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Occupational therapy burnout in school-based setting

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Doctoral Project

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY BURNOUT IN SCHOOL-BASED SETTING

by

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B.S., Vanguard University of Southern California, 2016
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my family for their love and support throughout my academics and educational career. This would not be possible without them. I would also like to dedicate this project to the teachers and school professionals I have met along my journey. There have been many changes in school systems, however these professionals continue to work and support students for the love of education. My hope is that we all collaborate and continue to educate others to further foster success in our students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will forever look at this time in my life as a very rewarding and challenging experience. During this time I moved, started a new job and had many life changing experiences. I cannot thank my family and friends enough for encouraging me to continue. I am so grateful for their love and support.

To my academic mentor, Angela Ursillo for her guidance throughout my project. You were always available to meet with me to either work to help me with this project or for emotional support. You challenged me to look deeper in the research to not only truly understand the challenges in this setting but the potential solutions. Thank you for your patience and guidance.

To my academic peer mentors Suzanne Nel and Jamie Lief. Thank you for your flexibility with schedules and meetings. Your feedback and support were vital to me throughout this process. You are both wonderful mentors and therapists. I am so happy for you as well and know you both will accomplish great things in the future.

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To my dog Luna, who kept me company and was with me through all the changes in life.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY BURNOUT IN SCHOOL-BASED SETTING

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ABSTRACT

The COVID 19 pandemic posed a great challenge to the education system in the United States. Although in person learning resumed, many challenges in the transition were observed in the school systems. Reports of high teacher turnover and burnout among school staff were reported in the media and new articles (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. 2021;Sunawan et al, 2021). Occupational therapists were also reporting difficulty managing job burnout due to a multitude of factors such as high caseloads, lack of school support and role ambiguity (Goffredo et al., 2022; Poulsen et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2022). Research focusing on school based occupational therapy burnout is scarce, however what has been published discusses a need to assist this population in the school systems. This issue has led to the creation of the *Ready for School* online program.

The *Ready for School* online program is designed to assist school based occupational therapists, with 0–8 years of experience in the Southern California region, gain tools and access to manage the many factors that lead to burnout in the school based setting. The program uses evidence-based research to target the main factors that lead to burnout and create a support system to allow new and novice school based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) to thrive. OTPs have the important role of supporting students through their educational journey, therefore it is paramount to properly prepare and equip them and their mental health needs.

PREFACE

I had the unique experience of being a school based occupational therapist during the transition to in person learning during the COVID 19 pandemic. My decision to focus on this topic came from watching my friends and colleagues work hard and persevere during a time of uncertainty. As a novice practitioner myself, I personally felt and saw firsthand the areas that needed to be addressed to improve the school environment for therapists.

Many teachers transferred or changed professions during my time as a school-based therapist. Other therapists shared their experiences and discussed their love for the profession and students, but the need for more support. I also cared deeply for my students and found immense joy in watching them succeed and reach their goals. However, I also understood the difficulty of continuously performing the job of a school based occupational therapist with few support systems in place.

My hope is that this project serves as a support piece to school based occupational therapy practitioners. I hope that they continue to do the job they love with proper connections and relationships built through advocacy and collaboration. The tools discussed in the program are to not only combat burnout but to build skills that can allow all school-based practitioners to advocate for support structures to continue to perform the job they love.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AOTA	American Occupational Therapy Association
ASHA.....	American Speech and Hearing Association
BU.....	Boston University
COTA.....	Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant
COVID 19.....	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DRI.....	Disability Rights International
IDEA.....	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP.....	Individualized Education Program
IRB	Institutional Review Boards
OTAC.....	Occupational Therapy Association of California
OTP	Occupational Therapy Practitioner
OTPF.....	Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process 4 th Edition
RCT.....	Randomized Control Trial
RTI	Response to Intervention
SBOT	School Based Occupational Therapy Practitioners
SPSS.....	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

GLOSSARY

Burnout – “the relationship between an individual and their job within the dimensions of emotional exhaustion, inefficacy and depersonalization” (Freudenberger, 1974)

Extrinsic Factors – actors that foster motivation such as achievement of job goals, supervision and feed, and social supports (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p.14)

Intrinsic Factors – Factors that foster employee growth, learning and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p.14)

Mindfulness – “Awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145)

Response to Intervention (RTI) – a 3-tier system with the purpose of addressing children's learning and behavior needs in the general education setting (Tools to Grow, 2023)

Workload Model – “all activities in which a school-based practitioner engages in that support students directly and indirectly” (Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020)

CHAPTER ONE – Introduction

According to a study by Katsiana & Galanakis (2021), the role of school based occupational therapy is to help students engage in roles, habits and routines in the school setting. This includes addressing fine motor and visual motor deficits, providing sensory strategies to assist in classroom participation and providing consultation services on these needs. School based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) play a role in supporting and educating teachers and parents as students continue through their educational career.

The introduction of occupational therapists into the school setting began with the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This act required occupational therapy (OT) to be provided in the public-school setting, mandated free and appropriate education for children 3–21 years of age and established OT in the early intervention sector as well (Fleming-Castaldy, 2019). Since then, there have been pieces of legislation that have expanded the role of OT in schools, the most notable being the Individuals with Disabilities Act, which identified OT as a related service under Part B (Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA); Case Smith & Clifford O’Brien, 2014).

After COVID 19, a trend in increasing caseload and burnout were noted among therapists. A study conducted by Seruya and Garfinkel (2020) highlighted increasing caseload and lack of administrative support as barriers towards implementation of workload models in order to further support OTPs. Currently, there have been a few studies that focus on school based occupational therapy burnout and support to prevent it. Other studies have focused on different groups in the school system and their level of stress and burnout returning to work after the pandemic. A study conducted by Ozamiz-

Etxebarria et al. (2021), discussed the level of stress and depression faced by teachers after returning to in person learning. Studies exploring the burnout level of school counselors have also been reviewed (Sunawan et al, 2021). Farquharson et al. (2022), also explored school-based speech pathologists and the decrease of job satisfaction after returning back from online learning. Increased caseload and years of experience were highlighted as contributing factors. With strong evidence depicting stressors in the school system among school personnel, it is important to investigate how school based occupational therapy practitioners are adjusting to the return to in person instructions and burnout levels.

Importance of the Problem

Studies focusing on pediatric occupational therapy burnout, have highlighted the risk pediatric OTPs face due to high caseload and work environment (Shin et al., 2022). The same study discusses the effects of burnout on quality of care and effectiveness of interventions. The principles in which pediatric OTs challenges have been investigated, can also be applied to school-based occupational therapy and the difficulties facing the profession in the post-Covid era. Although there is no state cap on caseload numbers of school based occupational therapists, Spencer et al. (2006), discussed the average caseload for a school-based therapist to be approximately 44 students. Since then, studies have reported growing caseload numbers and the struggle OTPs face to keep up with their caseload, and also perform other duties on campus, such as providing further education to teachers (Truong & Hodgetts, 2017). These increases in stressors can result in burnout and school-based OTPs ultimately leaving the profession. The Bureau of

Labor Statistics (2022) has recorded only a small drop in therapists in the school based setting from 2019 to 2021, however it is important to examine the issue in order to prepare incoming school based therapists with the tools needed to succeed in this setting. By not addressing burnout in the school setting, students, teachers and parents can all be affected by its consequences.

Rogers and Donson (1988) identify burnout as a “job related condition involving feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (p #1). Chronic stress falls under the umbrella of mental health and can lead to other mental health issues such as memory problems and anxiety and depression (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). According to the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process 4th edition (OTPF), occupational therapists work to enhance participation of individuals in home, school or community settings. Occupational therapists work with client factors which include specific mental functions that are responsible for emotional and stress regulation. The specific mental functions fall under a client factor, which allows for occupational therapy intervention. Occupational therapy is equipped with knowledge to address the issue of school based occupational therapy burnout by providing strategies and solutions to address the challenges faced in this setting.

Explanation of the Cause of the Problem

Ambiguity of the role of OT

COVID 19 had a significant impact on the education structure in America. School based occupational therapy practitioners were forced to deal with the shifting landscape

of their setting. After being required to move to online learning, therapists were required to quickly learn a new skill set in order to reach their students (Dahl-Popolizio, 2020). However, since returning to in person learning, therapists continue to struggle with delineating their role in the school team. Discrepancies in understanding the role of OT services in the school setting has added another layer of complications to the field (Bolton & Plattner, 2020). Although teachers have expressed interest in learning more about the role, barriers such as caseload and time seem to be a hindrance (Edick et al, 2022).

Increasing Caseloads

A unique aspect about school based occupational therapy is the multiple schools a therapist can be required to service. There is no legislative cap on how many schools a therapist is responsible for service, which creates the stressors of traveling to multiple locations as well as managing an increasing caseload. Stephenson (2019), discusses the increased demands placed on school based OT and the risk of burnout, citing frequent high caseload numbers as a source of risk. The study also discusses the recent push to transition to a workload model rather than a caseload model. However, lack of support from administration appears to be a significant barrier.

Administrative Support

Current research evidence focusing on school based occupational therapy discusses the push towards a workload model over a caseload model. Seruya & Garfinkel, (2020) define workload model as including all activities school based

occupational therapists participate in throughout the day. The current caseload model only takes into account the amount of students on a caseload, however fails to recognize the other duties school OTPs complete. This study concluded that although many school based occupational therapists would like to transition to a workload model, lack of support from administration acts as a barrier for this change. Stephenson, (2019), also discusses this desire to transition to a workload model, and how the lack of support from administration can ultimately lead to burnout in school-based therapists.

Proposed Intervention to Address Problem

Online Burnout Training Course

Occupational therapists and certified occupational therapy assistants (COTAs) are the main target audience of this program. Secondary audiences include teachers and administrators. The purpose of this online course will be to support occupational therapy practitioners with the challenges they face in the school system and how to put in place structures to support themselves in order to best service their students.

Focus on Burnout Prevention Strategies

The online course will feature teaching tools for mindfulness, caseload management and tools to educate others on the role of OT. According to the literature, these factors play a role in creating support systems for school-based practitioners and combating burnout (Aryankhesal et al. 2019; Persia & Carroll, 2023). Other areas will include advocacy in order to help school-based OTPs share needs for resources and support in their school settings.

Networking

Occupational therapy practitioners will also have access to a network with other school-based professionals in order to share ideas and strategies to assist in the challenging setting of schools. The literature identified the need for support structures to act as buffers to the demands of the job environment (Demerouti, 2015). Through the course, school-based practitioners will be able to form relationships with others and create professional networks to assist with these challenges. A website will also be created to accompany the course to access supporting materials.

Conclusion

School based occupational therapy practitioners have an important role in supporting student learning and education. The current trend in leaving the school setting, due to increased demands and burnout, can negatively impact students who require support in motor skills and sensory regulation. It is important to support school-based OTPs in order to advance student success.

CHAPTER TWO – Project Theoretical and Evidence Base

Overview of the Problem

The Covid 19 pandemic posed many issues to school-based therapists of all settings. School based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) in particular, were challenged with addressing fine motor, visual motor and sensory concerns over telehealth platforms. Prior to Covid 19, school-based OTPs faced issues with identifying their role on the school team and growing caseload numbers (Truong & Hodgetts, 2017). The struggle of clearly identifying their roles on the school team continued once in-person learning resumed.

School based OTPs and other school professionals are now experiencing an increased amount of burnout in the school setting, with growing numbers of school professionals leaving the setting, including teachers and counselors (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al.,2021;Sunawan et al, 2021). As a result, students are at risk of limited services on campus to assist with learning.

Theoretical Base

The Job Demands Resource Model

In 2007, two researchers created the job demand resource model (JDR). In their article “The Job Demands Resource Model: State of the Art”, Arnold B. Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti discuss in detail the inner components of the model. Job demands resource theory depicted in figure 1, illustrates the relationship between job demands and resources. In this model, job demands refer to those physical, psychological, social and organizational aspects of the job that require effort. Although job demands are not always

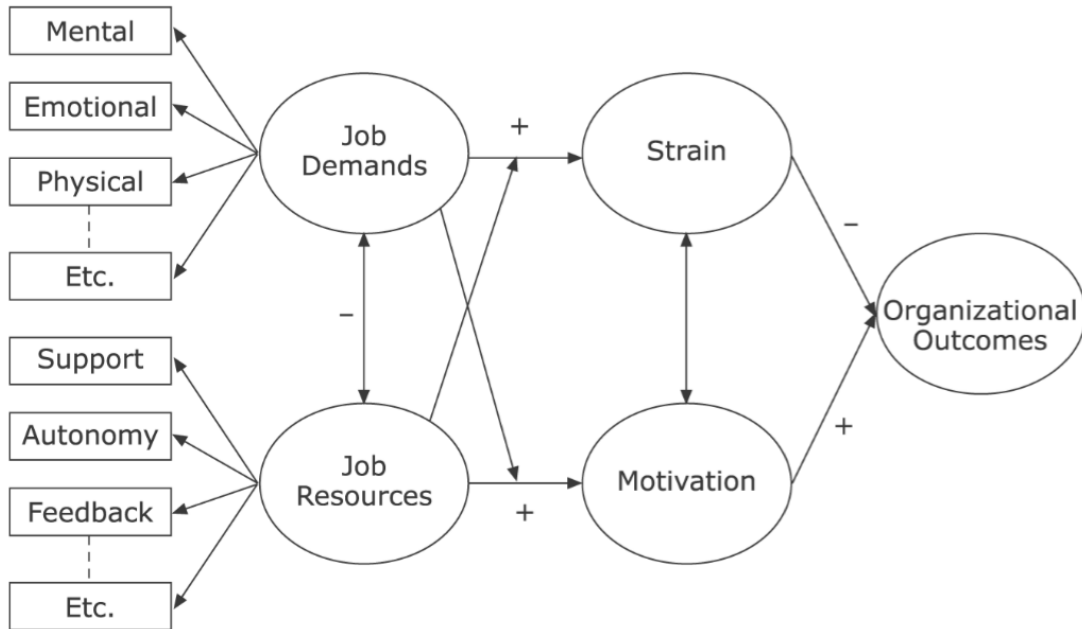
negative, they can become job stressors when they require high effort in which the employee is not adequately prepared.

The job resources include physical, social or organizational aspects of the job such as personal growth, development, learning and also achievement of work goals. Job resources can be both intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic refers to fostering growth and learning development. Intrinsic motivation can fulfill aspects such as autonomy, competence and relatedness. Extrinsic factors focus on the environment which can be support from colleges, proper feedback from superiors, and achievement of resources to foster engagement.

Bakker and Demerouti (2007), proposes that job resources are a buffer of job demands and strain including burnout:

When both job demands and resources are high, we expect employees to develop strain and motivation while when both are low we expect the absence of strain and motivation. Consequently, the high demands-low resources condition should result in high strain and low motivation while the low demands-high resources condition should have as a consequence low strain and high motivation (p.22)

In relation to the problem, the literature is depicting high demands for school-based practitioners without resources to buffer the demands. The *Ready for School* program is meant to be a resource to assist with decreasing job stress levels and increasing outcomes.

Figure 2.1*Illustration of the Job Demands Resource Model***Research Questions**

Five research questions were developed to investigate the relationship between school based occupational therapy and burnout.

1. Is there evidence that decreased work life balance leads to increased burnout in school based OT?
2. Is there evidence that the Response to Intervention (RTI) system can help reduce caseload/workload burden?
3. Is there evidence that teacher or school wide training affects school based OT caseload?
4. Is there evidence that a lack of administration or teacher support leads to more time educating staff and caseload numbers?

5. Is there evidence that role confusion in school-based OT leads to a lack of teacher and admin support?

Summary of Evidence

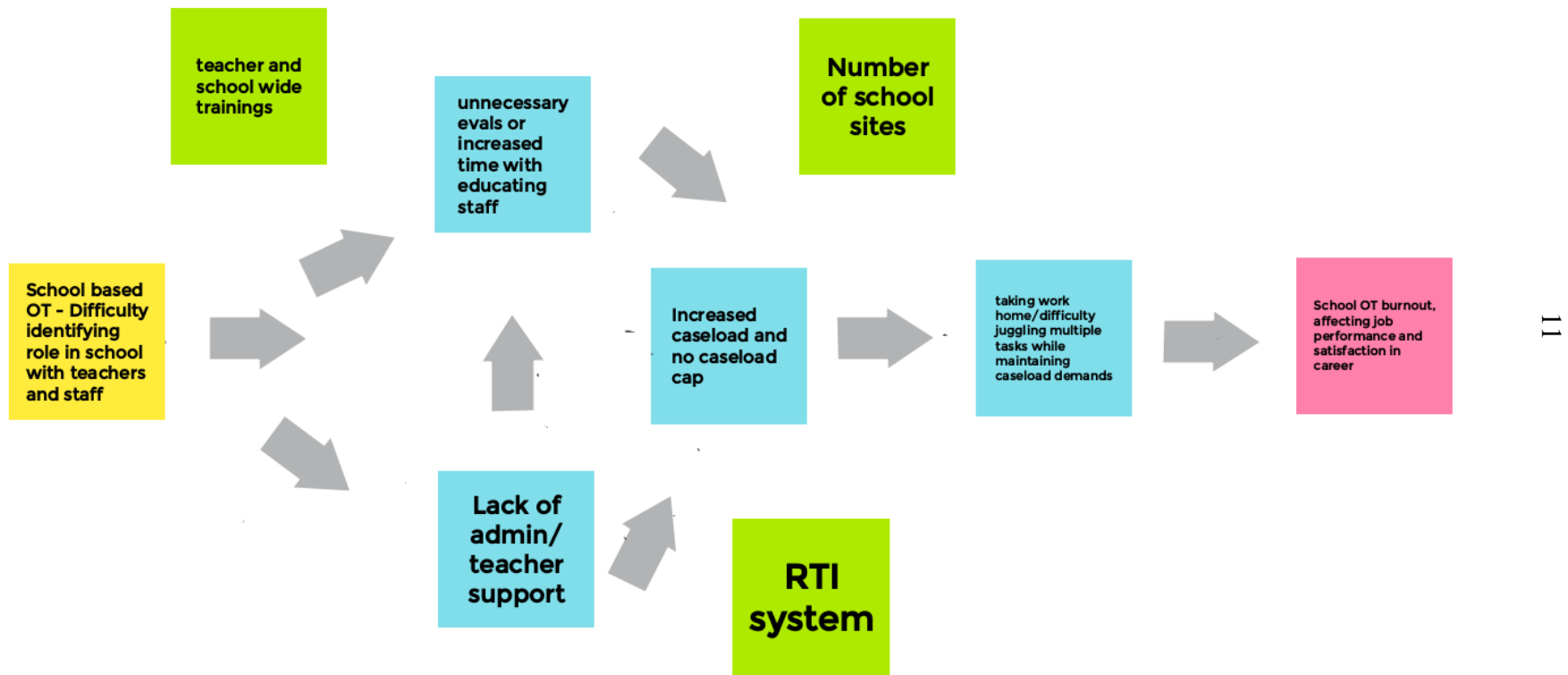
The explanatory visual pathway in figure 2.2, depicts the relationship between the factors and moderators that contribute to school based occupational therapy burnout. Research questions were used to guide the search.

Evaluations and Time Educating Staff

The problem of “identifying the role of school based occupational therapists”, is highlighted in yellow and placed at the beginning of the explanatory model. Mediators are identified in blue. From the problem, two factors occur simultaneously. The first factor is “unnecessary eval and increased time educating staff”. This is a direct consequence of not having defined roles on the school team. If teachers and staff are unfamiliar with what OTPs do in the school system, teachers may inadvertently submit referrals for OT services that do not fall under the occupational therapy domain. When this happens, an eval will be done despite the student perhaps not qualifying for OT services.

Figure 2.2

Visual of the Problem



Lack of Administrative/Teacher Support

The other factor that happens is “lack of admin/ teacher support”, also due to decreased role clarification. When administration and teachers do not understand the role of OTPs, supplying OTPs with appropriate tools may not be seen as a priority. Also, teachers and administration may not have a response to challenges facing school-based OTPs, such as an increase in unnecessary evals or lack of tools. This relationship is depicted on the model with an arrow from “lack of admin/teacher support” to “unnecessary evals.”

Increase in Caseload

In this setting, if there are “unnecessary evals” and “lack of admin/teacher support”, these factors can then lead to an “increase in caseload”. Under the California legislation, only speech and language pathologists are specifically given a caseload cap under Sec 56363.3, 2007 (Title 2. Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007). Physical therapy and occupational therapy are not listed in the bill and therefore, are not considered for caseload caps. With an increasing caseload and no cap, this can lead to school-based OTPs taking work home and having difficulty with work life balance. This ultimately can lead to the outcome highlighted in pink, school-based burn out and decreased job performance and satisfaction.

Moderators

The model also highlights moderators in green that can influence the magnitude of the factors. The first moderator is “teacher and school wide training”. If teachers and staff are trained on the role of OT in the school setting, this can prevent unnecessary

evals and increase support from admin and staff. The second moderator is the “Response to Intervention (RTI) System”, which is a 3-tier system with the purpose of addressing children's learning and behavior needs in the general education setting (Tools to Grow, 2023). The RTI system is a way to grade challenges with students and provide strategies before referring to special education services. By implementing the RTI system, children who require minor interventions can stay within the general education setting and prevent an influx into the special education arena, therefore reducing OT caseload burden.

The last moderator is placed between “increased caseload” and “taking work home”. The “number of school sites” can influence this relationship by adding increased workload of extra commutes between sites, more school teams to communicate with, and managing students from different schools. OTPs are also not capped on how many different schools they can service which can cause OTPs to work at 3–7 schools sites in a school year. All these factors and moderators can ultimately lead to the outcome of “school-based burn out and decreased job satisfaction”.

Search Report

A full text review was conducted in order to analyze the evidence of the problems illustrated in the explanatory model pathway. Results are organized by theme and search questions. Databases such as Google Scholar, American Journal of Occupational Therapy and Boston University Library were used to collect different literature reviews and studies related to each question. A total of 23 articles were used to compose this review. Articles included both qualitative and quantitative research. Articles from the past 15 years were included with the exception of Barner & Turner ,2001. Articles selected

focused on burnout in regard to school based occupational therapists, school staff or pediatric occupational therapists. Exclusion criteria included past 15 years or burnout in other professions that did not focus on schools or the medical environment of occupational therapy practitioners. Keywords included *burnout, caseload, teacher collaboration, response to intervention (RTI) and administrative support*.

Role Confusion and Lack of Support

One of the first relationships identified in the explanatory model is the relationship between role confusion of OTPs in the school system and the lack of teacher and administration support. Based on the research gathered in this area, a few themes emerged. First, teachers confirmed that teachers and administrators do not have a clear understanding of the role of OT in the school system (Ladner, 2019; Truong & Hodgetts, 2017). The literature suggests that teachers mainly see occupational therapists as fine motor therapists, however they do not have a clear understanding of their role on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. A study conducted in 2023 pointed out that some teachers are unaware of the use or effects of sensory strategies in the classroom which are typical OT intervention strategies, and this poses a barrier for OTPs to be able to implement this strategy (Whiting et al, 2023). It can be concluded that teachers do not understand the full scope of OT which not only includes school-based occupations but also sensory regulation, mental health and vocational skills.

Collaboration

Another theme that emerged was the desire for increased collaboration. In all studies reviewed, it was concluded that teachers wanted to have increased collaboration

and communication with the OTP (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Bradley et al., 2020; Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; Ladner, 2019; Truong, & Hodgetts, 2017). Common barriers that were presented were increased caseloads by OTPs and limited school support (Kennedy & Stewart, 2011). This then leads to the main problem, does role confusion influence lack of administration and teacher support? Based on the literature review, it appears that it stretches the workload of the OTP, ultimately leading to burnout. Teachers are requesting increased collaboration, training and time in their classrooms with their students. However, not being aware of the caseload and workload of the school OTP can ultimately lead to a decrease in support to handle demands.

Teacher Training and School-Based Caseload

The next relationship depicted in the model states, if there is increase in teacher training on the role of OT, then there will be a decrease in unnecessary referrals, ultimately decreasing caseload numbers. Based on the literature review, there were limited studies that researched the relationship between teacher training and caseload. One study by Rens and Joosten (2014), discussed how a focus group with teachers and staff on the role of OT can lead to increased collaboration with teachers. This would ultimately result in an increase in more appropriate referrals. The majority of the studies involving teacher training on the role of the OTP found that teachers do require training due to role confusion, but also are open to collaborating with OTPs (Bradley et al., 2020; Hubbard, & Friedman, 2020). The results of this section are similar to those of the section that discusses role confusion and teacher training, however based on the literature it can be inferred that with an increase in training, comes an increase in appropriate referrals

(Rens & Joosten, 2014).

With teachers being trained on the domain and scope of OT and the role on the IEP team, it can also be inferred that these trainings will ultimately have an effect on caseload numbers. In other settings, screening tools are used to determine if a patient or client requires OT services, ultimately reducing the number of unnecessary OT referrals (Su Zan Tan et al., 2021). However, in the school setting, screening children in order to identify if a referral is appropriate is considered a breach in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA Act states that a referral must be submitted once a disability is suspected (Individuals with Disability Education Act, 2004). Section 300.302 of the IDEA act specifically states that screenings cannot be used by teachers or professionals to inform instructional strategies, meaning tools cannot be used to determine eligibility of a referral.

Since a referral is made once a disability is “suspected”, it places a large responsibility on the teacher to determine if they “suspect” a disability. Since this process is subjective, it is also another reason why school-based OTPs face many unnecessary referrals. For this reason, training and collaboration with teachers play an important role in preventing unnecessary evals. If teachers understand the domain and role of OTPs, teachers will be able to recognize when an OT referral is warranted or not. This process will ultimately affect caseload numbers.

RTI System and Caseload

The Response to Intervention (RTI) system is a moderator that can influence the relationship between administration and teacher support and the caseload numbers. The

purpose of this system is to assist with identifying individuals who may be struggling both academically and behaviorally. It provides a 3-tier approach to addressing the needs of these identified students (Bazky et al., 2012). In tier 1, students are able to be successful in whole class instruction without the need for intervention. In tier 2, some at-risk students are identified and placed in small groups. At this stage, general strategies continue to be used, however in a small group setting to assist with providing more support to these students. Direct OT is not used at this stage. By tier 3, the student is identified to require further assistance and a referral for special education services is made (Bazky et al., 2012). Some challenges to the model under the IDEA Act include the use of appropriate referrals. For example, if a student in tier 2 has already been identified as having some type of difficulty and requiring small group instruction, then a referral to OT should also be made at that time and not in tier 3. Practice guidelines state that RTI is not used in place of special education services and should be used in accordance with the school's district interpretation of the IDEA Act (Bazky et al., 2012).

Although the language and guidelines of the use of RTI continue to be in question, there has been some research describing the effectiveness of the system. Most research studies suggest positive responses from teachers on the implementation (Ohl et al., 2011). One particular study discussed the positive effects of fine motor and visual motor development in a group of kindergarteners, demonstrating how implementation of this system can affect skill development before it reaches the level of referral (Ohl et al., 2013) Despite many positive remarks, there were barriers that were identified within the literature. The most common barrier was high caseload numbers of therapists and lack of

administrative guidelines (McGuire et al.,2015; Swaminathan et al., 2014). The literature suggests that although implementation of an RTI system can assist with skills development, impacting referral rate, it does not assist with caseloads currently. Many OTPs and Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) have noted that although an RTI system would benefit them as well as the school, there is no one to implement the process and they simply do not have the time to take on that challenge (Swaminathan et al.,2014).

Decreased Work Life Balance and Burnout.

After reviewing the different relationships in the model, the main question remains, is there evidence that decreased work life balance leads to school-based burnout? For the purpose of this project, burnout can be defined as a “job related condition involving feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (Rogers & Dodson,1988, p.1). School-based OTPs have a unique position in the school systems, however they can be misunderstood and overworked. A study conducted by Spencer et al. (2006) states that OTPs commit to their roles despite high caseloads and unpaid overtime. In other words, OTPs who choose to work in this setting are expected to accept these factors. However, these same factors have led to increased burnout in the profession (Poulsen et al., 2014).

This same trend can also be seen in other school professions such as school-based speech therapists and teachers. A study conducted through the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA), found that since the pandemic, there has been an increase in burnout among school based SLPs, mainly due to increased caseloads and time pressure to keep up with work demands (Farquharson et al., 2022). On the other hand,

teachers have also been leaving the profession due to burnout. Due to the increasing teacher shortage, it has forced existing teachers to take on more responsibilities, such as bigger class size and less in class assistance (Lawrence & Cassimeda, 2022). This only continues to place pressure on existing professionals in the school setting.

Conclusion

Based on the research, it can be inferred that increased work-based demands leads to decreased work life balance. Poulsen et al. (2014), notes the difficulty of mentally detaching from work can be a contributing factor of decreased work life balance. The school setting is a complex system, run by different types of legislation and funding, all open to interpretation and implementation. Due to this lack of clarity across setting and location, OTPs are faced with the challenge of solidifying their role within their school systems and IEP teams. There are many factors that can lead to an OT having decreased work life balance, such as lack of support, high caseload numbers and lack of screenings. However, with increased research and advocacy, the hope is to help existing school-based OTPs thrive in this setting.

CHAPTER THREE – Overview of Current Approaches and Methods

Introduction

According to the United States Census Bureau, 93% of households with school aged children used some form of distance learning during the shutdowns from the Covid-19 pandemic (McElrath, 2020). The article also stated that families in low-income areas reported difficulty accessing online resources for their children. The detrimental effects of Covid-19 can be seen in the 2020–2021 test scores, demonstrating a drop of 4 points in reading and 9 points in math for 13-year-olds. This is the lowest drop in over a decade (Carrillo, 2023).

Since the return of in person learning, teachers and staff have been tasked with assisting students recover not only two and half years of learning loss, but also teach to grade level state standards. This has placed immense pressure on teachers and staff, resulting in burnout and high turnover rates. Another subgroup that has been affected by this increase in services are the therapists that work in the school districts. An article discussing school-based speech language pathologist (SLP) shortages, states that 60% of speech therapists viewed their caseloads as unmanageable (Schaumurg, 2023). As of 2023, there is a SLP shortage in the school setting. This same trend can be seen with reported shortages for both school counselors and school psychologists (Riser-Kositsky, 2022). However, there is a gap in the literature involving school based occupational therapists and burnout from the changing work environment since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prior to Covid-19, school based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) faced

issues with identifying their role on the school team (Truong & Hodgetts.; 2017). The struggle to clearly identify their roles continued once in person learning resumed. Factors that stem from this issue include lack of administration and teacher support, an increase in unnecessary evals, increased caseload and increase in take-home work. These factors ultimately can lead to burnout.

Studies focusing on pediatric occupational therapy burnout have highlighted the risk pediatric occupational therapists (OTs) face due to high case load and work environment, however there are limited studies that specifically focus on the school-based setting (Goffredo et al., 2022; Poulsen et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2022). It can be inferred that with increasing demands on the profession, school-based OTPs are continuing to face challenges in the profession in the post-Covid era.

Search Report

The focus of this synthesis is to investigate current intervention methods used to combat and prevent burnout. Information is organized based on themes and discusses topics related to the most effective interventions. Databases such as Google Scholar, American Journal of Occupational Therapy and the Boston University Library were used to collect different literature reviews and studies related to each search question. A total of 35 articles were used to compose this review. Articles included both qualitative and quantitative research. Research articles from 2013–2023 were included. Keywords included *occupational therapy, burnout, school based, health care, job stress*. Exclusion criteria included research articles that were past 2013 and did not focus on the listed key words. The second part of this synthesis will discuss the use of this information to create

the *Ready for School* occupational therapy program to combat burnout in the school-based setting.

Signs of Burnout

The term burnout has become mainstream in the media and has been discussed by both celebrities and magazine writers. It can be defined as the relationship between an individual and their job within the dimensions of emotional exhaustion, inefficacy and depersonalization (Freudenberger, 1974). Some common signs include fatigue, anxiety, cynicism, weight changes, and making more frequent mistakes (“5 Tell Tale Signs of Burnout”, 2017; Howley & Somante, 2023). When viewing these systems in the context of a medical professional, or in an educational setting, such as a school occupational therapist, these symptoms can have lasting consequences. The lived experience of a nurse detailed how burnout led to feelings of hopelessness and decreased productivity. The subject also reports knowing other nurses who also dealt with burnout and coped through the use of self-medicating or even suicide (“5 Tell Tale Signs of Burnout”, 2017). However, despite these challenges, the nurse reported having a calling and feeling a sense of shame for being burned out. Similarly, school-based occupational therapy practitioners have also reported feeling called to their jobs but are burned out by the challenging factors in the school system (Spencer et al., 2006). It is important to educate OTPs on the signs and symptoms of burnout to properly care for their wellbeing.

Current Interventions

The topic of burnout and mental health has slowly gained traction within the last 10 years with the help of social media, celebrities, and mainstream media discussing

these topics openly. This has given rise to different interventions and strategies being adopted by employers and individuals to help cope with the stress of the post-Covid era. Some of these strategies have focused on implementing structures in the workplace. For example, negotiating job demands and setting boundaries for non-work and work activities was seen as a burnout prevention strategy in several studies (Aryankhesal et al. 2019; Demerouti, 2015). Also, creating supervision communication channels was another strategy found in the literature (Demerouti, 2015).

Despite the number of research articles covering this topic, there seems to be a consensus on the need for more reliable research. For example, Aryankhesal et al., (2019) discussed how some studies reviewed coping strategies for nurses leading to a decrease in burnout but data was insignificant. Researchers have called for more randomized controlled trials (RCT), bigger sample sizes, and increased intervention time in order to gain more reliable results (Aryankhesal et al., 2019; Nowrouzi, 2015; Taylor et al., 2022).

Another way burnout strategies have been viewed is through focusing on the individual rather than the workplace. These strategies involve doing activities on the individual's personal time that often brings a level of fulfillment to combat emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Hricová, 2020; Aryankhesal et al., 2019; Taylor et al. 2022). The focus on personally meaningful activities is in line with the occupational therapy paradigm. A strategy such as physical exercise has been shown through a number of studies to prevent or combat burnout in different populations such as medical students, medical workers, and social service occupations (Hricová, 2020; Gerber et al., 2013;

Mehta et al., 2021). Other studies focus on overall self-care, which also includes physical activity but also health, professional, and psychological self-care (Hricova, 2020). The area of self-care continues to require more research to expand on the limited body of evidence in relation to occupational burnout.

Mindfulness

One of the most popular strategies to combat burnout is the use of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be defined as the awareness of experiencing events moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness strategies have been investigated with combating burnout with occupational therapists and other medical professionals. Experimental studies have demonstrated positive effects with the use of mindfulness strategies in lowering job-based burnout and stress levels (Fabbro et al., 2020; Luken & Sammons, 2016; Persia & Carroll, 2023). It has also been investigated with occupational therapy students and medical students, with positive results such as decreased levels of emotional exhaustion, decreased stress and anxiety and increased gratitude (Luken & Sammons, 2016; Vogtmann & Provident, 2021).

Despite a growing body of evidence supporting the use of mindfulness, one main issue has been discussed. Luken and Sammons (2016) point out that one of the main limitations is the different definitions used for mindfulness in different studies. This lack of symmetry in definition can skew results. However, many articles reviewed included pre- and post-groups and standardized measures to monitor change with the use of mindfulness strategies (Fabbro et al., 2020; Persia & Carroll, 2023; Zhao et al., 2019). Currently, mindfulness continues to be a leading intervention to combat burnout with

strong evidence supporting its impact.

Internal Characteristics and Factors

Burnout is an issue that affects all individuals differently. Some people are more capable of handling stress while others struggle with managing demands. Some research has been conducted to investigate what factors and characteristics are present in individuals who are able to manage stress, to create effective protocols. One factor that was noted in multiple studies was social support outside of work. This includes strong family, friend or social support such as church groups. These supports were found to have a significant impact on a person's quality of life despite job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bridgeman et al., 2018; Struwig & Van Stormbroek, 2023).

Personality was also noted to play an important part in an individual's ability to manage stress. Angelini (2023), discusses how the Big 5 personality traits: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, openness, and neuroticism, can affect this process. Individuals who were found to score higher with neuroticism were also found to have a higher correlation to burnout, while extraversion and openness were found to be protective factors against burnout (Angelini; 2023).

Another factor that was noted by multiple research articles, was the importance of support from supervisors or managers. Research has indicated that having supervisory support and communication plays a large role in modifying the level of burnout (Bridgeman et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2022;). Appropriate channels of communication and feedback allow for not only opportunity for job growth, but also decreased task burden by providing clear expectations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Moyer (2011) considers

supervision as a protective factor against burnout and has been shown to increase job satisfaction in school counselors. The information on this factor is supported through the use of literature reviews and experimental studies, however one limitation noted is the need for larger sample sizes and duplication of studies in order to solidify results (Bridgeman et al., 2018; Fye et al., 2020; Shin et al, 2022).

Program Design

Based on the research discussed, school-based occupational therapy practitioners are experiencing the pressure of burnout (Spencer et al., 2006). There are many factors that are involved with this issue, such as increased caseloads, lack of administrative support, decreased response to intervention (RTI) systems in place, and ambiguity of the profession's role on the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team (Farquharson et al., 2022; Swaminathan & Farquharson, 2018; Cahill et al, 2014; Bradley et al., 2021). This doctoral project will address some of these factors through an evidence-based interventional program design.

The intervention design is a pre-and post-descriptive study. The intervention will target school-based occupational therapy practitioners in Southern California, with 0–8 years of experience. Therapists will complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) a common burnout measure used in multiple studies (Maslach et al., 1996). Participants will also complete a competency measure that will be created by the author to measure perceived mastery, competence, and ability in the area of school-based occupational therapy. These tools will assist in establishing a baseline.

The next phase of the study will be to have occupational therapy practitioners

participate in the *Ready for School* online course that teaches burnout prevention strategies as discussed in the research (Demerouti, 2015; Mehta et al., 2021). Participants will meet twice a week for 4 weeks to review different topics. Strategies include activities such as mindfulness, deep breathing, and meditation but also advocacy skills to assist with creating work boundaries. The research has indicated that this is an area of need for occupational therapists struggling with burnout (Struwig & Van Stormbroek, 2023; Shin et al., 2022; Persia & Carroll, 2023).

By providing the fundamental tools of strategies and advocacy, school-based OTPs can equip themselves to educate and work with teachers and administrators on their role and expectations. By creating open channels of communication, OTPs can feel supported by their administrators and teachers and effectively communicate what is needed in order to be successful at their role.

Another area that the doctoral project will address is the need for properly implementing a Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Research has shown that the implementation of these models can have positive effects on assisting with a student's fine and visual motor skills before the delay reaches the need for skilled intervention, such as occupational therapy (Ohlet et al., 2013). The use of RTI models can assist with creating proper protocols as well as training teachers on recognizing when a referral for an intervention is appropriate. This will ultimately affect OT caseloads and reduce the number of inappropriate referrals.

After the completion of the course, participants will retake the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the competency rating scale in order to measure any change from the

program. A focus group will also be conducted on the last day of the course to evaluate the effectiveness of the delivery method.

Conclusion

A question posed to Reddit in 2022 asked users “why are there so many school-based occupational therapy jobs”, which started a conversation on the challenges facing school-based OTPs. OTs that commented listed high caseloads, lawsuits, lack of support from administrators, lack of role identification and burnout as the reasons for leaving the setting (Reddit, 2022). Research evidence has also backed these claims made by commenters (Cahill et al., 2014; Barnes & Turner, 2021; Rens & Joosten, 2014; Spencer et al, 2006). With the increasing demands on school-based OTPs, burnout appears to be prevalent, resulting in more OTPs leaving or considering leaving the setting. It is important that this issue be addressed to help support the profession. These practitioners play an integral role in the school system by working with students to develop skills required for their educational careers. By properly equipping and supporting them, they will be more impactful in their roles while also not putting a strain on their own mental wellbeing.

CHAPTER FOUR – Description of the Proposed Program

Basis of The Proposed Program

Since the Covid 19 pandemic, there has been a shift in school culture. Growing trends of burnout have been seen among school personnel including teachers, speech therapists and counselors (Riser-Kositsky, 2022; Schaumurg, 2023). Literature on burnout levels for occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) post Covid 19 era are scarce, however research indicating burnout among school-based OTPs before Covid 19 did discuss a trend (Truong & Hodgetts, 2017; Stephenson, 2019). There are many factors contributing to this issue of burnout such as increased caseloads, decreased support from administration and staff and decreased implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies (Goffredo et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2022). Solutions to this trend include equipping school-based OTPs with the appropriate tools to advocate and manage the challenges that come with the school based setting.

The author's proposed program includes conducting an educational course that will be assessed pre and post program for the effectiveness with the goal of addressing school based occupational therapy burnout. The course will be a 4-week online course that will meet twice a week for 1 hour. The topics include Response to Intervention (RTI), advocacy, caseload management and burnout prevention strategies. After the course, a post test will be given to measure any change in previous burnout levels.

The program has the potential to bring forth much needed training and awareness to the setting. The main beneficiary and stakeholder of this program are the school based occupational therapy practitioners. At the micro level, these professionals will receive the

benefit of training and tools to assist with managing stress, caseload and advocacy in their settings. At the meso level, school administrators and staff will benefit from having equipped therapists be able to implement RTI interventions in the school setting and educate staff on the role of OT. At the macro level, informed therapists will be able to advocate for policies and protocols that support their role in the school system and their students.

An example of the use of the program can be, a first-year school based OT is having difficulty expressing their role to the individual education plan (IEP) team. The virtual program includes a lesson on the role of OT. The first year OT will be able to take that information as well as advice from more experienced OTs and present it to their IEP team to educate further on the scope of OT. This will decrease job related burnout by reducing the unnecessary referrals the OT receives as well as decreasing the time educating staff on their role.

Full Logic Model

Figure 4.1

Illustration of the Full Logic Model

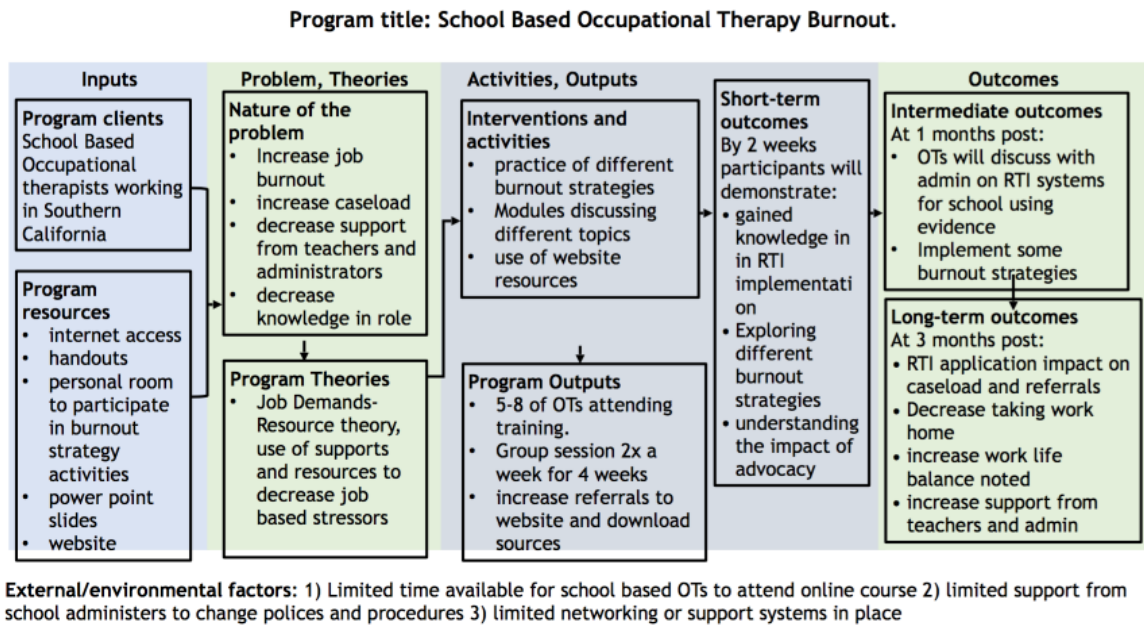


Figure 4.1 illustrates the logic model. This model is a visual representation of how the author's proposed program will achieve the outcomes through the use of the online course. As previously stated, the nature of the problem is the increase in job related burnout that school-based OTPs are facing. Factors for increased burnout include increasing caseload demands, decrease support from teachers and staff, and decrease RTI systems in schools (Poulsen et al. 2014; Rens & Joosten, 2014; Swaminathan & Farquharson, 2018). These factors ultimately lead to a decrease in work life balance and increase job related burnout. Which ultimately could lead to OTPs leaving their jobs or even the field entirely.

The course is designed using the job demands resource theory (JDR) depicted in Figure 2.1, which illustrates the relationship between job demands and resources. The basic premise of the theory states that when job demands are high and resources are low, there is an increase in job related stress. On the other hand, with resources available, it can lead to positive motivation and increased outcomes. (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Activities covered in the online course will be organized per week. These activities are intended to cover specific topics that will directly relate to some of the factors that have been identified to contribute to increased school-based burnout. Handouts that correlate with the session will be provided through the website for participants to download. Participants will also be given time to practice strategies and discuss within the group.

Short, intermediate and long-term goals are outlined within the logic model. After the completion of the course, participants are expected to continue to implement tools and strategies learned in the course to continue to make progress on their burnout management. By continuing these strategies, participants will be able to create a supportive environment that promotes work life balance.

Program Clients and Resources

The author intends to lead the online program. As previously stated, the online program is expected to be a 4-week program that meets twice a week for 1 hour per session. Participants will be recruited through convenience sampling as well as through posting on Facebook groups, American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) discussion forums and Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC). The

program is anticipated to include 5–8 participants. Inclusion criteria is occupational therapists with 0–8 years of experience in a school-based setting. Exclusion criteria include occupational therapists over 8 years of experience and outside of the Southern California region. Research suggests that occupational therapists experience burnout in the beginning phases of their career, highlighting less than 9 years of experience (Bümen, 2010; Janus, Gawalkiewicz, & Bac 2018). Southern California was chosen as the area to control outside factors, influencing results such as pace of life, region friendliness, traffic and commute. For example, a school-based OT in southern California may have a different experience as a school-based OT in a town in Utah.

Therapists who are interested in participating and see the course posting will be able to email the author at the email provided. A separate email will be created to maintain all personal information on a separate drive for confidentiality purposes. Once participants are secured on the roster, they will be emailed the pretest of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Competency Measure Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Sessions will be held online through Google Meets.

Required tools include a computer and access to reliable internet. Although this author will be the main therapist leading the class, the website will also feature resources written by other experienced occupational therapists that the participants will have access to. At the conclusion of the program, a post test of the Maslach Inventory and focus group will be conducted to assess the effectiveness of the course.

Intervention and Activities

Table 4.1

Weekly Course Schedule of Topics and Resources

Week	Topic	Activities	Resources
Week 1	Introduction, Advocacy, Burnout strategy (mindfulness)	Handout summarizing the issues, discussion on experiences Meditation and mindfulness practice	Handout on background information provided on website
Week 2	RTI, Burnout Strategy (deep breathing)	RTI hand out, deep breathing exercise and handout for at home practice	Handouts provided on website
Week 3	Caseload Management, Burnout Strategy (stretching)	Review of California Law on the IDEA Act, as well advocacy strategies, stretching activities that can be done anywhere	Summary on IDEA act handout
Week 4	Post test (outside of class), Burnout Strategy (support systems), Focus group	Establishing support systems in the community and focus groups.	Post test and Competency measure done at end of course

Table 4.1 outlines the course schedule that will be provided. Each week will cover 2 topics, 1 for each session. Duration of the sessions will be 1 hour. The first week of the course will cover introducing the problem for the first session and the second session that week will cover mindfulness meditation. The second week will cover RTI strategies in the classroom and the second session will focus on deep breathing exercises. The third week will cover caseload management and stretching exercises. The last week of the course will focus on support systems and focus groups on the last session. Post tests will

be collected one week after the conclusion of the course. Handouts for class will be listed on the website and can be accessed at any time for participants. Slides and materials will be prepared ahead of time to ensure proper flow of sessions.

Program Outputs and Outcomes

There are 2 main measurable objectives of the program. The first main objective is, by the end of the 4-week program, 60% of the participants will report a decrease in burnout levels as seen by the pre and post burnout inventory scale. The second main objective is, by the end of the program, 60% of the participants will be able to utilize 3 burnout strategies in their everyday practice after 3 months. These main objectives are expected to be accomplished through the use of short- and long-term outcomes.

Short term outcomes are outcomes that are within 2 weeks post program. In this time frame, participants are expected to be able to utilize their knowledge learned from the program and begin implementing the exercises and resources in their everyday practice. This includes meeting with IEP teams to discuss roles, discussing support strategies with administration and begin training staff on RTI strategies in class. Knowledge and skills acquired from the course will be mainly displayed in this time frame. Participants will have access to handouts and organizational materials to begin educating staff and administrators on their role on the IEP team as well as recognizing when referrals are appropriate.

Intermediate outcomes include 1 month post program outcomes. In this time frame, participants are expected to have operational RTI systems in a few classrooms, have open communication with administration and begin receiving appropriate referrals

for OT. School based OTs will also be utilizing preferred burnout strategies regularly. This time frame mainly displays a decrease in chronic symptoms of burnout. By utilizing the tools and strategies gained from the course, a measurable decrease in symptoms of burnout will be demonstrated.

Longer term outcomes include 3 months post program. By this time frame, participants are expected to have educated teachers and staff on RTI systems to implement in all classes, have increased work life balance, increased support from administrators and staff and recognize areas of continuing need for advocacy. An increase in confidence and satisfaction is expected at this level. School based OTs will have made connections with other OTs in the program to network and discuss strategies. The results of strategies will be felt and seen in their ability to adapt to changes as well as manage work life balance.

Anticipated Barriers and Challenges

External factors that can possibly pose a challenge to the program are possible push back from staff and administration. The program challenges school-based OTs to implement RTI programs in class and advocate for referrals. Administrators and teachers can possibly be a barrier to promote this change in the schools. These challenges can be mitigated through the use of open communication with administrators and teacher representatives. School OTs work closely with teachers who work with their students, however teachers who do not have students being treated by OTs would need other channels of communication to discuss RTI implementation.

Another possible barrier is the time expected for school-based OTs to attend the

program. Many school based personnel discuss doing work at home and this course would require school based RTI to set aside time that may not easily be available (Rayburn, 2016; Cruickshank & Hyndman, 2024). OTs will need to show consistency in their attendance as well as dedicate time to implementing strategies. For this reason, times for the program will be from 6pm pacific time to 7pm. This time frame is well after IEP meeting hours are expected to be held, allowing for increased participation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the goal of this doctoral project is to investigate the effects of a pre and post program on school based occupational therapy burnout. The course is intended to provide resources and build a community for school-based therapists who are feeling the effects of burnout in the post Covid era. By providing information on certain topics outlined by the evidence-based literature, the goal is for therapists to not only decrease their overall burnout, but also implement these strategies in their settings to be more effective therapists who also prioritize work life balance.

CHAPTER FIVE – Program Evaluation Research Plan

Introduction

Since the return of in-person learning to classrooms, teachers and staff have been tasked with assisting students recover not only two and half years of learning loss, but also teach to grade level state standards. This has placed immense pressure on teachers and staff, resulting in burnout and high turnover rates. Another subgroup that has been affected by this increase of services are the therapists that work in the school districts. An article discussing school-based speech therapy (SLP) shortages, stated that 60% of speech therapists viewed their caseloads as unmanageable (Schaumburg, 2023). As of 2023, the article reports an SLP shortage in the school setting. This same trend can be seen with reported shortages for both school counselors and school psychologists (Riser-Kositsky, 2022). However, there is scarce research involving school based occupational therapists (OTs) and burnout in this setting.

Prior to Covid 19, school based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) faced issues with identifying their role on the school team (Truong & Hodgetts, 2017). The struggle of clearly identifying their roles continued once in person learning resumed. Factors that stem from this issue include lack of administration and teacher support, an increase in unnecessary evaluations, increased caseload and increase in take-home work. These factors ultimately can lead to burnout. Studies focusing on pediatric occupational therapy burnout have highlighted the risk pediatric OTs face due to high case load and work environment, however not many studies specifically focus on the school-based setting (Goffredo et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2022). It can be inferred that with increasing

demands on school-based professions, school based OTPS are continuing to face challenges in their profession in the post-COVID era. The proposed program would assist with bridging the gap and provide needed resources for therapists in this setting.

Program Scenarios and Stakeholders

The goal of this program is to create a resource to assist school based occupational therapy practitioners (SBOTPs) with burnout in this setting. The proposed program is *Ready for School*. It will focus on some of the main challenges (SBOTPs face that typically cause burnout. The program will use an online platform and be connected to a website that would also have resources. Participants will meet twice a week for 4 weeks and go over topics depicted in the module.

As a previous working school-based OT, the author possesses knowledge and experience in this field. The author has personally encountered these challenges in the school setting and knows many other SBOTPs who have as well. Evidence-based intervention sessions will be delivered in a 4-week program, 2 times a week. Regarding the handout information, other experienced OTs who also have knowledge on specific topics may be invited to add or create handouts as well as add to the website content.

The main beneficiaries of the program would be school based OTPs. The program specifically targets both incoming and established school-based therapists from 0–8 years of experience. Secondary beneficiaries could also be the other therapy disciplines who work with occupational therapists such as physical therapists and speech therapists. Teachers and administrators could also be affected since some of the Response to

Intervention (RTI) strategies involve direct communication with teachers and administrators to establish protocols.

Vision

As previously stated, there is a current gap in the literature discussing school based occupational therapy burn out, post covid. Although burnout in the pediatric setting was noted through previous research, there is limited research discussing current trends for occupational therapists (Truong & Hodgetts, 2017; Stephenson, 2019). Through this online program, the author hopes to equip new graduate and intermediate school based occupational therapists with tools to be able to manage this challenging setting. Tools will focus on not only managing job related stress but advocacy strategies to impact the school environment to create a supportive work environment.

After the collection of both qualitative and quantitative measures, the goal is to make appropriate adjustments to the course to ensure the most desired topics are being covered. Resources and handouts will continue to be available through the website. The hope is to continue to host the course and create a community for school based occupational therapists to support each other.

Engagement of Stakeholders

The author for this program would be involved in all aspects of the program. This includes the planning, implementation and reflection of the results. Stakeholders in this program include new and established school based occupational therapists. As the primary stakeholders, all topics covered in this module will be targeted to testing whether the product of this program reduces job-based burnout in this setting. The creation of the

resources used in modules on the website would include input from other occupational therapists in the setting, as well as teachers and personnel. It is important to make strategies practical and easily implemented into a school setting. The perspectives of these groups would greatly benefit stakeholders by expanding on the available resources to them to assist in preventing burnout. The information received from this program would be used to assist in the reduction or prevention of burnout for OTPs.

Another stakeholder group would be the principals and administrator of these schools these participants represent. By school-based OTs educating themselves on strategies and protocols to reduce burnout, these schools as a whole may also benefit. Through the implementation of RTI protocols in classrooms and creating open channels of communication, school districts may also increase productivity. This group of stakeholders may possess an interest in the design and implementation of the program, ensuring rigor and reliability of the results. The findings of this program would benefit their own schools by providing burnout prevention education for their staff and the inclusion of RTI protocols. Prevention of burnout would impact staff retention and turnover.

The last group of stakeholders include large organizations such as the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and school unions. These types of stakeholders would focus on consultation on the program as well as scrutiny of results in order to ensure validity. The information provided by this program would provide insight into the school systems and encourage increased research in this area. The program would also give opportunity for school-based OTs to advocate for their roles in these

arenas. School unions would learn more about the role of occupational therapy in their schools and also both organizations can further understand the needs of OTs to prevent burnout. The table below outlines stakeholders and their involvement throughout the phases of the program. Under types of involvement, P stands for planning and programming. The I stands for implementation or evaluation and the R stands for reflecting and recommending further development. The table also outlines possible roles and special interests for stakeholders.

Table 5.1

Stakeholder Matrix

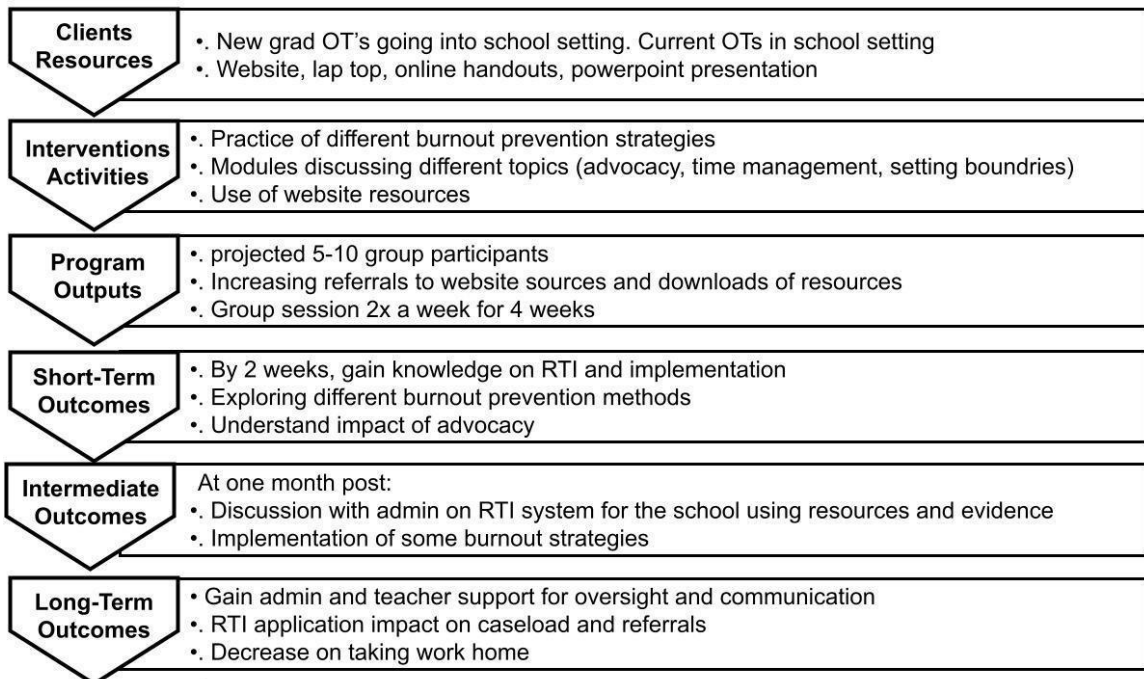
Stakeholder or Stakeholder Group	Type of involvement (planning, implementing, reflecting)	Possible Roles	Specific Interests
The author as the main researcher	P,I, R	Overseeing website, creation of module themes, assisting with content, running virtual groups	Recording pre and post data, implementing strategies into group discussions, analysis of data
Other school-based OTs, teachers,	I, R	Creation of resource activities, giving view of teacher from classroom perspective	Testing practicality of strategies in classroom
Principles of schools, other administration, other service providers (SLP, PT, Special Education Teacher teachers)	P, I, R	Investment on results on order to improve productivity, feedback on design and validity of results	Assess reliability and validity
AOTA, teachers union	R	Consultation	Encourage further research for burnout in this setting

Simplified Logic Model for Use with Stakeholders

The logic model below depicted in figure 5.1, illustrates the background and rationale of the intended program. The program will target incoming and established school based occupational therapists and will use an online class design. Intervention activities will focus on burnout prevention strategies such as mindfulness exercises, advocacy in the school system and caseload management with the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) systems (Koelbl et al., 2016). The Response to Intervention system is a 3-tier system designed to target class and individual students needs to succeed in school. The goal of these activities will be to accomplish both long-term and short-term goals, ultimately leading to a decrease in overall burnout.

Figure 5.1

Simplified Logic Model



Preliminary Exploratory and Confirmatory Process

Once stakeholders have been identified and have expressed interest in the program, regular meetings to finalize the program content and logistics will be implemented. Virtual meetings will be arranged to maximize attendance. Stakeholders that have roles in the program, as well as those connected with financial support for the program, will be invited to discuss progress. In the beginning, these meetings will open with an overview of the problem based on current research evidence to establish the literature gap and discuss reasoning of the program. Once this has been established, the logic model can be presented and reviewed. A PowerPoint and virtual handout will be emailed to participants prior to the start of the meeting.

Once these aspects of the program have been established, the program design and stakeholder roles can be presented. The program will mainly target new and established school based occupational therapists with 0–8 years of experience in the field. Other personnel include teachers with experience working with service providers. Their input and perspectives are important since these strategies are meant to be practical and easily implemented in a school-based setting. The research design will consist of pre- and post-program data collection. It will be categorized as descriptive research, analyzing the different characteristics and variables of this phenomenon. Rating scales to measure burnout such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory and self-assessment questionnaire will be used prior to the start of the program to measure degree of burnout and perceived mastery as a school based occupational therapist (Maslach et al., 1996). The self assessment questionnaire will be designed by the researchers and Survey Monkey will be used to

administer the questionnaire. Participants will then begin the program with meetings 2 times per week, going over topics that are related to SBOTP burnout. Post measures will be taken at the end of the 4-week program.

After going over the proposed intervention, the floor will be open for input. Stakeholders will likely be invested in providing input in order to ensure a successful program that will support many other OTs to deal with many of the challenges that are faced upon starting employment in the setting. This program gives these professionals an opportunity to help their peers be successful in a very challenging setting. Despite differing opinions and approaches, the author believes a consensus on major decisions will be reached by keeping the goals of the program as the main focus. Areas of interest include types of information being presented and ways of reaching new audiences and community building opportunities. By analyzing through the lens of program evaluation research, stakeholders can come to consensus about aspects of the intervention that would be most impactful for this population.

Program Evaluation Research Questions by Stakeholders

Table 5.2 describes both formative and summative questions by each stakeholder group. Formative questions assess whether or not the needs of the target population were met by the program. Summative questions evaluate change in the program. These questions are meant to answer questions stakeholders may have in regard to the purpose and reliability of the program. These questions also guide relationships of different issues that surround burnout in the school setting.

Table 5.2*Stakeholders Questionnaire*

Stakeholder or stakeholder group	Types of Program Evaluation Research Question
Author	<p><i>Formative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will recipients report other favorable outcomes? • Will the intervention be sufficient for training burnout prevention protocols? <p><i>Summative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the intervention affect burnout levels in school based occupational therapists?
Persons actively involved in program delivery – Other school-based OTs, teachers,	<p><i>Formative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the main challenges facing SBOT in the setting today? • What is the most effective format to deliver information? • What information is most relevant to the SBOT in this current time? <p><i>Summative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did participants gain knowledge from resources and guides created? • Did participants gain confidence in advocacy strategies? • Did participants gain skills in implementing strategies?
Facility, educational institution or organization or management – Principles of schools, other administration, other service providers (SLP, PT, SPED teachers)	<p><i>Formative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the content of the program meet productivity goals and concerns in the school system? • Do course topics align with facility concerns and challenges? • Did OT/staff participants report favorable experience? <p><i>Summative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can research data from the program be used to demonstrate decreased burnout in SBOT?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the delivery of the program more costly than other similar products?
<p>Funding agencies, advocacy organization, including AOTA , policymakers– AOTA, teachers union</p>	<p><i>Formative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are participants confident they are able to advocate for school-based OTs in the school systems and policy makers? • Are long term goals of the program realistic? <p><i>Summative:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the course content of the program fill in gaps of literature? • In the current climate of the school systems, is the program justified based on the findings?

Research Design

Category of Research Design

The research design for the described program is non-experimental with single group pre- and post-program measurement. The program evaluation research is a pilot study and falls under phase 2 in the author’s project. In phase 1 of the project, the author will focus on input from stakeholders and participants and study the research literature to determine the basis of the problem. The purpose of the pilot study is to determine the extent to which beneficial change occurred and whether any aspects of program delivery should be improved. The findings would address the possibility that providing resources to school-based OTs can prevent job burnout. The author’s particular interest in this pilot study is to assess the content of the course in terms of relevance to OTs in this setting and to determine if specific short- and long-term goals can be reached. The original pilot study will only include school based occupational therapists before opening to certified

occupational therapy assistance. Content and delivery will need to be assessed before opening to a wider audience.

Overview of Summative and Formative Approaches

In order to collect summative information, measures such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory will be used to measure pre to post change. Another measure will be a self-assessment questionnaire to rate perceived mastery and skill competence as a SBOT on a scale of 1–10. These measures will provide numerical data that can be used to measure change. Assessments will be administered online and collected before and after intervention through email. An online version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory is available through the publishing site which can be purchased for 15 dollars. Rating scales to assess perceived job mastery and competence can be created through the use of tools such as Survey Monkey.

In order to collect formative information, a focus group with a small number of individuals who meet the criteria of participants will be utilized at the end of the program. The focus group session can be recorded and discussion will focus on program content and delivery, and questions in regard to applicability of what was taught. The focus group would most likely meet online due to availability and responses can be recorded through Zoom platform or Google Meets.

Methods

In order to begin collecting data, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Boston University will need to be obtained prior to the start of the program. A proposal will be drafted and will cover informed consent, risk and confidentiality.

Participants will sign a consent form before accessing the questionnaires. The consent will outline the purpose and methods of the study. Risk will also be outlined which may possibly be found in the content of burnout. Participants will be asked to evaluate their own level of burnout which may possibly be triggering for some participants. If this is the case, participants have the option to not complete the study or participate. Confidentiality will be established through the use of coding. Each participant will be given a number code of 5 numbers and a key will be made. Only the researcher will have access to the key and information. Information will be kept password protected on the laptop. At the conclusion of the program, all information will be given to Boston University to destroy.

Inclusion criteria for the program will consist of working as a school based occupational therapist for 0–8 years. The geographic area will consist of therapists in the Southern California region. Age ranges and gender will vary. Southern California consists of both urban and rural areas and therefore will possibly represent therapists in different school settings.

The program will be delivered online. The website will hold resources such as handouts that will be used in the program. The group intervention will begin with 5–8 participants that will meet via Zoom to discuss burnout prevention strategies. These meetings will last 1 hour and be held twice a week. Recruitment of participants will be done by both convenience sampling and online posting on organization websites such as Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC), AOTA, and Facebook groups.

The first week will cover introductions and background information of the problem as well as advocacy. The second session of the week will focus on burnout

strategies. Strategies and exercises will include mindfulness for the first week. The second week will cover the topics of RTI strategies and the second course will cover different types of deep breathing. The third week will cover caseload management and stretching for relaxation as the third burnout strategy. The fourth week will cover support systems as the last burnout prevention strategy. The last session of that week will include the focus group. Each session will cover content, practice time and group discussion at the end.

Qualitative Methods

The research question the researcher seeks to answer is does the implementation of burnout prevention strategies decrease burnout in school based occupational therapists? In this particular research question the independent variable will be the lessons on burnout prevention strategies. These variables will be manipulated in order to see its effect on the dependent variable, school-based burnout. Inclusion criteria include new grad students to practicing occupational therapists with 0–8 years of experience. Therapists with over 8 years will be excluded. Also, this module will focus on the Southern California region. Competency questionnaires will be administered pre and post modules in order to assess mastery and competency in their field. The questionnaire will be a Likert scale with a section for participants to also discuss their experiences. A post focus group will also be conducted in order to assess the delivery and content of the program.

Quantitative Methods

Data collection will begin prior to the start of the actual modules. All participants

will be given an online version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) as well as a secondary competence questionnaire through Survey Monkey. The main system of measurement that will be used to collect quantitative data is the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which measures emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Therefore, school based occupational therapy burnout may be operationalized as a score using the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Results of each participant will be stored in the cloud on a separate password-protected drive. Copies of results will be stored on a hard drive that is password protected in the event information in the cloud is lost or wiped out. The main researcher will be the only person who has access to these drives. Once all pre and post scores are entered, the researcher will analyze data and organize results based on themes. Results from the Maslach Burnout Inventory are scored online through the system. They will be double checked by the researcher in order to ensure no errors are detected. Results from the competency surveys will be saved and organized into a chart.

Intervention Fidelity

To ensure fidelity of the program, certain measures will be put in place in order for the delivery to be consistent. First, each session will be broken down in the same format, with the first 10 minutes reviewing evidence and literature of a specific strategy. The next 30 minutes will include practice and implementation of the strategy in the form of a worksheet exercise or physical exercise depending on the topic. The last 20 minutes will include group discussion where participants may interact with each other and provide feedback and ideas on strategies. This interactive component will allow for participants to

remain engaged in the topic. In the event of a guest speaker, this same format will remain consistent. Content for guest speakers will be analyzed beforehand to ensure specific components of each topic are being addressed.

Threats to Internal Validity

Although no experiment can be done with no threat to internal validity, it is possible to minimize its effects. Based on the structure of this research project, some possible threats can be identified. First, attrition, which is the loss of participants. This would result in their information being excluded from the analysis which would decrease the sample size. Possible strategies to prevent this would be to offer the program during a reasonable time and manner. This program will be virtual to promote participation and eliminate barriers such as a commute or childcare. Also providing an incentive for those who complete the program such as a gift card. Another possible threat would be seasonality. Since the population would be using a school-based schedule, the majority of therapists would be off during winter, summer and spring breaks. It is also known that, during the months of April– June, therapists tend to be very busy completing assessments and Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for students whose birthdays are in the summer, increasing their workload, making sessions in this time period too difficult to attend. Program dates revolving around the Dec– February would be most reasonable for their schedule.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Management and Analysis

A post-program focus group being used to discuss program content and delivery. Answers will be recorded via zoom. Responses will be categorized in themes in terms of relevance to the topic of burnout and to discuss findings.

Quantitative Data Management and Analysis

Data would be kept on a spreadsheet that would be accessed by the researcher. A drive that is password protected will be used to ensure confidentiality. Analysis software such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 18 Apple Mac can be used to quantify results of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and competency questionnaire. Based on the goal of the program, inferential statistics would be conducted to determine causation between the program and job-related burnout.

Anticipated Strengths and Limitations

One potential bias that may be encountered is observation bias, meaning the participant may alter their answers due to being observed. This type of bias can be mitigated through the use of different data collection tactics. Using two different types of questionnaires would assist in identifying and preventing this type of bias. Another type of bias is observer bias, in which the researcher has established expectations that may influence interpretation of results. This type of bias can be addressed by having oversight from a third party such as an academic advisor. Another strategy can be to ensure a thorough research plan that follows a strict format of intervention delivery and data collection.

Communicating Evaluation Results

The last aspect of this program will be to present the results to stakeholders. The plan would be to create a formal presentation and present the statistical data on the program. Information would include viewers of the website and downloads of the resources. It will also include pre and post data from the two questionnaires used to demonstrate any change. The main take-away for stakeholders would be the importance of providing burnout prevention strategies for school-based OTPs. A written form of the results summarizing key points and the message of the program will be created. Results will then be framed in the context of a working school based occupational therapist. The presentation will then lead to the main point, which would be to incorporate burnout prevention strategies in schools to further support school based occupational therapists.

Conclusion

The goal of the *Ready for School* online program is to provide support to school-based practitioners. Primary stakeholders will be occupational therapy practitioners, with secondary stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, speech therapists and other school staff. This program is meant to teach school-based practitioners how to advocate for themselves and manage the many factors involved with school-based burnout. It is important to address the mental health needs of school-based practitioners and equip them with the necessary tools and support to continue to service students.

CHAPTER SIX – Dissemination Plan

Project Description

The *Ready for School* program is an online module designed for occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) working in school-based settings. Research has indicated a growing amount of stress and burnout within the school setting, including speech therapists, teachers and school counselors (Riser-Kositsky, 2022; Schaumurg, 2023). OTPs working in this setting have also experienced increased job-related stress (Stephenson, 2019). This online module targets school-based OTPs and equips them with tools to manage and overcome the many job-related stressors in this setting.

Dissemination Goals

School-based OTPs face many challenges in the school system. Factors contributing to ongoing burnout include role ambiguity on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, lack of support from administrators and staff and growing a case load due to unnecessary referrals and decreased knowledge on OTPs' role. The short-term goal for this project is to equip school-based OTPs with tools to advocate properly for themselves, and the profession, in their respective districts. For this reason, the course offers tools to assist school-based practitioners in teaching others in regard to their role, implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) programs, and advocating.

Long-term goals for this program include increasing awareness of OTPs in schools. Currently, only speech-language pathologists (SLPs) have caseload standards set by the state from the American Speech and Hearing Association (State by State Caseload Guide, 2022). This type of support allows speech-therapists to advocate and set

appropriate caseload numbers to best service students and staff. School-based OTPs do not have such guidelines. As of 2020, an average school-based OTPs caseload is 41–50 students, with signs of continued growth across the U.S. (Seruya, & Garfinkel, 2020). Currently, school-based OTPs manage unreasonable caseloads with minimal resources to manage all aspects of the job (Seruya, & Garfinkel, 2020). By providing awareness of the issues surrounding school-based occupational therapists, protocols, and standards can be set at the state level to protect OTPs and their students.

Target Audience

The primary audience for this online course is school-based OTPs. The online course offers a unique opportunity for OTPs to convene, learn new skills and share insights on current challenges facing the profession. The key message of this program is to provide support to the OTPs, who often find the early years overwhelming. Research shows that the highest levels of stress and burnout occurs within the first eight years of a profession, primarily due to a lack of experience and skills in advocating and setting boundaries. This course is designed to be a space for school-based OTPs to feel heard, seen and supported.

The secondary audience includes school personnel, such as teachers and administrators. Many of the tools provided in the modules focus on raising awareness on the role of OTPs to educate school staff. Administrators and school staff will then have an increased knowledge on the challenges facing OTPs on campus. Advocacy efforts will focus on solutions and creating an increased understanding of OTPs' role on the IEP team.

Key Message

The *Ready for School* online course seeks to support school-based OTPs in managing and overcoming challenges of the setting. The anticipated results of this program include decreased burnout, increased knowledge of the OTPs' role and increased staff support. These factors have an overall effect on students who are losing access to services due to high turnover. To best support students, school-based OTPs also need to be supported to do the job. Research indicates that many school-based OTPs endure high caseloads, long work hours at home and decreased life balance for the "love of the job" (Spencer et al., 2006); however, this cycle is not sustainable.

School-based OTPs are expected to be able to apply the strategies provided in the school to combat burnout. In doing so, OTPs will be able to set appropriate work boundaries with administrators who may be unclear on the role of the OTPs and how it impacts their students and the IEP team. School-based OTPs will also be able to educate school staff on the specifics of their role and how they best serve their students. Implementing RTI programs in the classroom will assist teachers with identifying and addressing signs of delay early on and implement strategies to support students before the referral process to services. These interventions are expected to decrease burnout among the school-based therapy practitioners.

As a practicing school-based OTP, this researcher aims to be a spokesperson for this program, bringing awareness to the challenges facing OTPs in the school systems. A secondary spokesperson includes Lisa A. Test, OTD, OTR/L, FAOTA, co-chair of the school-based OT Subcommittee, and the Occupational Therapy Association of California

(OTAC) Lifetime Achievement Award recipient.

With the implementation of these strategies by OTPs, the secondary audience will have the opportunity to also work with these strategies to improve the overall relationship between staff and students. Staff will be able to understand the role of OTP and make appropriate referrals. They will also be able to provide necessary support with increased communication with therapy providers. These improvements will provide increased clarity and function on the IEP to best support students. Spokespeople for this audience include this research and Vanessa Silver, MS, BCET/AET, Fellow/OGA, C- SLDS/IDA from Bay Path University. Professor Silver began her career as a resource and special education teacher. She has 25 years of experience working in the areas of dyslexia and dysgraphia. She is equipped to speak on school-based OTPs with the teacher's perspective in mind.

Dissemination

The results of the program are expected to be disseminated to primary and secondary target audiences through different communication formats. This research first intends to create a brochure on the program objectives and outcomes to be sent to participants. Participants will be able to share resources with other OTPs and school staff. Another form of written dissemination includes submitting a small editorial to the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) *OT Practice* magazine to publish program outcomes.

Next, this research will utilize electronic forms of dissemination to submit the results. Use of Facebook groups for school-based OTPs and school personnel will allow

both target audiences to receive the program's intended outcomes in a format that allows for interaction and discussion. AOTA and OTAC forums will also disseminate information to the OTPs' primary target audience. This researcher will post program outcomes on the program website to provide information to anyone seeking information. Contact information for the researcher will be provided to answer any question an individual may have. These forms of dissemination do not require financial capital to use.

Lastly, person-to-person forms of dissemination include attending conferences and professional development meetings to reach the secondary target audience. These meetings will include the distribution of brochures and fact sheets to summarize program outcomes. AOTA and OTAC conferences are also person-to-person modes of dissemination of information. The use of poster presentations and the distribution of fact sheets will help to reach the OTP community. This form of dissemination will require the submission of proposals to participants in poster presentations. This form of dissemination will be the costliest due to the entrance fee and cost of travel.

Table 6.1

Dissemination Activities

Dissemination Activity	OT Target Audience	School Personnel Audience
Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brochure ● AOTA <i>OT Practice</i> magazine editorial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brochure
Electronic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Website ● AOTA/OTAC forums ● Facebook group chats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facebook groups
Person-to-person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● AOTA/OTAC conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Professional development meetings

Budget

Chapter 7's funding plan outlines the online program's cost at approximately \$1,190 per year. During the dissemination process, electronic forms will not have any significant cost. \$80 a month worth of Wi-Fi will be calculated into the budget to run websites and access online forums. The cost of attendance of the OTAC and AOTA conferences ranges from \$300–\$500 for the entrance fee. Travel costs such as flight and hotel will not be calculated due to variability. This brings the total budget of the program to \$1,770 a year.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the dissemination tactics will include collecting data from different sources. Electronic forms of data collection will include the number of downloads from the program website and referrals from online forums to the program. person-to-person forms of evaluation will include the number of individuals who reached out requesting participation or information on the program. The number of participants in the program will be compared year to year to assess areas of successful recruitment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this program aims to support school-based OTPs in preparing and combating burnout. Participants will learn about advocacy, burnout strategies and caseload management skills that can be implemented to support themselves in schools. Through this program teachers and administrators will learn about the role of occupational therapy on the IEP team and build relationships to best support students. Results of the program will be disseminated through written, electronic and person-to-

person formats. Intended outcomes include decreasing burnout among OTPs and increased support in the system.

CHAPTER SEVEN – Funding Plan

Introduction

The return to in-person learning in 2021 was a difficult transition for students and teachers alike. Soon after, the media highlighted the stress of returning to in-person learning with coverage discussing the number of teachers leaving the field due to burnout and students struggling with behavioral challenges (Kim et al., K., 2022). Research covering staff in the school system has also highlighted speech therapists and school counselors, expressing increased burnout since the return (Riser-Kositsky, 2022; Schaumurg, 2023). A gap in literature discussing the challenges experienced by school-based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) exists; however burnout for pediatric OTs is reported (Shin et al., 2022). The goal of this program is to provide support and resources to school-based OTPs. The program will be an online module course that will meet two times a week for 1 hour for four weeks. The topics covered will explore factors associated with burnout in this population. Participants will complete a pre-test and post-test as well as a focus group at the end of the course. Extra resources will also be available on the website for participants to access in assisting with managing burnout in the school setting.

Available Resources

The first phase of the program will include creating the website and resources. A website designer will create the website to ensure the proper functionality of tabs and resources. The resource tabs will include mindfulness strategies, advocacy, caseload management, and Response to Intervention strategies (RTI). This researcher has

experience in the school-based system and will assist with writing some of these resources. However, occupational therapists with certification and experience in these areas will write resources for advocacy and mindfulness. These professionals will also be responsible for teaching those specific topics. Some of these resources will be created specifically for the module classes so participants can fill them out and begin planning to apply them to their school settings. Researchers will set aside funding for the web designer and OTs who will write and teach the topics.

Once the website and resources are in place, the next phase of the program will begin. Recruitment of participants will include posting on Facebook groups, American Occupational Therapists Association (AOTA), and Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC) for school-based occupational therapists meeting criteria. Researchers will request permission to advertise recruitment fliers. School-based OTs in the Southern California region, with 8 or fewer years of experience can join the program. Once the number of participants is confirmed, researchers will distribute the online Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Competency Survey to participants. Researchers will calculate the cost of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and use of Survey Monkey.

The final phase of the program will involve the application and conclusion of the class. The classes will be conducted over secure Zoom meetings, ensuring privacy and comfort for participants. Researchers will collect post-tests of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and Competency Survey. The costs of the redistribution of the tests will be calculated. To address the costs of the program, we will rely on the vital support of use of grants and scholarships. The California Foundation for Occupational Therapy (CFOT) is

a grant and scholarship program for members of the Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC). The grants are specifically designated to support the development of programs and projects that advance occupational therapy. Specific grants under this foundation include The Lisa Test Endowed Research Award and the Bonita Kraft Research Grant, which focus on expanding research into mental health and OT practice.

Table 7.1 outlines the tools and resources needed to run the school-based online burnout program.

Table 7.1*Year 1 Program Expenses*

Items	Costs	Justification
Personnel 1) Researcher 2) 2 Guest Speaking Occupational Therapists 3) Web designer	1) Volunteer, 0\$ 2) 45\$/hr 3) 500\$–1000\$ Total: Approximately 860\$	1) This research will be involved in teaching a majority of the courses for the month-long duration of the course 2) 2 OT colleagues will be involved in the project to teach a topic of the course. They will be paid for their time teaching and contribution to the site 3) A professional website designer will be hired to design the website and ensure the functionality of the site.
Space 1) Zoom membership	1) 14\$/month Total: 14\$	1) Zoom pro offers functions such as unlimited time on meetings and increased security features.
Equipment 1) Lap top 2) PowerPoint	1) 0\$/ current in use 2) 160\$ for year Total: 160\$	1) This research plans on using current laptop 2) PowerPoint purchase for MacBook in order to share powerpoints with participants
Supplies 1) Website 2) Resources upload to tabs 3) Maslach Burnout Inventory 4) Competency Survey 5) Survey Monkey	1) 20\$ a year for domain 2) 45\$/ per hr of labor 3) 15\$/ test 4) 0\$ 5) 75\$/month Total: 155\$	1) 20\$ a year will go towards purchasing the domain of the website 2) Therapists will be paid for their time creating resources for websites. This researcher will also create and upload materials for special topics. 3) The maslach inventory website charges 15\$ to purchase online version of test 4) Competency survey created during course 5) Survey monkey membership includes analysis of responses and statistics

Table 7.2*Year 2 Program Expenses*

Items	Cost	Justification
Personnel 1) Researcher 2) 2 Guest Speaking Occupational Therapists	1) Volunteer, 0\$ 2) 45\$/per hour Total: 45\$	1) This research plans on continuing to be the main OT working on this module on free time. 2) 2 guest speakers who are well experienced on their topics will present for their specific topics
Space 1) Zoom Membership	1) 14\$ a month Total: 14\$	1) Zoom will continue to be used into the second year in order to access more advanced features of Zoom.
Equipment 1) Lap top 2) Power Point	1) 0\$ 2) 160\$ for the year Total: 160\$	1) This researcher does not anticipate buying a new laptop for the second year of the module 2) Renewal of PowerPoint software
Supplies 1) Website 2) Maslach Burnout Inventory 3) Competency Survey 4) Survey Monkey	1) 20\$ domain renewal fee 2) 15\$ 3) 0\$ 4) 75\$/month Total: 110\$	1) Renewal of the website domain fee 2) Purchase of the Maslach Burnout inventory, online version to administer to participants 3) Competency Survey created by researcher 4) Service fee for SurveyMonkey advanced membership

Table 7.3*Potential Funding Sources*

Type of Funding	Source and Amount	Usage
<i>Grant Fund from Occupational Therapy Association California (OTAC)</i>	Lisa Test Endowed Research Award	<i>\$1,500 available to fund research in women's mental health, pediatrics, or occupation centered practice.</i>
<i>Grant Fund from Occupational Therapy Association California (OTAC)</i>	Bonita Kraft Research Grant	<i>\$1,500 available to fund mental health research.</i>
<i>General OTAC Grant</i>	General Grant available for all research categories	<i>Up to \$6,000 available per grant</i>

Conclusion

The OT school-based Burnout Prevention Program supports school-based OTPs in their settings. The online program creates a sense of community and resources for school-based OTPs to apply for and navigate the school-based system. Grants and scholarships can cover costs for this program. It is important that research and support are provided to this population for school OTPs to continue to support students and staff.

CHAPTER EIGHT – Conclusion

The COVID 19 pandemic was a life altering experience for many people around the world. The work that has been done to move on from such a difficult time has also been strenuous. Since the return to in-person learning, 44% of K–12 teachers have reported feeling “very often” or “always” burned out (Camera, 2022). The trend of burnout in the school system has been steadily growing with states such as Maine and Massachusetts, reporting hiring more than normal teacher turnover percentages (Banrum,2023). However, in some states such as California, teachers exiting the workforce were not recorded during the 2021–22 school year (Barnum, 2023).

Burnout is a hot topic in the media with other professionals such as school counselors and speech therapists also sharing their experiences. Studies on both of these groups have discussed rising trends in burnout, with speech therapists also discussing difficulty with caseload management (Riser-Kositsky, 2022; Schaumurg, 2023).

Little research currently exists on burnout and school based occupational therapy. Research has indicated that burnout in pediatric occupational therapy was being reported prior to the pandemic (Gupta et al., 2012; Truong & Hodgetts, 2017). Since the covid 19 pandemic, new research has indicated that school-based practitioners have also been struggling with burnout and the uncertainty in the schools systems (Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020; Struwig & Van Stormbroek, 2023).

Currently, a shortage of speech therapists in the school system has led to issues with accessing services for students and school districts (Marante & Farquharson, 2021). School based occupational therapy practitioners also service students, assisting with the

development of fine motor, visual motor and sensory integration skills to access classroom materials and activities. Rising burnout levels in the population can lead to school based occupational therapy practitioners also following teacher and speech therapy trends and leaving the school setting.

There are multiple factors that are associated with burnout in the school-based setting. Factors that were regularly identified in the literature were lack of support, role ambiguity, high caseloads and decreased work life balance (Goffredo et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2022). These factors can also be influenced by moderators, such as the existence of an Response to Intervention (RTI) system, teacher training on the school based OTP role and the number of locations an OTP services (Bazyk et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2020). The explanatory model in Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship between these factors and how they ultimately lead to burnout. This issue has led to the creation of the *Ready for School* program, an online program composed of modules to assist school-based practitioners prepare and combat school-based burnout.

The online course will be held online over Zoom and cover a variety of topics. Participants will be recruited through convenient sampling as well as advertisement on online platforms such as the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), Facebook groups and the Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC) newsletters. Participants will then be given pre measures to assess their baseline burnout levels. Personal information will be stored on a drive with a number key made for each participant to protect. Participants will then attend the online course that will be held two times a week for a duration of four weeks. At the conclusion of the course participants

will complete burnout level measures in order to assess any change. A focus group will also be conducted to assess content and delivery method of program.

Topics covered in the course are outlined in table 4.1, which describes the course schedule and listed topics. Participants are expected to learn how to advocate for themselves in their school settings, collaborate and educate others on their role, implement a variety of burnout prevention strategies and educate on RTI programs. A website is also expected to accompany the program, with access to materials and extra resources for participants. Outcome measures are expected to be measured 2 weeks, 1 month and 3 months post program to assess goals of the program.

Outcomes will be disseminated through personal, written and electronic forms. Use of brochures and fact sheets will be created to mail to participants. As well as passed out during poster presentations for person-to-person dissemination at conferences such as AOTA or OTAC conference. Results will also be disseminated electronically through use of Facebook groups and AOTA forums, in order to reach the primary target audience and insight discussion of outcomes. Funding is mainly expected to come from grants through OTAC grant foundations.

School based occupational therapy practitioners perform a vital role in the school system, servicing students and assisting throughout their educational journey. The *Ready for School* online program addresses the needs of school-based practitioners by providing support and strategies to areas often overlooked. It is important to address the mental health of school-based practitioners to empower them to continue to provide creative and effective services to students and to ensure the profession continues to thrive.

APPENDIX A – Program Document

Competency Survey

Example Questions

Please rate your current level of confidence in your ability to perform the duties of school based occupational therapists (IEPs, interventions, treatment planning etc.)

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident
- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

Please rate your current level of confidence in your ability to advocate for yourself as a school based occupational therapists in your setting to your colleagues

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident
- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

Please rate your ability to set work-based boundaries in your current school setting (this includes understanding your job description, boundaries with administrators).

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident
- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

Please rate your ability to manage your time in your current school setting (this includes taking work home, managing the work on campus, setting time for writing IEP reports and notes)

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident

- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

Please rate your ability to educate school staff and administrators on the role of school based occupational therapy

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident
- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

How familiar are you with the Response to Intervention (RTI) and its implementation in classrooms

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident
- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

Please rate your current level of confidence in the support from teachers and staff in your current district

- 1= Definitely not confident
- 2= Not very confident
- 3= Somewhat confident
- 4= Moderately confident
- 5= Highly confident

Self Reflection

What do you consider the most difficult aspect of your job as a school-based OT?

How would you describe your energy reservoir at this moment?

What outside strategies do you use to manage your stress currently?

APPENDIX B – Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of occupational therapy (OT) in the school system is to support students in developing fine motor, visual motor and sensory regulation skills to access the classroom and thrive in school. With the shutdown of schools for the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many students, teachers, and staff experienced increased stress and uncertainty regarding the school setting structure. The return to in-person learning continued to bring challenges.

As of 2019, many school professionals, such as teachers, speech-language pathologists, counselors, and staff, have reported experiencing burnout (Riser-Kositsky, 2022; Schaumburg, 2023). Professionals can infer that school-based occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) are also experiencing increased burnout in this setting. However, limited research has stated this outright (Stephenson, 2019).

There are many different factors that have contributed to the increase in burnout for OTPs. These factors include lack of administrative support, ambiguity with the OT role, lack of Response to Intervention programs, increased caseload, and decreased work-life balance. These factors then increase burnout, affecting the mental health of school-based practitioners. For OTPs to help students support their academic goals, they must have a support system that will set them up for success.

Project Overview

The *Ready for School* online course provides burnout prevention strategies and education to school-based OTPs. The program targets OTPs with 0–8 years of

experience. Research indicates that professionals with less than nine years of job experience have increased burnout and stress (Bümen, 2010; Hultell, Melin, & Gustavsson, 2013; Janus, Gawalkiewicz, & Bac 2018). The program will only include school-based OTPs from Southern California. This researcher will recruit participants through Facebook groups, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) community of practice groups, and the Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC) postings. Once this researcher has identified participants, they will complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Competency Measure. The course will meet two times per week for one hour for four weeks. Table 1 outlines the online course topic schedule.

Table 1

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Activities	Resources
Week 1	Introduction, Advocacy, Burnout strategy (mindfulness)	Handout summarizing the issues, discussion on experiences Meditation and mindfulness practice	Handout on background information provided on website
Week 2	Response to Intervention (RTI), Burnout Strategy (deep breathing)	RTI hand out, deep breathing exercise and handout for at home practice	Handouts provided on website
Week 3	Caseload Management, Burnout Strategy (stretching)	Review of California Law on the IDEA Act, as well advocacy strategies, stretching activities that can be done anywhere	Summary on (IDEA) act handout
Week 4	Post test (outside of class), Burnout Strategy (support systems), Focus group	Establishing support systems in the community and focus groups.	Post test and Competency measure done at end of course

The program is rooted in the job demands resource theory (JD-R), which focuses on the relationship between demands and resources. The theory states that when job demands increase and resources decrease, the outcome is an increase in job-related stress. However, when there is also an increase of job-related resources, it can act as a buffer to job-related stress and can lead to positive motivation and increased outcomes. (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Key Findings

The researcher will measure program outcomes using pre- and post-measures as well as downloads of supplementary resources. Participants will demonstrate decreased levels of burnout exhibited by the Maslach Burnout Inventory and increased reported levels of job competency. The researcher expects participants to apply strategies from the course and implement them in school settings.

- Short-term outcomes at two weeks post-program include increasing awareness of the OT role on individualized education program (IEP) team implementing advocacy strategies with administrators and teachers
- Intermediate outcomes at one-month post-program include implementation of RTI strategies in the classroom and full implementation of burnout strategies.
- Long term outcomes at three-month post-program include RTI application of classroom strategies, decrease caseload and unnecessary referral rate, decreased take-home work, and increased work-life balance.

The program is expected to have a positive outcome on the overall burnout levels of school based occupational therapy practitioners. By equipping school-based

practitioners to advocate for their needs, they will be able to educate their school staff and promote OT.

Conclusion

The goal of the *Ready for School* program is to prepare school-based OTPs for the challenges of burnout in the school system. To ensure students continue to receive excellent OT services, OTs must also be supported. Using advocacy and burnout prevention strategies, school-based OTPs can effectively manage their caseloads and support their students.

APPENDIX C – Fact Sheet



Occupational Therapy Burnout in the School Setting
Lizette Andazola MS, OTR/L
OTD Candidate



<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/40/b2/0d/40b20d9136c8f311d05a26bd33dd1d12.jpg>

School Based OT

The role of school based occupational therapy is to help students engage in roles, habits and routines in the school setting (Katsiana & Galanakis, 2021). This includes addressing fine moto and visual motor deficits, providing sensory strategies to assist in classroom participation and providing consultation services as needed. School based occupational therapy practitioners play a vital role in assisting students through their educational careers.

What's the Problem

Research has indicated a growing amount of burnout within school-based professionals (Truong & Hodgetts, 2017; Shin et al., 2022). These include speech therapists, teachers and school counselors (Riser-Kositsky, 2022; Schaumurg, 2023). OTs, working in the school setting have also been identified as experiencing increased job-related burnout. Factors related to increase burnout include:

- Lack of administrative support
- Role ambiguity
- Increase caseload
- lack of work life balance
- Lack of Response to Intervention programs (RTI)



<https://www.unmc.edu/nmmi/services/ot/SchoolTherapy.jpg>

Ready for School Online Program

The Ready for School program is an online course with the goal of addressing the factors associated with burnout. School-based occupational therapy practitioners will be able learn burnout prevention and advocacy strategies in order to implement them in their practice.

Course Info

- Online meeting, 2x week
- Duration of 4 weeks
- Pre- and post-test measures
- Additional resources available on website



<https://www.arborpsychology.org/ann-arbor/policies-forms/a2-ot-gym/>

practitioners play a vital role supporting students. It is important to also equip this population with the necessary tools they need to thrive in this challenging setting.

Funding

Funding for this program will be provided through grants from supporting organizations. Stakeholders of the program include school based occupational therapy practitioners, teachers, school administrators and school boards. Marketing for the program will include use of social media, AOTA and OTAC forums for marketing and recruitment.

Implications for OT

The *Ready for School Program* supports school-based practitioners succeed in the school settings. The online program creates a sense of community and resources for school-based OTs to apply and navigate the school-based system. School OT

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Why are there so many school-based jobs available? Are OTs leaving peds at a high rate?

(2022) cdal06, Why are there so many school-based jobs available? Are OTs

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CURRICULUM VITAE

