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Occupation-Based Learning Modules in Preparation for Parole: A Program Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative research study was conducted that examined occupational therapy students'

fieldwork rotation at Muskegon Correctional Facility, where they implemented a 15-week

pre-parole program. One focus group with three participants was conducted. Transcription,

coding, and theming followed, providing five themes; restriction, OT perceptions, learning

styles, future needs, and relationships. Results showed areas of needs within this population,

ways occupational therapy can address this need, and general improvements that can be made

to pre-release programs.

There are approximately 2.3 million incarcerated individuals in the United States (U.S.) with 225,000 in federal prisons and jails, 1,316,000 in state prisons, and 615,000 in local jails (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Further estimates show 3.7 million individuals are on probation, and 840,000 more are on parole in the United States. According to Benson (2003), multiple studies show that the mental health of individuals who are incarcerated declines while in prison as their violent and criminal behaviors increase. After experiencing high levels of stress and negative emotions, they are released with no preparation and few social or occupational skills needed to enter back into society. Prison programming implemented by occupational therapists can be used to teach these skills that are critical to combat the high rate of recidivism. According to the National Institute of Justice (2014), recidivism occurs when a released individual commits a crime that results in rearrests, reconviction, or re-incarceration within a three year period after release. Studies have shown that recidivism rates are lower under rehabilitative approaches to incarceration versus punitive methods (Taxman, 1998). One way the rehabilitation model could be applied to the current U.S. criminal justice system is more extensive parole preparation for individuals who are incarcerated.

Before an incarcerated individual completes his sentence, he may be eligible for parole. The term parole finds its roots in a French word meaning "to declare a promise" (Sulaiman, Ibrahim, Mohd, Nen, Sarnon, & Alavi, 2016, p. 142). The incarcerated individual promises to have prosocial behavior. An occupational therapist can help to facilitate this by encouraging participation in meaningful activities of daily living and by increasing the health and well-being for an individual or group (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Along with other professionals such as social workers and parole officers, occupational therapists may intervene

during this process to assist them with preparing for re-entry into society. Occupational

therapists are equipped with the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary to serve this

population, both in the prison system and as they transition into the community. The following

literature outlines current prison programming, punitive vs rehabilitative approach, recidivism,

and occupational therapy's promising role in this area.

Prison programming

When an individual is incarcerated certain freedoms are removed; however, there are still

programs put in place that are aimed to educate and help to reduce recidivism rates. A study

conducted by the Office of Justice Programs examined the recidivism rates in 30 states; 67.8%

of the 404,639 state prisoners released in 2005 were rearrested within three years of their

release, and 76.6% were rearrested within five years of release (Durose, Cooper & Snyder,

2010).

Research has shown the higher the education level of the incarcerated individual, the

less likely the individual is to recommit a crime when he is released (Prison Studies Project,

2018). As mentioned by the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), the mission of

educational programs is to provide opportunities to these individuals that will help them

become "contributing, productive members of the prison community while incarcerated and

contributing members of their communities upon release from prison" (MDOC, 2018, para. 1).

If these programs are provided it allows the incarcerated individual to maintain or develop

academic, work, and social skills needed within the prison community and the community to

which they will be returning. Unfortunately, according to the Prison Study Project, only six

percent of correctional spending is put toward these programs (2018). Due to the lack of prison

programming available, it is evident that the U.S. prison system prioritizes containment and not rehabilitation of individuals who have been incarcerated.

Punishment and rehabilitation

The current U.S. prison system primarily uses a punitive method where punishment is the prison system's focus. Forsey (2001) defines punishment as "the deliberate infliction of suffering on an individual by the state, often through a deprivation of money, liberty, or life" (p. 10). In a punitive prison system, incarcerated individuals are stripped of most of these freedoms. Forsey argues punishment is not justifiable, as the benefits do not outweigh the cost. This is notable as the American Psychological Association (APA) concludes that a punitive social control mechanism is a short-term solution that does more long-term damage to the person who is incarcerated and to the system than it helps. This punitive model has not seemed to be a deterrent to crime as the prison population has exponentially grown due to recidivism.

A rehabilitative model of incarceration focuses primarily on the rehabilitation and reintegration for people who are incarcerated. Depending on a country's implementation of a rehabilitative model, individuals that are incarcerated still have all services and rights of a citizen, minus a loss of liberty. Challenges for America to implement a rehabilitative system are its larger prison population and the financial burden it would place on a system which is already in debt. The size difference, the current overcrowding, and high rates of recidivism in the United States create difficulties to a transition of a more rehabilitative model (Berger, 2016).

Parole

There are two types of parole supervision styles: social casework approach and surveillance model approach. The social casework approach focuses on helping those who are on parole

with their problems, working to make success possible, and providing counsel (Caplan, 2006).

The surveillance model monitors parolees closely and returns them to prison if they violate

their parole (Caplan, 2006). People who are incarcerated are allowed on parole as soon as they

are eligible due to increased prison population unless the board can show they are a risk to

society. In a retrospective analysis about the anomalies in America's parole system, researcher

Joel Caplan states, "The parole system's primary response to larger caseloads and a more

punitive and unforgiving public is at odds with its traditional medical model of casework,

rehabilitation and reintegration" (Caplan, 2006, p. 70).

   One type of rehabilitation program is a re-entry program. These programs assist

incarcerated individuals in re-entering the community after they are released. Caporizzo (2011)

states the main purpose of re-entry efforts is to make communities safer and lower the direct

and indirect costs of incarceration of offenders. In addition, they state this is done by assisting

with job placement, facilitating access to drug-free housing, and providing support services

(2011).

Rehabilitative roles in prison

Interdisciplinary roles

There are currently several rehabilitative staff of different professions in America's prison

system, the most common being social work. The main roles of a social worker in a correctional

facility are to provide individual and/or group therapy, promote healthy family relationships,

provide access to employment, and advocate on behalf of the incarcerated individual's positive

behavior so they can feel prepared to enter back in society (Brown & Maki, 2012). Social

workers serve an important purpose for incarcerated individuals, but their scope of practice does not include an occupation-focused approach. Occupational therapy can help fill this void.

Occupational therapy's role

When an individual is incarcerated his environment changes, which influences his ability to engage in activities that are meaningful to him. Not having these resources or opportunities to engage in occupation can lead to occupational deprivation. Occupational deprivation refers to a circumstance when an individual's external situation hinders his ability to be involved in, or have the option to engage in activities that bring him joy (Whiteford, 1997). The use of occupational therapy within prisons could help reduce occupational deprivation. Occupational therapists have the ability to give individuals who have been incarcerated the tools and resources to be able to function independently, and effectively reintegrate into society (Westervelt, 2015).

Occupational therapists in the United States have done research examining how occupational therapy could create positive outcomes for incarcerated individuals as they reintegrate back into the community. At Duquesne University, research was conducted titled The Community Reintegration Project (CRP). Results showed positive outcomes when using occupational therapy in the jail, more specifically with re-integrating the incarcerated individuals back into the community and lowering the recidivism rates (Eggers, Munoz, Sciulli, & Hickerson Crist, 2006). A program in St. Louis was implemented at a local jail six weeks prior to individuals going on parole. It looked at each individual's needs holistically and took into account their personal and environmental factors (St. Louis University, 2016). In 2016, occupational therapists at Saginaw Valley State University developed a program called

Prison-Based Life Skills Animal Program. The aim of this program was to assist individuals who were incarcerated to recognize and change thought processes in order to create more adaptive and problem solving behaviors (Herlache-Pretzer & Jacob, 2018).

The ultimate goals of occupational therapy in this setting are to assist with various aspects of the individual's life and to serve as a reminder of the humanity of these individuals, showing they, too, are individuals with a drive to engage in meaningful activities. These programs have the potential to provide preliminary evidence that occupational therapy has a meaningful role in the prison system (Herlache-Pretzer & Jacob, 2018).

Theoretical perspectives

The Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) helped to guide this research. MOHO is a useful model of theoretical practice because of its evidence-based and associated assessment tool, The Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview Rating Scale (OCAIRS). The OCAIRS is a semi-structured interview that contains a forensic-specific assessment form option including a mental health interview tool. This assessment can be useful in prisons as it helps to determine how incarcerated individuals feel about moving forward and making prosocial choices upon release. Because the roles, habits, and personal causation of the individual are subject to change upon parole, discussing and being aware of this is an important step in successful re-entry to combat recidivism (Bryant et al., 2014).

Muskegon correctional facility

In 2017, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Occupational Science and Therapy Department established a connection with Muskegon Correctional Facility. Muskegon Correctional Facility allows GVSU occupational therapy students to conduct classes related to topics such as

financial management, stress management, and technology use in preparation for parole and re-entry to the community. A program evaluation was conducted on the occupation-based learning modules that were carried out at Muskegon Correctional Facility by Grand Valley State University Occupational Science and Therapy students.

The researchers propose to do a program evaluation of the occupation-based program led by three level I fieldwork students from GVSU occurring at Muskegon Correctional Facility over four months. A group of three GVSU occupational therapy fieldwork students will be accompanied by one GVSU occupational therapy faculty member. They will be trained and provide occupational therapy group intervention to the 15 incarcerated individuals. The students will be accompanied by a Grand Valley faculty member, Dr. Cynthia Grapcyznski, OTRL. Participants from Muskegon Correctional Facility will include 15 adult males who are eligible for parole review within 24 months and were selected by an overseeing official. The researchers are not privy to the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to recruit members for participation in the programming.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to evaluate GVSU's occupation-based modules that were implemented to help prepare incarcerated individuals for upcoming parole. This was originally intended to be accomplished by using two methods. First, by interpreting fieldwork students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, including themes of needs. The second method planned was to survey incarcerated individual's readiness to be released into the community on

parole. Unfortunately, the second method was not approved by the Michigan Department of Corrections due to time restrictions of the study.

The main objective of this research was to investigate the subjective efficacy of an occupational therapy education program driven by occupational therapy fieldwork students. The fieldwork students were invited to participate in a focus group upon completion of their fieldwork placement. It was hypothesized that occupation-based programming would prepare those eligible for parole, and increase their self-efficacy to function more adaptively.

Research design

Program evaluation consists of the use of research methods to measure if a service or program is meeting the needs of the target population (Kielhofner, 2006). Program evaluation is closely tied to program development, as the first closely informs the other. A focus group with occupational therapy students who implemented the program was used as a tool to evaluate the program (Kielhofner, 2006).

Creswell (2014) describes the use of a focus group and a few open-ended questions, with the goal to encourage the interviewees to share their opinions and views. Kielhofner (2006) also comments that a qualitative approach using interviews and focus groups creates a platform to more deeply garner the needs of the participants. The interviewees were purposefully together in order to encourage further dialogue and richer qualitative data. This data was used to obtain critical observations including what worked well with the incarcerated individuals and what specific learning modules should be changed.

Focus groups have an advantage due to researchers leading the line of questioning (Creswell, 2014). The focus group protocol included a brief introduction followed by nine

open-ended questions (see Appendix B for focus group questions). Upon the suggestion of

Creswell (2014), the initial question was purposefully a more straightforward question to serve

as an icebreaker. During the interview, researchers followed-up and asked participants to

further explain the thoughts they shared and encouraged elaboration (Creswell, 2014).

Taylor (2017) argues that one advantage of a focus group is that it is an efficient way to

gather information from multiple people simultaneously. It furthermore allows the researchers

to explore critical incidents that may have led to outcomes that were not met or exceeded

expectations. Krueger (1997) suggests that a focus group should run from one to two hours in

length, so the researchers chose to run the focus group for approximately 90 minutes. The

recommendation for a two-hour group is to ask approximately 12 questions. Due to the shorter

duration, there were nine suggested questions.

To reduce the presence of coercion or undue influence a committee member outside

the department recruited the focus group participants. The focus group was used to determine

the OT student's perspectives of the effectiveness of the modules. They were notified that they

were not in any way obligated to participate in the focus group, and could withdraw at any time

once beginning. By participating, they agreed to the use of their information for this research.

Snacks and water were provided as an incentive.

For transcription purposes, a random letter was assigned to each fieldwork student

participating in the focus group. Once the focus group was completed, the student researchers

transcribed the information collected and ensured accuracy of the transcription. The

researchers completed coding and theming of the information collected through the focus

group within nine weeks of receiving the focus group transcription.

Participants

The participants involved in this study included a convenience sample of three Grand Valley

State University Occupational Science and Therapy students who completed their Level I

fieldwork at Muskegon Correctional Facility. These participants were selected due to their

interaction with the target population and because they implemented the program. All three of

the fieldwork students were invited to participate in a focus group.

Data collection

The duration of the focus group was recorded with an MP3 recording device borrowed from the

OT department, and the information was transcribed. The interviewers took notes about the

interviewee's facial expression and tone and then add those to the transcription. The recorded

information was saved on the recording device and stored in the primary investigator's locked

file cabinet designated for research storage on campus until the recording was deleted.

Transcription of the audio data was performed by two of the student researchers and reviewed

by the other two student researchers on the team.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Analyzing data in a qualitative study involves taking apart the information and putting it back

together again (Creswell, 2014). To ensure rigorous methods of analysis, five steps of analysis

suggested by Creswell (2014) guided our research analysis. The first step includes preparing the

data for analysis. This was done during transcription of the interview. The second step includes

reading through all the data as a research team. This gave an opportunity to have a broad scope

of all the information before getting more involved in the small details. Next all the data was

coded. This involved organizing the information into different sectors and categories. It included segmenting paragraphs and organizing of information into categories labeled by terms used by the participants. Codes typically fall into three categories: common sense labels based on previous research, unanticipated findings, and unusual codes that interest the researchers. The study used a mixture of emerging and predetermined codes. This provided the structure for the findings but left important space for unanticipated information.

After coding, the organized data was used to create themes that highlighted the findings of the research. Several of those were broken down for discussion into subthemes. To finish the analysis, the information was interpreted. This included bringing meaning into the themes and subthemes identified, as well as explaining how information collected adds to past research or contrasts with it. Interpretation also included identifying important future research directions and connects findings to relevant theory.

Validity & reliability

Multiple steps were taken to check for validity and a consistent approach to the research process throughout the study ensured reliability. Validity strategies included clarifying bias, and presenting discrepant information (Creswell, 2014). Bias was clarified within the discussion of limitations, including a thorough reflection on how the researchers' interpretation have been shaped by gender, culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and background (Creswell, 2014). Discrepant information that contradicts the discovered themes were presented to show a balance of viewpoints and add credibility. All these methods have been suggested to add validity to qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Gibbs (2007) lists several procedures that the current researchers implemented to increase reliability. Transcripts were checked for mistakes made in transcription by the research team. Researchers were vigilant that the definitions of codes did not change as analysis moved forward. Meetings and communication between the team was consistently recorded in individual research journals. Also, in the developing of code, researchers verbally abided by an intercoder agreement. This agreement stated that at the beginning, all researchers analyze an individual passage of the transcription text together and must agree on codes found. When a situation arose where three researchers agreed and one did not, the majority decided.

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the researchers addressed three of the four aspects of credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was established by coding the transcription as individual researchers first, then gathering as a group to determine common codes, and lastly agreeing upon themes. To establish transferability, Korstjens & Moser (2018) suggest the researchers provide descriptive data of the setting, sample, inclusion and exclusion criteria, interview procedure and topics, as well as excerpts from the interview guide. To establish confirmability, researchers verbally discussed any potential biases they held towards either population.

Results

Five themes emerged through data analysis of the occupational therapy (OT) fieldwork program with the men at Muskegon Correctional Facility, restriction, OT perceptions, learning styles, future needs, and relationships. Within four of the five themes, sub-themes emerged. OT

perceptions had three sub-themes of OT perceptions of themselves, OT perceptions of the

men, and OT qualifications for success. Learning styles had three sub-themes of OT teaching

styles, men's learning styles, and modules. Future needs had three sub-themes of OT students

perceptions of the men's needs, the men's perception, and technology needs. Lastly,

relationships had four sub-themes of men and men, men and family, prison staff, and men and

OTs.

Restriction

The first theme identified explores the idea of restriction. The students who were interviewed

shared different aspects of how this restriction affected them as they taught, and also how it

impacted the incarcerated individuals in their daily lives.

The students showed frustration about the lack of resources they could use during the

modules. Participant A stated, "We had limited resources. All we had available to us was a

chalkboard and that was it. No technology or anything [else to help]." When responding to a

question about some of the challenges they faced while leading the group, participant A stated

that it was challenging to be ". . .creative with intervention planning with such limited

resources." The warden of the prison was often associated with restriction, as she approves

what can go in and what the prisoners and the students can take in and out. Participant C said,

"We had to get everything they would take with them preapproved. Anything we brought

in...the warden would [have to] say 'yes' and they [men] would take it with them [out of the

class]."

The students believed further advocacy is needed to be able to bring in more materials

that enhance teaching and give men the exposure to up-to-date technology. Participant A said,

"I wish we would have pushed the envelope a little bit harder and advocated that...if we bring

in other types of materials they're not going to harm us with them." This theme of restriction

was also identified in connection to the men. This theme was not unanticipated, as the main

focus is on incarcerated males. This restriction was seen in the environment for the men. It also

was identified in the limited time the men could be in class, showing a restriction in education

and preparation for parole. This restricted environment also impacts a restriction in leisure

opportunities. While it was said by participant C that the incarcerated individuals had ". . .a lot

of free time," they were in an environment where they did not have "many leisure

opportunities".

OT perception

The second theme that emerged during the analysis process was the overarching idea of OT

students' perceptions. Subthemes of this included OT students' perception of themselves, OT

students' perception of the men, and OT students' perception of what qualifications for success

are in the criminal justice rehabilitation setting.

Throughout the focus group interview, the OT students reflected upon their fieldwork

experience and revealed some perceptions they had of themselves, revealing the first

subtheme. They spoke about how their experience was an eye-opening process and how

throughout the weeks they felt their skills as practitioners continually grew and developed.

During the focus group participant C stated, "There's not even words for the amount that I've

learned in the last couple weeks. It has...been a really cool experience to...get to meet all of

these individuals [and] to learn from them each…[week] and help to prepare them for their

future." The OT students also spoke about how they were mostly autonomous in decision

making and implementation while leading the modules each week. This forced them to adapt

to their situation quickly and learn how to best serve the men in their group. The OT students

stated that it was a learning process for them as well as the men. Participant C explained this by

saying:

> I think it definitely got easier as we went along... Learning how to facilitate questions
>
> and learning [more about] individuals helps you grade down or up… That just...came
>
> with...practice and I feel like if we were to do it all over again I would have...a lot better
>
> grasp on the best way to facilitate discussion.

Overall, the OT students' perception of themselves was mainly reflective and showed their

progress and growth throughout the entire experience.

The OT students also shared their perceptions of the men that they led in the group each

week, leading to the second subtheme. Their overall perceptions included overarching ideas of

surprise and miscalculation. More specifically, the students had a surprise at their lack of

understanding in relation to risk, goal setting, and overall lack of knowledge. Participant C

stated:

> Well a lot of these individuals have been in this facility for 20 plus years and so a lot of
>
> the [things that are]...culturally the norm for us, they just hadn't had. They were a step
>
> behind [be]cause they hadn't been integrated into society.

The OT students explained during the focus group that throughout the course of their program,

they provided homework and reference sheets for the men. They had the perception that the

men would refer back to these materials in the future which was made evident by the men

asking for more homework and information at times. This also tied into the perception that the

students had towards the men in terms of what learning style would be most beneficial for

them. The OT students felt it was most important that the men knew how to seek resources on

their own once on parole versus trying to teach them about every single resource there is.

Participant A stated:

> I think that as time went on [and] the weeks continued...it was more important...that
>
> these guys knew how to seek resources that were available to them, as opposed
>
> to...having all this knowledge.

This shows some of the perceptions that the OT students had helped to guide their teaching

and lead their interventions in group.

The third subtheme under OT students' perceptions is OT qualifications for success,

meaning that this is what the students thought tied into their success of the program.

Throughout the entire process the OT students had mentorship from their fieldwork supervisor,

which they thought attributed to their success, even though the supervisor took a hands-off

approach. The students also thought that they had the leadership skills needed to be successful

in this environment. They attributed this to their previous experiences in their schooling.

Another main point of discussion during the focus group was about the need for the OT

students to build rapport with the men. Finding sameness between themselves, and checking

their privileges and assumptions all contributed to rapport-building. Participant C explained it

as:

> As a white girl in grad[uate] school we've...had certain privileges in our lives and trying
>
> to get past that barrier [was important]...It was an interesting thing to try to find

sameness. Doctor G. [supervisor] would always say to always try to find sameness

[even] though we are both from different environments.

Learning styles

The third theme identified was the overall learning styles. The first sub-theme identified the OT

students' teaching style. It was noted that transitioning from teaching in a large group to that

of multiple small groups was more successful. These smaller groups lead to further and more

meaningful discussion. In addition, verbal sharing was a positive experience for both the

participants and the OT students. To help them identify what was important to the men before

starting the modules they used the OCAIRS. This allowed the OT students to teach broad

concepts to the group and grade the materials as necessary. Overall their approach was

centered on encouraging the men to participate in small and large group discussion each week

and to think critically about the content. Participant A said, "At the end we would have a large

group activity to... apply what we had learned before closing with a reflection based off what

we covered that day."

During the focus group it was noted that the OT students used open ended-questions to

facilitate discussion with the men. The students also encouraged the men to complete their

homework each week. By continuing their learning outside of the session through homework

and allowing the men to have input of the modules it was evident that an adult style learning

theory was used. The students asked for feedback throughout each of the modules to ensure

they were being client-centered. Additionally, the men were taught to set practical goals for the

program and in preparation for release. Finally, participant A identified writing was an effective

teaching strategy.

> They all [men] mentioned that having [information] on paper makes it more
>
> realistic instead of just ideas floating in their head[s]. It's a really good idea for the
>
> future students to have them write things down so they visualize it.

The second sub-theme discussed the men's learning. Based on the information gathered from

the OT students it was evident that initially the men had passive ideas for the modules, but as

they felt more comfortable and time went on, they requested certain topics and information to

be taught. As a result, Participant C identified the men as curious and engaged:

> [A] lot of them spoke that this was the only time they felt like they were an equal...
>
> after a few weeks... of [them getting] to know us and we got to know them
>
> [through] building...rapport. They started to... care more and [so they] engaged
>
> more.

Additionally, the men's overall knowledge differed between them so some modules taught

were more applicable than others. They were given homework after each module to complete

of which they initially thought was helpful. But as the program progressed, the men's

perception of the homework changed from being helpful to being identified as busy work. But

overall they thought it was beneficial for reflection and processing and were open to

completing the homework. Participant A said:

> We gave out homework almost every module. We handed it out at the end [of
>
> sessions] for them to take out [of the class] with them and then come back the
>
> following week with it completed [and ready] to share reflections...Our purpose
>
> behind that was to allow the information to...stay with them and for them to think

about it throughout the week instead of just coming into a class for 2 and a half

hours and then leaving without thinking about it the rest of the week.

The final sub-theme was about the modules. Throughout the program, the men were able to

make connections between the modules and their personal lives. The OT students noted that

although the men showed reliance on past goals and plans, they appreciated the opportunity to

write things down and visualize their future. The men also told the OT students they were

reteaching the information from the modules to other incarcerated individuals thus transferring

and increasing knowledge of their peers. Participant A stated, "They share the information with

other inmates and that was super helpful for them [the men]. Which was...having...a ripple

effect, impacting more people."

Future needs

The fourth theme identified the future needs of the men. The sub-themes of the students'

perception of the men's needs, men's perception of their needs, and technology needs were

identified.

There were overarching ideas that were associated with the first subtheme of the OT

students' perception of the future needs of the men. The focus group showed that the men

have a desire to travel but have out-of-date knowledge. Another future need for the men was

to incorporate repentance and forgiveness. However, this topic was not applicable to all. This

was identified as a need because it would be a way to display repentance for the wrong doings

the men have done. Participant A explained:

. . . I think...something that would have been beneficial would be to have them

[the men] write a letter to somebody that they have wronged in the past...to ask

for forgiveness if that's applicable. I don't know if that would be applicable to all

of them.

Additionally, another need the men identified was having family problems and a need for

parenting skills. The OT students did not feel qualified to teach this module considering none of

them have experience being a parent. Multiple men classified this as a need.

Furthermore, as the OT students explained the various learning modules that were

taught throughout the focus group, it was discussed by participant A how the men would place

"all their eggs in one basket." More specifically, that the men would not have a real backup plan

if their release plan did not work out as they had hoped. Upon release, the men will need to

make informed choices in order to remain in the community and avoid recidivating. Breaking

down a plan into doable steps was identified as a need and being able to maintain a routine

upon release. This is shown when participant B mentioned:

. . . that was another...module that I don't think we said before. We...called it

Plan of Action and we had a worksheet and...activity where we had four

different themes like employment, housing, health insurance,... and

relationships.

The second sub theme was the men's perceptions of their needs. While teaching the modules

the OT students were able to understand how the men perceived their abilities and their needs

throughout the program. When discussing employment, participant B said the men were

interested mainly in creating their own businesses:

> I think a lot of them just wanted to start their own business and so...I made a
>
> handout on steps of starting your own business...It almost seemed like they
>
> didn't realize how big of a task that is and how big of a deal it is.

It was also stated by participant A in relation to the men starting their own business that:

> I think we covered all…[areas] but...taking an inventory to see exactly what
>
> types of businesses beforehand would allow us to specify, making more detail
>
> for what they needed.

The men identified the need to understand financial management to start up their own business. They initially believed creating a business would be simple and underestimated the steps involved. This was shown in the following statement of participant A:

> Financial management was eye opening. We provided them with...a pie chart of
>
> the percent of the saved income [needed] for...each category of living.
>
> They...realized that…'Wow! With a minimum wage job it's [going to be] tough to
>
> save...money'.

It was also discussed by the students that the men felt disappointed after they learned about the future barriers they may face once they reintegrate back into the community. However, working with the OT students gave them hope for the future, participant A noted that "I would say that because they've [the men] been in prison for so long they haven't really had access to the 'outside world', as they call it. And so, us [occupational therapy students] coming in fresh…[gave] them hope."

The third sub theme identified was the need of technology. There was a lot of discussion about technology needs the men and OT students identified within the focus group. It was seen

that the men had little to no experience with using an online search engine for job seeking.

Furthermore, the men were unsure on how to perform online banking. Participant A stated,

"...We mentioned earlier [that] some of [the men]...have been...there for 20 years, and the

entire community, society, [and] world has changed to all technology." Therefore, the OT

students saw the need for improvements of the men's access to technology in order to

promote exposure to various technological platforms. During the focus group participant A

mentioned:

> . . . for me and the guys that I interviewed with the OCAIRS that[technology skills] was
>
> something every single one of them [mentioned] when I asked the question[s], 'What
>
> can we provide to you?...What can we help teach you? What are some goals you want
>
> out of our program?' And they all said computer skills [and] technology. Right off the
>
> bat.

Relationships

The last theme identified dealt with relationships. Participants often mentioned relational

aspects to their work in the prison and mentioned several relationship interactions. These

relationships include those between the men and the other incarcerated individuals, the men

and their families, relationships with the prison staff, and the relationship between the men

and the participants.

When considering the relationship between the men and each other, it was noted that

fairness of treatment mattered to the men. Participant A relayed a story of conducting a trivia

game with the men during one of the modules. "...if we [the students] were not confident in

how we're scoring things because they [the men] were really competitive, they would get upset

about that and we would have to re-collect the whole group together." This competition and

desire for fair treatment in relation with each other contrasts to the comradery also noted. The

participants stated that the men learned best from the stories of each other. The content

became relevant to them when another man shared how he related to the information in the

module. They stated that in some lessons men reported that they shared what they learned

with a bunk mate who was helped by the information.

The relationship between the men and those outside of the prison was also found in the

data. Men often depended on friends or family outside for their housing post-release. When

considering employment after release, several mentioned they had previous business plans

with people outside. Participant B mentioned the men's relationship with their children,

reporting that many of the men have children and "they did talk about problems with their kids

and families."

The relationships with the prison staff were also discussed during the focus group. Data

reflected a negative feeling towards the prison staff from the occupational therapy students.

Participant A perceived that the staff would treat the men based on "... what they were

charged and sentenced with." The relationship between the men and the prison staff were

perceived by the participants as negative.

The final relationship discussed was between the men and the participants. This

relationship was heavily infused throughout the data. It was seen that the participants had

differences in intimidation levels towards the men. Participant A stated she never felt

intimidated throughout her experience. Participant B shared that, "when you see...the crimes

that these guys have committed...it can be super intimidating and...a completely different

experience than anything else . . ." There were two incidents in which the participants did not

feel like they could be completely honest or direct, both because they did not believe they were

qualified enough to give an educated answer.

The participants also expressed barriers, especially initially, which they perceived were

due to the differences in gender, age, and the differences of environment. Participant A

struggled to connect with the men in the beginning since they were not a part of the "outside

world". When responding to what hindered engagement, participant C remarked on the

difficulty in the beginning to find "sameness".

> Yeah I would say it was really hindering to the group at the beginning because a
>
> lot of them [men who are incarcerated] admitted at the end [that they originally
>
> wondered] 'what are we going to learn from these college, young girls? But I
>
> think as soon as they got to know us and understood where we were coming
>
> from and that we were...open to them, that it...allowed them to open up.

There were many instances of a positive feelings the participants had towards the men, and of

the men towards the participants. There were feelings of trust established over time, with

participants not feeling they were in physical danger. The participants remarked on how

respectful each of the men were throughout the sessions and had positive interactions with

them. The students felt they had built meaningful relationships with the men and expressed

empathy towards the men's fears and worries. Participant A shared:

> . . . I told the guys on our last day that I looked at each of them...as my brother,
>
> or dad, or uncle. I feel like I could go to any of them… [for] life advice that I

needed...this process allowed us as students to learn just as much as [the men]

learned.

The participants shared that they treated the men with respect. When responding to why they

believed the men contributed so much during each session, participant C stated, ". . . I know

we...all treated each other with respect and treated each other as equals." The participants

were able to share their hope and confidence that the men would successfully reintegrate using

the skills they had learned.

Discussion

The data on restriction shows that professionals working in this environment are restricted in

their work. The policies are not conducive toward rehabilitation. This is seen by the restriction

in materials that are brought in and out of the classrooms, the limitations in resources, and the

limited time men who are incarcerated are allotted to be in classes. The men reported too

much free time, but restricted access to meaningful leisure. This creates a form of occupational

deprivation as they have limitations around engaging in activities that bring them joy.

Development of a useful and productive routine would be more constructive for the men and

for society upon their release, as they would be more likely to integrate successfully. While

some of this constraint is necessary because incarceration is naturally restrictive, many policies

currently held in place impedes professionals doing rehabilitative work and is a barrier to

successful integration of men.

Overall, the OT students perceived the pre-parole program was beneficial for the men

and would aide in their upcoming reintegration into the community. The process as a whole

was eye-opening for the OT students and revealed to them the value of non-traditional practice

areas. The students were able to learn new skills that they will be able to apply and will benefit

them in their future. The results showed the men found the program beneficial and will use

both the knowledge and materials they gained through the modules. The students' surprise at

the men's lack of knowledge and understanding in certain areas also shows the gap in services

being provided to the men to prepare them for release.

The OT students' perceptions about what was needed for their own success in this

environment provides data that will be useful for both future students who complete the same

or a similar fieldwork experience and practicing occupational therapists who may work in this

setting in the future. Qualities that were identified to be important for an occupational

therapist in this setting include flexibility, creativity with limited resources, patience and

understanding, the confidence to advocate for this population, and the ability to identify

personal biases and build rapport. By building rapport with the men, the students were able to

connect and build strong relationships with them. Their relationships contributed to the success

of the program and without the strong connection between them, the men would likely not

have been as open about their concerns, questions, and past experiences.

The OT students experimented with various teaching styles to find methods that were

effective for both parties. The most impactful approach was incorporating the use of small

group discussions. This allowed them to facilitate discussions that were meaningful and

provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge in an informal manner. It was likely that the

men felt more comfortable speaking in a smaller group, thus contributing to deeper

conversation. In addition, developing the content to be more client-centered helped to keep

the men engaged in their learning. The men started to suggest topics for modules several

weeks into the modules, showing an investment in their learning and feeling comfortable in the environment. The OT students used their clinical skills to grade the learning materials as necessary. This enhanced the understandability of the module. Additionally, they encouraged the men to reflect upon the materials by discussing open-ended questions as a large group at the conclusion of each session. Smetana and Bell (2014) argues there is no difference between large group (whole class) and small group learning when using computer simulations. In fact, the researchers noted that there was highly collaborative discussion during the whole class discussion. This is helpful information to note for the current research as the men participated in both large group and small group discussion but noted that they prefer smaller groups. More research is needed to determine the effect of the ideal group size for optimal learning with this population.

Because the men were actively engaged in their learning and completed their homework it shows they are invested in the program and are genuinely interested in better preparing themselves for release from prison. It can be assumed that because the OT students taught the men how to set practical and measurable goals, the men will think more critically about the steps they can take to reach those goals. Furthermore, having them written on paper makes them feel more real and attainable. A study by Harrist, Harrist, Carlozzi, and McGovern (2007) determined that participants who spoke or wrote about their life goals versus something more general had fewer health center visits. In addition, participants of the study who discussed their life goals also reported a more positive mood. This study supports the use of goal writing as an effective therapy intervention as performed by the OT students. In addition,

the results of the study suggest that if incarcerated individuals participate in discussing their

goals, they will have better overall health and wellbeing (Harrist et al., 2007).

Additionally, the men took the information they learned from the program and taught it

to their peers. This demonstrated their competency with the material and information learned.

A study by Chrispeels, Klosterman, Martin, Lundy, Watkins, Gibson, & Muday (2014), supports

peer-to-peer teaching and learning. They found that undergraduate students who taught high

school students tested better in the material they taught. The men who shared with

incarcerated individuals who were not participants of the program furthered the impact the

program had on the prison as a whole.

There are needs that were not thoroughly addressed throughout the program. The men

have a desire to travel, however, have out-of-date knowledge. Out-of-date knowledge could

limit the men's ability to be successful once they are back in the community. Additionally, it

could affect how comfortable they feel seeking out resources and information needed to travel

especially if this included obtaining a passport. The men identified the need for parenting skills

and guidance with family problems. Due to the OT students feeling unqualified to address this

topic since they are not parents themselves, this is an area of need that is not currently being

addressed for these men.

Forgiveness and repentance was another need that the OT students identified.

Incorporating this as a future module taught by the OT students could help the men further

understand forgiveness and repentance as well as allow them to relieve any guilt or shame they

have surrounding the crime they committed. Recent criminal justice research suggests that

when the offender offers an apology and shows remorse it can benefit both the offender and

the victim(s) (Eaton & Theuer, 2009).

Secondly, the men had a desire to develop their own business. However, the OT

students identified the need for the men to better understand financial management and all of

the steps that are involved when creating one's own business. Utilizing an inventory or

evaluation of the exact needs that each individual has for the type of business they want to

create would allow future OT students to provide specific education based on the results. This

could also turn into a future module that the OT students create since most of the men

identified that they want to own a business. The OT students felt this showed that the men

were individualistic and wanted to create their own in order to feel they are control. This would

allow the men to have a sense of control they do not typically have during their incarceration.

It is hypothesized that if the men were given more opportunities for control and positive

experiences with authority they would be less interested in individualistic business plans.

Willingness to join the workforce and have a boss would help the men to integrate successfully.

More research is needed to consider this potential correlation. The need of employment

post-incarceration is a common need seen in research. An article written in 2004 systematically

evaluated incarcerated individuals post-release employment. Harrison and Schehr (2004)

concluded:

> National recidivism rates for nonviolent, adult ex-offenders between the ages of
>
> 18-35 remain at 70%, not because all of them are prone to criminal behavior, but
>
> because they are not provided with the necessary tools either in prison or

outside to live independently and maintain employment. (Harrison & Schehr,

2004, pp.27)

Lastly, there was the need for technology. The men had little to no experience with

seeking jobs using online search engines due to limited exposure. Currently, many job postings

are found through online sites, and if the men are unaware of how to use these sites this could

hinder their ability to find and acquire a job. Furthermore, limited exposure can greatly impact

the men's reintegration into the community. Technology is always changing and evolving, which

could cause the men to feel overwhelmed and unprepared with how to navigate technology

and the online world. Increased exposure to various technological platforms would ensure the

men can be prepared and comfortable with using technology upon release. The ability to seek

and gain meaningful employment upon release would allow these individuals to become

productive members of society.

The results about relationships emphasizes those who are incarcerated are relational

beings. This is shown in the competition between the men, their desire to share information

with each other, and their thankfulness for the respect they received from the students.

Incarceration can lead to high levels of isolation. Isolation is a large factor in causing or

exacerbating mental health conditions. Research published in 2019 in New Jersey followed 92

in or released from the New Jersey Department of Corrections. The researchers found a

positive association that was statistically significant between time spent in isolation and

number of mental illness diagnoses (Valentine, Restivo & Wright, 2019). The men reported that

the time in their parole preparation modules was the only place they felt respected and were

treated as an individual. This humanizing treatment lead to an increase in discussion and

participation in each module. The men craving respect and calling for equal treatment

emphasizes the humanity of these men. The treatment in prisons today dehumanizes those

inside, making re-entry back into society more difficult.

It was shown that the relationship with the prison staff was negative. If the relationships

of the staff with professionals and with the incarcerated individuals improved more beneficial

improvements could be made in America to each correctional facility. Prison and jail

populations are increasing each year and recidivism rates are rising. Rhee, Hur, and Kim (2017)

found that coworker incivility negatively impacts job performance and increases emotional

exhaustion. Improvements must be made to change this, and a place to start would be

improving relationships amongst prison staff. This is supported by research done by Mattingly,

Davidson, Polovick, and Jaegers (2016) showing that prison staff were concerned with the level

of communication and teamwork among themselves and prison policies.

Implications

Overall, this research study provides baseline data to an area of research that is

underdeveloped. As OT emerges in this area of practice, this study can serve as a framework for

program development and identifying common needs of incarcerated individuals. This research

study allowed the OT students to speak about their experiences and provide data validating

OT's role in this setting. The students were also able to provide data showing the gaps of

preparation and services offered to incarcerated individuals prior to release, which could result

in increased rates of recidivism.

A limitation of this study was the small number of participants. Due to this, the data is not representative of all occupational therapy programming in prisons, and the results have limited generalizability. Limitations of the focus group included the fact that the data about the target population came from an indirect source, and was subjective to each student implementor. Because the focus group was conducted by the research team, the fact that interviewers and interviewees were peers in the same academic cohort, the researchers' presence may have biased the answers given (Creswell, 2014).

In addition, the primary investigator was the participants professor in some classes. There were also multiple participants in the focus group, and not all may have contributed evenly. Additionally, the presence of the other participants may have created a bias among one another (Creswell, 2014). The research team did not consult with an outside professional to review transcription data and to verify themes identified. This poses a limitation for ability to replicate the themes. Initially, this was planned to be included in this research study, but due to time restrictions was not completed. This research may not be as applicable to other institutions, due to the limitation of not being able to survey the incarcerated individuals through a post program survey, as originally desired.

Dissemination

After the research has been completed, the findings will be shared with the stakeholders involved. This information will be sent to the GVSU fieldwork students who participated, the faculty educators, the Muskegon Correctional Facility prison warden, research mentor, and committee members.

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Appendix A

Glossary

Incarceration: confinement in a jail or prison

Punitive: inflicting or aiming at punishment

Recidivism: a tendency to relapse into criminal behavior

Re-entry: the transition of offenders from prison to community supervision

Restriction: a limitation put into place by an outside source

Parole: conditional release of an incarcerated individual

Rehabilitative: providing supports and programs to assist in the reintegration following

incarceration

Occupational Therapy: therapy to encourage engagement in meaningful activities of daily life

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. What topics did the modules cover?

    a. How effective do you think (insert module) was? Why?

    b. Which module did you find most/least effective? How did you measure this?

2. How did you create the modules at the correct level of understanding for participants? How

    did you take into account participant literacy level?

3. How involved was the group during your sessions? (questions, discussion, etc.)

    a. What contributed to engagement? What hindered engagement?

4. What were the challenges you experienced leading this group? Challenges in creating the

    modules?

5. Are there any module topics that were not taught that you think would have been

    beneficial?

6. Which module topics were most challenging for the incarcerated individuals to understand?

    a. Why were they the most challenging?

    b. How could you tell they were the most challenging?

    c. How could this be approached differently in future?

7. Was the homework assigned beneficial for the individuals involved?

8. Now that you are finished, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

    (how they taught, implementation, assessment, homework, teaching style)