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Developing understandings of occupational (in)justice with occupational therapy students in a transnational project.

Abstract

This article describes an innovative transnational education project involving three European Universities, funded through ERASMUS+. One of the aims of this project was to develop and provide a curriculum to facilitate students' understanding and identification of occupational (in)justice by exposing students to marginalized people living in three European communities with differing cultural, social and political systems. Occupational injustice is an ongoing deprivation or patterns of disruption which creates health burdens, barriers to educational and social opportunities and risk to the individual's lifespan (WFOT, 2019; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). We will describe how a transnational educational collaboration offered a new way of facilitating learning of occupational (in)justice in a practical way to stimulate applying concepts to discipline specific thinking and engage students in debate about new areas of potential practice which are transformational. The educational theory underpinning the project is discussed, together with a description of how authentic learning experiences supported the development of occupational justice knowledge and justice-focused practice.

Keywords: occupational injustice, occupational science, occupational therapy, education, teaching and learning, internationalisation, transnational education project

Introduction

The education of allied health professionals worldwide is changing from local and individual perspectives to global community perspectives with responsiveness to contextual determinants of sustainable health (United Nations, 2015). Social justice is concerned with creating inclusive societies through treating people fairly and

respectfully and allocating social advantages and disadvantages that reflect people's needs and performance (Miller, 2001; Rawls, 2001). Occupational scientists believe that such approaches require that students develop skills in critical reflection, global awareness and become occupation-focused to enhance the health and wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities through meaningful occupation (Aldrich, 2015; Townsend & Polatajko, 2007; Whiteford & Hocking, 2012).

Occupational science has been defined as both a disciplinary social science and a multidisciplinary science integrating viewpoints that enhance individual disciplinary understanding (Hocking, 2000; Larson et al., 2003; Lunt, 1997; Pierce et al. 2010; Yerxa, 1991; Zemke & Clark, 1996). An occupational perspective of social justice focuses on people´s rights to participate to their potential. Therefore, occupational science is a particularly important knowledge source in occupational therapy practice, education and research. Occupational justice stems from the concept of social justice and focuses on identifying opportunities and freedoms for people to engage in occupations that have meaning and promote health (Bailliard et al. (2020). According to the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' (WFOT) human rights position statement asserts all people's occupational rights to participate in a range of occupations supporting survival, health and well-being, to choose without pressure of unfair limits on their choice and to engage freely and without risk (WFOT, 2019; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Awareness of occupational injustice within the profession, especially among pre-service professionals, must be increased in order to address occupation-focused population health (World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT], 2016).

Hocking (2019) postulated that if occupational therapy graduates were to be prepared for the challenges of modern practice in the 21st Century, they needed to work

therapeutically with individuals and to engage with diverse communities and societies to identify occupational injustice and promote occupational justice. It has been suggested that occupational therapy students can be agents of social change even before graduation and can move outside the walls of their institutions to highlight the concepts of occupational injustice and occupational rights in their local communities (Simo, 2011). Townsend and Wilcock (2004) called for educators to make justice explicit in the curriculum to develop "critical, reflexive rather than technical prescriptive practice" (p. 83). There is a call for curricula reform to include new teaching paradigms where students construct their learning in response to exposure to particular contexts (Hooper et al., 2013).

In this project staff from three European Universities (Lund University, Sweden, University of Southampton, United Kingdom and National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland) collaborated using a transnational learning approach to develop students' understanding of complex concepts such as occupational (in)justice. It was important that students were exposed to these concepts in a planned manner and given opportunities to explore both familiar and unfamiliar experiences at home and abroad. Based on Leask's (2015) interpretation of an internationalised curriculum, the team shared a vision to create learning experiences for all students to foster deeper knowledge and advanced occupational therapy skills "within the context of the different cultures of knowing, doing and being" (p. 3). One aim of this experience was to enhance students' abilities to recognise, understand and appreciate differing cultural perspectives and then apply occupational science principles in service of occupational justice (Leask, 2015). This will allow graduates to work effectively with occupational injustices within their own diverse communities, whilst also offering opportunities to

work across borders using occupation to aid social transformation to solve global and local occupational injustice challenges (Pollard, 2018).

To do this effectively, students needed opportunities to view the world differently, either by challenging the familiar or seeking to understand the unfamiliar. Such learning approaches draw on theories of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991). A transformative educational experience must include individual experience, a holistic orientation, an awareness of context combined with authentic practice, to enable students to participate in critical reflection and dialogue (Taylor, 2009). A transnational educational experience provides such an opportunity as students engage in a unique, repertoire of learning opportunities at multiple time points and in various contexts (Timmermanns & Meyer, 2014). This perspective informed the development of a European curriculum over the 3-year period affording both staff and students opportunities to explore, discuss and debate local issues within a European framework and understand issues in a more global way (Webb, 2005).

Facilitating understanding in occupational (in)justice:

The educationalists from the participating universities agreed that occupational(in)justice was difficult for students to grasp as the knowledge is challenging conceptually and requires students to draw on tacit knowledge to make the previously unrecognised known (Perkins, 2006). This is complicated further as students struggle to understand the competing conceptual frameworks that address different aspects of occupational engagement. For example, students considering the biological determinants may not initially consider the socio-economic aspects and their relevance to participation and engagement in occupation (Fortune & Kennedy-Jones, 2014) which provides the foundation for engaging with occupational (in)justice. In addition, occupational (in)justice is a multifactorial concept as it relates to complex social issues

situated in historical, political and economic contexts that impact the occupational lives of individuals and groups. This wide and all-encompassing perspective can create tensions in facilitating education around occupational (in)justice for students, who can struggle to address the needs and desires of individuals who are part of communities but whose individual requirements may differ from those of their communities.

Despite commitments by occupational therapy professional associations, educationalists and theorists to move the profession toward practice that critiques and responds to the societal and structural inequalities that affect health and occupational participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014) some educational curricula, including the universities participating in this project, were concerned that they continued to have an individualistic, medical or body-centric focus (Hocking & Townsend, 2015; Wilding & Whiteford, 2008). Research shows that increasing the emphasis on human rights and occupational justice in curricula can have a profound and transformative effect, with students reporting that they were more skilled in advocating for marginalised populations and more empowered to be agents of social change as graduates (Crawford et al., 2017).

The team decided that transformational learning opportunities were needed to embed the importance of occupation to health by identifying the occupational injustices experienced by groups and communities. While some have argued that this type of transformation can only be achieved fully through experience in practice education or post-education practice (Nicola-Richmond et al., 2018; Nicola-Richmond et al., 2019), these experiences do not always include a focus on occupational injustice or occupational rights. This can lead to disparate experiences across students and challenges with linking theory to practice with the implication that conceptual thinking is only done at the university (Fortune & Kennedy-Jones, 2014).

Transformative authentic service-learning

Transformative learning is a subset of adult learning theory and is grounded in constructivism. It describes the process of paradigmatic shifts or perspective transformation in students thinking, enabling students to develop or reshape their perspectives through their experiences (Mezirow, 2003). Perspective transformation is the process of becoming aware of one's assumptions and values and is triggered by a disorientating dilemma with the aim of reconfiguring students' thinking to allow an integrative perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Pedagogically, transformational learning occurs when students are presented with an alternative point of view.

The Making Internationalisation a Reality for Occupational Therapy Students (MIROTS) project provided this alternative view by using experiential, collaborative, active service learning focused on complex real-world problems of marginalized people in the community (Lombardi, 2007; Maina, 2005 Meyers & Nulty, 2009). For example, one group of students heard narratives of members of the Traveller community in Ireland and related these to the concepts of social exclusion and occupational injustice. Engaging with an ill-defined problem, using sustained investigation, multiple sources and perspectives, collaboration, reflection, interdisciplinary and assessment created an authentic learning experience (Lombardi, 2007).

Transformation in learning occurred through facilitation of reflection on the content of the experience (what they thought and felt), the process (a personal analysis of their assumptions and values) and premise (an awareness of what they perceived) (Taylor, 2009). Students reflected on their learning and compared this to the social, cultural and political systems in their country. Transformative thinking was developed through the holistic approach of 'see-feel-change,' and involved changing students' understanding of the meaning, reality and consequence of occupational injustice to

people's lives (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). Therefore, the individual participating universities agreed that they needed to work collaboratively to address occupational injustice and this informed the development of materials within the 3 year MIROTS project.

The MIROTS Project

Facilitating learning to support and deepen understanding of occupational injustice was an important and evolving aspect of the MIROTS project in order to allow the team to meet the overall aims of the project. In 2016 the University of Southampton, National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway) and Lund University formed a strategic partnership funded through ERASMUS+ with the aim of internationalising their curricula to enhance their educational provision by supporting the development of intercultural skills and professional identity of occupational therapy students to better support the increasingly diverse populations within their own countries. The project facilitated opportunities for undergraduate occupational therapy students to engage in international discussions with other undergraduate students, qualified occupational therapists, service users and community services. In total, six hundred and forty-three students and 72 community partners engaged in the MIROTS project. In the third and final year of the project a further three European universities (University of Vic, Spain, Riga Stradins University, Latvia and Bournemouth University, UK) joined the partnership.

The main educational goals were to develop a deeper understanding of occupational (in)justice within the host institutions' own local community as well as the visiting European institutions' local communities while acknowledging and seeking understanding of diversity and culture in daily practice and the professional responsibility to create inclusive societies (Kinébanian & Stomph, 2009). Secondary goals were to experience the impact of different government policies and subsequent

statutory and non-statutory services on the occupational lives of European citizens either first-hand or through discussion with peers

MIROTS offered two educational experiences per year: an international visit involving cohorts of students and a virtual collaborative online learning activity. The learning opportunities of each exchange were crafted with consideration to the unique academic, cultural and health landscapes of the host country. In the first exchange at Lund University the focus of the exchange was on the development of new and insightful occupational therapy theoretical models such as the ValMO (Persson et al., 2001). In the UK, the exchange focused on occupational therapy in new and emerging areas and at NUI Galway on the history of service learning and co-production and listening to marginalised voices. The structure and layout of the exchanges are given in Table 1.

MIROTS used service learning to ensure that students experienced the real-life challenges that people face in their lives so they could reflect and experience a transformational change in perspective. In these authentic learning experiences, first students worked on their own investigating occupational injustice in unfamiliar communities and the loss of occupational rights for assigned marginalised group, while identifying the potential for occupational therapy and advocacy. They then worked with students from other European countries to compare how the occupational needs of the marginalized group and communities could be addressed. This offered a further layer of complexity which required students to address and navigate cultural issues to enhance understanding of how occupational (in)justice is experienced in different cultures and the solutions that may be offered.

Collaboration was maintained through online transnational exchanges that took place between the collaborating institutions later in the year. Because of differences

between curricula and intakes in each university some students participated in both the online and international exchanges, while others participated in one only. Therefore, it was critical that the online learning experiences were equally rich, provocative and transformational. Students partnered with local organisations in their own countries and collaborated via video-conferencing weekly to explore, debate and critique issues facing groups and individuals experiencing occupational injustice. By working together virtually in a community of practice across programmes and countries, the students experienced the collaborative awareness of the broader view of occupation and participation in society as a right (WFOT, 2019).

ERASMUS+ funding supported all students, regardless of background. Those with social or economic disadvantage were supported either to travel or, if they could not travel, to engage virtually by linking with a local organisation supported by staff at home. All resources were shared with students online and included key reading, videos, presentations, material created by people with lived experience of marginalisation (such as blogs or podcasts) and lectures. Students were educated in the use of specialist software for making podcasts (in 2018) and were guided in the use of video-conferencing for their group-based work. A complete guide to the learning and teaching resources created for the MIROTS project is available to educators interested in replicating this project at (https://libguides.lub.lu.se/MIROTS).

MIROTS service learning experiences

The core concept of occupational justice linked all learning experiences and via service learning ensured that students could understand the "real-world" application of occupational justice. In advance of each exchange, local and transnational examples of populations experiencing occupational injustice were identified. In 2016, the host institution Lund University, Sweden identified projects that facilitated collaboration

with 'real partners' to address occupational justice issues affecting people in Sweden, the UK and Ireland. Students visited these organisations, interviewed staff, volunteers and/or service users and then worked in groups to identify the occupational justice issues facing that population. Learning opportunities such as these exposed some students to 'alien' or 'troublesome' knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003 Timmermans & Meyer, 2019) which they were required to traverse to reach new, more nuanced understandings of how occupation is shaped and constrained encouraging the emerging professional to act differently in future practice (Timmermans & Meyer, 2019).

One project aimed to explore the occupational needs of unaccompanied refugee children and adults in Sweden to identify a potential role for occupational therapy with the refugee population and to understand the process of transition from refugee to asylum seeker to Swedish resident. This was a timely project considering resettlement figures of refugees, which reached a historically high level in 2015, with Sweden receiving 162,000 applications for asylum (Migrationsverket, 2020; Statista, 2019). Current global estimates state that by 2020 there will be more than 1.44 million people seeking asylum from home countries due to war, conflict or persecution (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [UNHC], 2019).

Students worked together to develop and carry out semi-structured interviews with a migration officer, an employee of a refugee camp for unaccompanied children and three adult refugees attending a local meeting point service. They used an occupational lens to frame their enquiry. Questions included "What did you/they do before you came to Sweden"?" "How many occupations do you/they have during the day?" "What do you/they find meaningful and how does it affect your/their wellbeing?" They found that there was significant occupational deprivation which led to destructive occupations e.g. drug taking, self-harm and

that the loss of work impacted on roles and routines. These results reflect the themes described in the literature on the occupational experiences of forced migrants; occupational deprivation, imbalance, the challenges of adaptation and change, the effort to maintain and re-establish identity and plan for the future (Huot et al., 2016). Students then produced abstracts of their work and presented at a streamed conference to all partner institutions. This allowed students to illuminate and sit with the lived-experience of people and communities living on the socio-political, economic and cultural margins of society, affording opportunities to demonstrate agency, openness, commitment, responsiveness and resourcefulness (Creek & Cook, 2017; Fortune & Kennedy Jones, 2014).

A novel feature of the MIROTS project was the use of technology to internationalise the classroom and collaborate in service learning across countries. In the Spring semesters of 2017, 2018 and 2019, students from the three universities collaborated for a period of five weeks using video-conferencing technology. In each country, students engaged with a local community organisation or topic, compared health policies, occupational justice issues, potential roles for occupational therapists and presented their information together in a web-based conference. One successful example was a project exploring occupational justice for young carers. Children and adolescents who care for a family member with a disability are a hidden and vulnerable group (Stamatopoulos, 2015) and, while the exact prevalence is likely underestimated, may include between 2% and 8% of children and young adults in industrialised countries (Leu & Becker, 2017). This does not take into account the many young people who care for a family member who has not yet presented to any service (Moore & McArthur, 2007). Occupational

therapists may work with the person with a disability and encounter a young carer in this way, but rarely work with them directly.

Over three years, students partnered with local community organisations who support young carers and met in a series of video-conferences to discuss the occupational justice issues facing this marginalised group. In 2019, the University of Latvia in Riga, the University of Vic, Spain and Bournemouth University, UK also collaborated. A pan-European perspective on the experiences of young carers was gained by students through a variety of activities which included site visits, community-based learning, self-directed research and discussion-based learning. The virtual online collaboration demonstrated the potential for technology to assist students in collaboration and presentation of academic work. The results of their efforts were presented in a web-conference streamed across the six sites simultaneously. This demonstrated the potential for sustainable, authentic outcomes in internationalised learning experiences.

Discussion

Transnational education

Much has been written about the transformative effect of international placement for health sciences students (Dass-Brailsford & Serrano, 2010), particularly for students from Global North placed in countries in Global South. The opportunities for increased professional and personal development are reported (e.g. Barker et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2017) as are the associated challenges such as working in unfamiliar cultural contexts (e.g. Crabtree et al., 2015). There has been criticism of international placement experiences in healthcare, particularly in relation to inequity of opportunity. Students from the Global North experience the vast majority of placements and, within this, it is only those who are financially stable who can afford these opportunities (King

et al., 2010). In addition to this inequality, it is not clear whether there are impacts on cultural competence (Razack, 2002) and awareness of occupational injustices. Medical volunteering placements have attracted similar criticisms (Bauer, 2017) where concerns around paternalistic approaches (McLennan, 2014), ethical double standards (Bauer, 2017), short time-frames and cultural and language barriers that could lead to incorrect or inappropriate treatment have been identified (Wall, 2011).

Student mobility in the context of international study abroad opportunities, including Erasmus, are considered key to fuelling the global labour market, enhancing human capital and developing student self-efficacy (Bridger, 2015). As with the barriers to international work and voluntary placements, study abroad opportunities are very difficult for the increasing number of students who have home responsibilities, part-time jobs or rental agreements (Fielden et al., 2007). Other students are reluctant to engage in these opportunities as they are unsure about the quality of the academic experience (Fielden et al., 2007). Having shorter mobility options or participating in virtual mobility can increase participation and reduce the inequalities associated with traditional exchange opportunities (Sweeney, 2012). There is some evidence that these options may be beneficial but very little evaluation on the impact of these types of exchanges has been completed.

A transnational project, such as MIROTS, differs from international placement opportunities in a number of key ways. Education across borders for cohorts of students to support the conceptual understanding of occupational justice, development of cultural sensitivities and professional identity in student occupational therapists was delivered. The project provided opportunity for brief period of mobility for all students, regardless of their background. The focus of the exchange was not on delivering healthcare or learning clinical skills but on education.

"Internationalisation at home" is another alternative to outward mobility. These activities are broad but refer to any activity with an international focus that happens on the home campus (Knight, 1994). Online international collaboration is a method of "internationalisation at home" that has been used to provide students with international opportunities without travel. These approaches have been used in health sciences and occupational therapy education in the past five years (e.g. Aldrich, 2015; Zadnik et al., 2019) and are an equitable way of providing students from global north and global south with international learning opportunities (Aldrich & Peters, 2019; Sood et al., 2014). These online collaborations offer a transnational perspective on how to address issues of occupational global health concerns and societal reorganisation resulting in occupational injustice.

In 2013, the European Union (EU) called for education to be unlocked through innovative learning and teaching activities that exploit new digital technologies (European Commission, 2013). The project through the 'virtual classroom' developed projects that were supported by reliable digital platforms and offered opportunities to connect the classrooms transnationally. Staff and students learned about these technologies and, using them, supported learning that drew on authentic, serviced based and international pedagogies to allow students to learn from and with one another to examine the global challenges of marginalised groups who experience occupational injustice and find 'glocal' (combing global and local considerations) solutions (Pollard, 2018). Healthcare students will work in a glocalised world (Garcia-Ruiz, 2016) and so it is imperative that they have the opportunities to examine the opportunities and trials that may accompany this.

Challenges and limitations of transnational education

The critiques of occupational science include that it is informed by the religious,

economic, political and educational ideas of a Western, Anglophone, capitalist, industrial and Christian view of reality (Kantartzis & Molineux, 2011). This project may invite similar criticism and not be considered to be a truly international perspective as the issues that the students were exposed to were those prevalent in Europe. Hence, it would have benefited further from including countries from outside the Anglophone sphere, from diverse cultures and social systems (Magalhães et al., 2018). However, the authentic learning opportunities designed for the project exposed students to different healthcare, social care, political, historical and economic systems allowing them to compare and contrast different perspectives and solutions to occupational (in)justice ensuring that their learning experience was emotionally and cognitively demanding and ultimately a powerful learning experience.

This project attracted Erasmus funding and some elements are not sustainable without funding. Whilst the international five-day exchange was evaluated positively by students and staff and allowed students to be immersed in the structural, historical, economic, political and cultural aspects of occupational (in)justice, the costs associated with this activity are not sustainable. The opportunities to link virtually offer ongoing opportunities to address the complexities of occupational(in)justice in a meaningful manner and can be done at little to no cost. This offers more flexibility and can assist with overcoming the challenges of arranging face-to-face contact in curricula that are overloaded and differ substantially in the arrangement of materials and content.

Whilst opportunities to work with other students transnationally has novel appeal the practicalities are numerous. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the project was conducted in English; this increased the complexity for students from non-English speaking countries. Curriculum designers of transnational learning should ensure that adequate time is given to allow students to work in a second language.

Secondly, the timing of learning activities was challenging as these had to be integrated into numerous crowded timetables. Thirdly, for projects to be meaningful and create real opportunities to address tacit knowledge and transform learning, they should be authentic and the expectations of the students in the learning activity as closely aligned in each institution as is possible. When students engaged at differing levels with groups and communities this created anxiety and students focussed on the process rather than the learning opportunity e.g. if one institution required the students to work with the group for several weeks as opposed to a single visit. Finally, when working on virtual collaboration tasks the focus of the investigation and group / community needed to be consistent to allow students to compare and contrast social, economic, political and cultural contexts of the occupational (in)justice.

Limitations of the project and recommendations for future:

Annual student feedback was gained on the experience, which enabled ongoing review and refinement of the exchange experiences. However, delays in obtaining ethical approval simultaneously across the three institutions means that these data are not available for publication. Full formal evaluation, embedded in a project from the start, will be important in any future international learning experiences. Future research to ascertain if graduates identify occupational injustice and occupational rights and are advocators for change within their current work practice is indicated.

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Conclusion

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This project aimed to expose students to new cultures, languages and groups of people in different countries to create transformational changes in their knowledge and understanding of the impact of social, political, religion and culture on the occupational health and well-being. Whilst limited to a European experience, the project presented students with disorientating dilemmas, resulting in critical reflection and analysis of

their experience using an occupational science lens. Working collaboratively enabled them to explore similarities and differences in services, structures and approaches to marginalised groups and to identify the opportunities for occupational therapy practice and advocacy both locally and internationally.

Acknowledgements

Table 1. Structure of the MIROTS international and virtual exchanges

International exchange	Virtual exchange
Sweden -2016 UK -2017 Ireland -2018	Held online each year in February-March
Prior to the exchange: All students had introductory lectures. They had common reading, watched a bespoke video about occupational justice and applied their new knowledge to a health-related case study	
During the exchange: - Orientation and welcome to the country - Keynote address and welcoming lectures - Students allocated to groups - Each group went on visit(s) to a local community partner organisation involved in the support or advocacy for marginalised populations or people with particular healthcare needs. - Students worked in groups for 3 days exploring the occupational justice issues facing that local population and debating how barriers to justice could be overcome. - Each exchange had a tangible outcome for the local population or the	During the exchange: - Students allocated to transnational groups - The exchange took place one day a week for 4-5 weeks - Groups were facilitated to meet virtually using video-calling - Students were allocated a community partner organisation. Organisations met common needs in the three countries e.g.

profession. For example: a podcast raising awareness of social justice issues or a clear protocol for how occupational therapy could contribute to meeting the needs of this population - The week included cultural and social events to help students bond as a transnational group - Students who could not travel were facilitated to link with the groups via video-calling - Closing conference	mental health, older adults - Students went on one or more visits - Common issues and differences in global approaches to this health need were debated virtually - Closing conference.

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