

Reflection Article/Essay

“Best practices of occupational therapy in schools” – a critical review and contributions for occupational therapists in the education sector¹

“Best practices of occupational therapy in schools” – uma resenha crítica e aportes para terapeutas ocupacionais no setor da educação

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Abstract

This text is the result of a seminar by the Research Group “Citizenship, Social Action, Education and Occupational Therapy”, which took place in 2019, among the members of the “School, Occupational Therapy and Radical Inclusion” line, who have investigated the book “*Best Practices of Occupational Therapy in Schools*”. Published in 2013, this book was widely read in the United States of America, as part of the efforts of the American Occupational Therapy Association to offer and expand theoretical and practical subsidies that would guarantee both the insertion and the qualification of performance of the occupational therapists in services and actions tied to the education sector. We believe that sharing a synthesis of this material, as well as critical reflections that were fostered by your study, in a contextualized dialogue in the Brazilian scenario, may inspire new proposals for occupational therapists who have dedicated themselves to this sector, but also discuss the risks that model transpositions can cause, since certain models and approaches respond to historically and politically situated contexts. With our differences explained, we wish that the circulation of the proposals in this book

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may, above all, contribute to leverage new and efficient strategies to expand the number of professionals involved in the education sector.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy; Education; Education, Primary and Secondary; Practice Guideline as Topic.

Resumo

O presente texto é resultado de um seminário do Grupo de Pesquisa “Cidadania, Ação Social, Educação e Terapia Ocupacional”, ocorrido em 2019, entre os integrantes da linha “Escola, Terapia Ocupacional e Inclusão Radical”, que se debruçaram sobre o livro *“Best practices of Occupational Therapy in Schools”*. Editado em 2013, esse livro teve grande circulação nos Estados Unidos da América, compondo parte dos esforços da *American Occupational Therapy Association* para ofertar e ampliar subsídios teórico-práticos que garantissem tanto a inserção como a qualificação da atuação dos terapeutas ocupacionais em serviços e ações junto ao setor da educação. Consideramos que compartilhar uma síntese desse material, bem como as reflexões críticas que foram fomentadas pelo seu estudo, em diálogo contextualizado no cenário brasileiro, possa inspirar novas proposições para terapeutas ocupacionais que têm se dedicado a esse setor, mas também colocar em debate os riscos que transposições lineares podem causar, uma vez que determinados modelos e abordagens respondem a contextos situados, histórica e politicamente. Explicitadas nossas diferenças, que a circulação das propostas desse livro possa, sobretudo, contribuir para alavancar novas e eficientes estratégias para ampliarmos o número de profissionais envolvidos com o setor da educação.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional; Educação; Ensino Fundamental; Diretivas Práticas.

1. Contextualization

Occupational therapy has been related to the field of education, especially with schools, having different perspectives and practical propositions, with the United States of America (USA) standing out in this context due to their volume of productions and experiences, as well as professionals who operate in the education services sector (Lopes et al., 2020; Souza et al., 2020). In order to better apprehend part of this spotlight, we looked at the book *“Best practices of occupational therapy in schools”*, edited and released by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), in 2013, and organized by occupational therapists Gloria Clark and Barbara Chandler.

The effort undertaken was also based on an interest in knowing and reflecting on what the book's title suggests: therapeutic-occupational practices in schools that can be considered references in the USA. Added to this motivation in the preparation of this critical review, is the relevance of putting this work in dialogue in the national context, because of a certain lack of knowledge about it, which is possibly linked to the fact that it is only available in the English language.

The book's organizers have accumulated a long professional trajectory, with more than 35 years dedicated to childhood studies and education, including within the public

management of this sector in the USA - Gloria Clark in the state of Iowa and Barbara Chandler in North Carolina; they also stand out for being involved in several AOTA actions. The publication of this work is part of a set of efforts by this entity to offer and expand theoretical-practical and legal subsidies, which guarantee both the insertion and the qualification of occupational therapists dedicated to the education sector.

These efforts, as discussed by Souza et al. (2020), started in the 1970s, when, in 1975, the “Education for All Handicapped Children Act” (EAHCA) was promulgated and, from there, numerous strategies were produced, among them, a series of articles and reflective essays, sharing and advancing the contributions of occupational therapists to this sector.

Members of our research line have been raising academic production since 2016 in the interface “occupational therapy and education/schools”, (Pereira, 2018; Lopes et al., 2020; Borba et al., 2020), coming across these articles and essays, among many others, in which 57% of the authors were linked to US institutions.

With respect to that set of efforts over time, one of its results was the institutionalization of occupational therapy as a profession that makes up the services of the education sector in the USA, creating the term “school-based occupational therapy” in reference to that specialty.

In the USA, the term “school-based occupational therapists” is widely used. However, this term, nor its variations, make sense in the Brazilian context. In Brazil, the term “occupational therapy in the school context” has been used in the documents of the COFFITO (Federal Council of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy) system (Brasil, 2018). Similarly, the Working Group of the National Network for Teaching and Research in Occupational Therapy that deals with this theme is called “occupational therapy and education”. In the most recent discussions of this Working Group, held at the 5th National Seminar on Research in Occupational Therapy, there was no consensus on the expression used by the COFFITO System to designate the field, since other educational spaces, such as practices in non-formal education and in universities, focused on the inclusion of people with disabilities, are not covered by this nomenclature (Souza et al., 2020). Thus, in most publications of the members of the research line “Occupational Therapy, School and Radical Inclusion”, we have used the expression “education sector”, which, in our view, reflects beyond the institutional space of the school and designates actions that are managed by educational policy.

In addition to the different ways in which the field is named, it is also important to note that this institutionalization of occupational therapy in the education sector took place in the USA in a very particular way, since, despite being inserted in the sector through a relatively large legal apparatus, the amount paid for occupational therapy services in schools usually does not come from the public sector and education, but from private health insurers, that is, from families (Souza et al., 2020). We will resume this specificity later; for now, let us get back to the book.

2. Organization and Themes

“Best practices of occupational therapy in schools” resembles a large set of guidelines, of almost 600 pages, written by 49 authors, of which 48 are occupational therapists who have had experiences with schools at some point in their professional career, although

many of them continue to coordinate practices, research, policies and work in school management teams.

The book is organized into five sections, with 48 chapters that integrate them in diversity and quantity that seem to depend on the accumulation of experiences contained in that section. The sections are: I - Fundamentals of practice in schools; II - Evidence-guided practices: considerations to support participation in different areas of the educational system; III - Evidence-guided practices: planning to support participation according to the population; IV - Evidence-guided practices: performance-based considerations to improve participation; V - Evidence-guided practices: activities to improve student participation.

The first section stands out for presenting the legal and historical milestones for the institutionalization of occupational therapy in schools in the USA.

According to the first chapter dedicated to the history of occupational therapy in schools (Chandler, 2013), the beginning of this professional action was through the enactment of some laws, which made the Public School organized to receive children and adolescents (3 to 21 years old) with disabilities, notably the “Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975” (EAHCA), which later came to be called the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” (IDEA). Because of it, the hiring of professionals, including an occupational therapist, was guaranteed, as well as of services that started to be organized to support the access and permanence of this public in schools.

Nevertheless, there are doubts about this hiring, because, according to our documentary research, these laws come from the 1970s. However, there were already occupational therapists working in schools in the USA since the 1940s (Souza et al., 2020). The IDEA, it seems, is quite normative, requiring students to fulfill requirements related to certain diagnoses established by it to receive professional monitoring. Eligibility - “when should a student receive therapeutic-occupational intervention at school?” -, appears among the concerns of the first texts focused on the theme (Souza et al., 2020).

Still for Chandler (2013), these laws were fundamental, but are still unknown by many occupational therapists who will work in this field. As such, many chapters in this initial section refer to the laws that outline the practices. In this context, the notion of evidence-based practice is also a guiding principle for all sections, as is clear from their subsequent titles and chapters.

The legislative discussion, which permeates the entire work, is resumed in chapter 24 (Jackson, 2013), section III, in which the author draws attention to other possibilities of acting and hiring the occupational therapist, in addition to that regulated by IDEA. From what we can understand, in the USA, there are a series of laws about specific population and rehabilitation issues, which, among other objectives, aim at realizing the right of these people to an “appropriate free public education”. One of these laws, the Rehabilitation Act, 1973, has its section 504 aimed at guaranteeing the necessary support in regular schools for students with disabilities - and in it, for the first time, the occupational therapist is mentioned as one of the specialists responsible for offering this type of service (Souza et al., 2020).

Lawdis et al. (2017) point out that IDEA-2004 ensures that occupational therapists who work professionally in schools attend students that are eligible for special education

and related services. However, if a student does not meet the criteria established by IDEA, the section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act ensures that occupational therapists and other professionals must provide their support services.

In the following sections, although with different nominations, in general, the chapters are structured in a very similar way and, for the most part, are centered on specific diagnoses, such as: autism; emotional disorders; hearing impairment and deafness; intellectual disability; low incidence disabilities, including deafblindness; other health disorders; physical disability; specific learning disabilities; traumatic brain injury; and visual impairment, which is most likely related to the eligibility criteria determined by IDEA.

These chapters present the general aspects of diseases and/or disorders, how they interfere with the subjects' participation in school and how the work of the occupational therapist can contribute to improving participation and learning. The guidelines for action emphasize the importance of prior assessment, through valid instruments, focused on the individual and the limitations imposed by their condition, which makes it possible to build an intervention plan that seeks to minimize these effects and enhance student participation, including environmental, curriculum, material and learning assessment adaptations, as well as prescribing assistive technologies.

The practices described and proposed in the work focus on individual subjects, with the need to define, in person, an “Individual Education Plan”, together with parents/guardians, teachers and student; they also sometimes indicate access to reports by other professionals, the realization of observations in a real environment with the application of standardized tests and assessments aimed at student participation (the most cited being the School Function Assessment by Coster et al., 1998). Less frequently, suggestions for tools to assess performance skills and [organic] factors intrinsic to the student appear.

Still, there seems to be consonance regarding the importance of developing the occupational profile of the students to whom the intervention is directed. It is common for all chapters to defend a so-called top down approach, in reference to the discussion posed by Trombly (1993).

According to Coster (1998), this approach is organized on three levels: 1. Aimed at assessing the extent to which the child is able to orchestrate engagement or participation in occupations in a positive context and that favors his development. 2. Aimed at the critical tasks that make up the key roles and the difficulties in performing any tasks that satisfactorily limit occupational or role performance. 3. Specific to the tasks or activities that are most limiting to engaging in important occupations. Still, for this author, the difference of this approach is the direction around positive concepts of a child's occupational engagement specifically, instead of concepts of limitations.

As for the intervention, in general, starting from this plan, there is a concern for it to happen in the natural environment and consider the student's routine, focusing on strategies such as environmental adaptations, appropriate school furniture, use of occupations and activities, guidance for teachers, consultancy, education, training and the use of methods such as Coaching² which can be directed to the individual or the

² The literal translation is “training”, but this concept evokes a professional qualified to support his clients with several resources based on sociocognitive psychology and neurolinguistics. In Brazil, there is a series of criticals in relation to this method, mainly

social environment that surrounds them, including the school community and the family, as well as external referrals to the services in/at the school to solve other problems. The most cited approach to the occupational therapist's practice regarding the various performance skills is the CO-OP (Cognitive Orientation to daily Occupational Performance), originally developed for the public with developmental coordination disorder (DCD).

Two concepts are recurring throughout the book: *evidence* and *participation*. Although not theoretically defined by the organizers or the authors, they guide the reasoning of the chapters. In a broad sense, the authors elect as a central result of their practice the expansion of student participation in school, based on the International Classification of Functionality (ICF) and explaining how much the increase in functionality in the student who is accompanied by the occupational therapist expands engagement in occupations and, as a result, also expands their participation in the learning processes in the school routine.

Finally, and not least, it should be noted that all chapters are structured to reflect the language of the 2008 AOTA document, “Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process”. The first edition of this document was published in 1979, and was originally an official registration document for occupational therapy services and products, created in response to a demand from the US government. With each edition, the document reflected changes in the practice of American occupational therapists, outlining the domains and processes of the category, and provided terminology considered consistent for use by professionals in their records (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Thus, the professional category's organizational capacity in these terms and the important intermediation role developed by AOTA should be highlighted. This trajectory culminates in the incorporation, by the academic production, of this terminology and logic that has become hegemonic in the USA, also reflected in what the book “Best practices of occupational therapy in schools” brings.

3. Scoring a Critical-reflective Analysis

Initially, it is important to emphasize the effort made to search for standardization of language, which ends up operating a standardization of the models used. There are important controversies in relation to this, because, if, on one hand, the standardization of language could produce a driving force for dialogue with other professionals and for the institutionalization of a professional field for the occupational therapist, on the other hand, this configuration operated limitations, that is, the development and scope of proposals that address other problems faced by the school. Would there be counter-hegemonic or alternative practices, but that are equally good, of American occupational therapists in schools in the country, who are unable to establish themselves as contributions and knowledge in the area?

A very important aspect to understand and situate this book is the organization of the singular structure of political-economic conformation of the USA, strongly liberal and focused on the market, as well as the configurations of occupational therapy in that

because there are many professionals offering this type of service without having been trained to do so and, in addition, incurring private methods and acts in the field of psychology (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2019).

country. Despite having public and free Basic Education (Elementary and High School), a highly privatized health system is noticeable, which creates a contradiction when these two sectors intersect: school demands, in general and to some extent, are collective, but the possible responses to be produced by health are directed to individuals/family, who define the financing of the intervention. In this context, the education sector or the families, via private health insurance, hire the necessary professionals, one of them being occupational therapists. This results in the need to clarify which problems can be covered and to justify the hiring of certain services and professionals.

In this sense, the legal framework defines that “purchase & sale” services provided by occupational therapists are also restricted to the scope of disabilities, expanding to those with medical diagnoses related to rehabilitation. Thus, situations such as those involving violence, ethnic and cultural differences end up outside the scope of the practice and, outside, even, of the concern of occupational therapists. Criticisms in this regard are present among American occupational therapists, as in the reflexive essays by Marczuk et al. (2014) and Robbins (2001).

Another fact draws attention, because, although the book proposes a scope regarding the practices implemented, out of the 48 chapters, only two of them elect other subjects outside the scope of childhood to be the target audience of the action of occupational therapists. In chapter 23, Orentlicher (2013) focuses on students with disabilities who are in secondary education and their insertion into adult life, a process called transition. In chapter 36, Dunn (2013), who prefaced the book and is one of the pioneering occupational therapists in therapeutic-occupational practices in schools, defends and elects the teacher as the public of the intervention, and not as a partner of work among professionals.

This seems to be a reflection of practices notably focused on childhood and still traversed by a cultural issue specific to the USA, which often uses the expression kids (which, in literal translation, means only “children” in Portuguese) to refer to both children and adolescents and even young adults. We can only apprehend whether a particular practice refers to one population group or another, or both, when the text under study explains the educational level or the age group to which it refers. In addition, there are many chapters that use the term “student” generically and do not explain the level of education or the age group they dedicate themselves to. Through the curricula of the authors, as well as investigations carried out and already cited here on the subject, we invariably come to the conclusion that, in most cases, the experiences really are with children and, in the case of the USA, early childhood education (through approaches that configure early intervention), especially in the early years of Basic Education, with a view to acquiring writing.

In any case, the challenge posed is how to prepare materials that can bring together the elements of the current practice and, equally, advance the field in its possible contributions, envisioning new proposals that respond to also present demands. In the case of the book “Best practices of occupational therapy in schools”, compared to results found by us in studies that analyze the proposals around occupational therapy in school/education in the scope of research (Pereira, 2018; Borba et al., 2020), we can say that the book contains certain propositions that are more visionary than those found in

scientific literature, such as those involving the transition processes of young people with disabilities (Orentlicher, 2013), as well as support for driving cars (Dunn, 2013).

Still on the structural logic of operation of the US service sectors, it is reflected in the organization of the chapters and in their content, with texts that elect specific problems related to the field of disabilities, which expand to the demands of child mental health related to learning problems, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorders, sensory disorders - centered on diagnoses. To some degree, it also explains the emphasis given in the chapters around the evidence, both the basis of the actions, the research carried out, and the results of the therapeutic-occupational practices, as palpable justifications, because they are evident, for the hiring of this professional category.

If, on one hand, this way of operating, from a point of view that takes experiences in Brazil (Pereira, 2018; Pan & Lopes, 2020), limits professional performance to certain demands that follow prerogatives centered on the health-disease process, on the other hand, it was this same logic of evidencing the contributions of occupational therapy to the school that enabled the institutionalization, in the USA, of occupational therapy as a profession legally incorporated into the education sector. According to data brought by the book in question, in 2013, there were 21.6% out of the total of occupational therapists in the USA involved with the referred sector. If we apply this percentage to the most up-to-date number of occupational therapists employed in the USA³, in absolute numbers this means around 20,900 occupational therapists.

In Brazil, we do not have the absolute number of updated occupational therapists available. The latest number is from 2016, found in the article by Mariotti et al. (2016), pointing out that we are 17,500 professionals. The specific number of occupational therapists working in the education sector, despite a survey carried out by the Federal Council of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy (COFFITO) - the same that, in December 2018, triggered Resolution N^o. 500, which recognizes and disciplines the specialty of what was called "Occupational Therapy in the School Context" - was not disclosed (Brasil, 2018).

Therefore, the importance of disseminating this material, as well as the promotion of the production of others in their most diverse formats, is emphasized, because it can inform and assist occupational therapists who are working in this and other sectors, committing to sensitize education managers, at all levels, to make it possible to hire this professional action, whose contributions are already in place.

Thus, academic works like this are fundamental, including critic ones, so that, since the graduated training of occupational therapists, the school is taken as central in the lives of children and young people, and occupational therapists are compelled to incorporate this dimension in their practices. So that they are encouraged and inspired by the American experience, to strengthen laws and regulations that enable and expand the hiring of occupational therapists in this sector, for them to be able to contribute with their knowledge and actions to face different problems that come together in school and in schooling processes in Brazil. As our fellow social workers and psychologists have pleaded and recently achieved, with two major main differences that correlate: the freedom that occupational therapy has in Brazil to address the demands with which

³ According to the Scholarship Newsletter Signup (2020) website, occupational therapists currently employed in the USA.

comes across in practice and create possibilities for responses; our public policies, which would allow professionals to be hired by the public sector, therefore, not subject to market logic, favoring a broader performance in the face of the problems faced by our public schools, especially those arising from the mark of social inequality, including among people with disabilities, but not only.

It is also important to point out what we must learn, in Brazil, from the experience of the USA. Many may feel compelled to incorporate professional reasoning and the terminology proposed by the framework for the practice of AOTA or even try to transpose what was reported in this book as “Best practices of occupational therapy in schools” for the different realities of Brazilian schools in a simplistic way. We believe that we have more to learn from the entire organization of the American occupational therapists category, in dialogue with AOTA and the academic field, understanding: 1) what occupational therapists have been doing in schools in Brazil (terminologies, approaches, resources and tools, professional reasoning); 2) how the processes that lead to the production of documents regulating professional practice in the context of Brazilian occupational therapy occur; 3) what the field of education has presented as demands; 4) for which occupational therapy in Brazil has developed a “know-how” that allows it, today, to contribute through proposals for schools; and 5) in which debates and struggles we should insert ourselves in the search for external recognition, by the education sector, so that our proposals have legitimacy and are translated into education policies in general.

The simple transposition of experiences from the USA to Brazil can, most likely, distort a reality of performance that has been emerging since the 1970s in Brazil, subsuming important contributions and possibilities that have been opened in this field - both from practice and research. In this regard, specifically, Pereira (2018) presented the richness and diversity of what Brazilian occupational therapists, in the academic field, have been outlining in the education sector, synthesized in four main axes: 1) Social inclusion, school inclusion, children with disabilities and dialogue with occupational therapy; 2) Resources and devices for the practice of occupational therapy at school; 3) Child education, child development and its interface with occupational therapy; 4) Childhood, adolescence and youth in situations of social vulnerability, public school and occupational therapy. Certainly, other studies and analyzes that can recognize the diversity of perspectives and propositions in the area for the education sector need to be promoted.

In any case, it is necessary for occupational therapists interested in this field to organize themselves to undertake efforts for a construction that will require breath, reflection, organization and collective time.

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Author’s contributions

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