inservice to special education staff to clarify any questions and provide additional support by week 10.		
Resources Needed: • Toolkit		
• LINKS staff		
Liivixo stair		
Evidence of Accomplishment:		
By midterm, OTD student has created toolkits and will plan in service dates with staff fragge and the staff of the property of the staff.		
 after pre-surveys have been completed by participants. By final, OTD student has provided each participant with an in service training on the 		
self-regulation toolkits.		
Midterm:	Final:	
☐ Accomplished	□ Accomplished	
□ Making Progress	☐ Making Progress	
☐ Not progressing, needs attention	☐ Not progressing, needs attention	

Appendix D



11:02 AM

Re: OBrien-Manuscript Attached

##- Please type your reply above this line -##

Greetings!

Thank you for writing to AOTA. Staff have received your email and will reply in the order in which it was received. In the meantime, one of these articles may help address your inquiry.

Lisa Gwaltney (AOTA Customer Service)

Jul 13, 2022, 12:11 PM EDT

Hi Sinead,

Thank you for your submission. I will review it as soon as I can and get back to you just as soon as possible regarding whether it is appropriate for the *OT Practice* magazine. All the best.

Lisa

Lisa Gwaltney

Editor, OT Practice

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)

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