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Perceptions of Occupational Therapy Practitioners as Leaders within the New York State Education System

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ABSTRACT

In most states, occupational therapy practitioners are restricted from advancing to formal school leadership positions. The absence of pathways to leadership may limit the ability to fulfill AOTA's Vision 2025 and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This study investigates how limited opportunities for career advancement affect school practice trends. We explore the perceptions of school practitioners in New York State concerning leadership, advocacy, and state policies. Seven hundred and fourteen current and former occupational therapy practitioners in New York schools completed a researcher-developed online survey. Notably, almost all respondents (94.7%) agreed that practitioners should be able to pursue educational administrative coursework. Most (94.6%) agreed that practitioners in New York should advocate for policies that would allow them to pursue such coursework. Many respondents reported that they would consider pursuing the coursework if available. This research emphasizes the misalignment between federal and state policies. Federal policy (ESSA) and Vision 2025 encourage greater involvement for occupational therapy practitioners, but state policy restricts their advancement. The findings demonstrate the pressing need for reform and the creation of pathways that enable occupational therapy practitioners to assume formal leadership positions in school settings, thus enhancing their contribution to the school community.

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School administrators are essential leaders who ensure the efficient management of school operations while working to raise student achievement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Formal school leadership positions are often filled by principals, directors of special education, and superintendents. In most states, a person must be educationally credentialed to become a school administrator. Each state uniquely regulates educator and administrator credentialing requirements (Sauvigne-Kirsch, 2017). New York State Education Department policies and their impact on the profession of occupational therapy were explored in this study, but this research can be a model for other states.

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) Office of Teaching Initiatives issues educational credential certificates in three categories: School Administrators and Supervisors, Classroom Teachers, and Pupil Personnel Services. School Administrators and Supervisors include School District Leaders and School Building Leaders. Classroom Teachers include teachers and speech-language pathologists. Pupil Personnel Services

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include school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers (New York State Education Department, 2015b; NYSED, 2015a, 2023). Occupational and physical therapy practitioners are not included in these categories. This excludes them from having an educational credential, rendering them ineligible to pursue the coursework required for an educational administrative certificate.

Currently, occupational therapists (OTs) have the flexibility to enter the field with either a master's or doctoral degree. Occupational therapy assistants (OTAs) can enter the field with either an associate or a bachelor's degree (ACOTE, 2018). It's important to note that the term "occupational therapy practitioner" encompasses both OTs and OTAs, but their pay scales typically differ. Classroom teachers and Pupil Personnel Service professionals may enter the field with a bachelor's degree but are required to obtain their master's level within 5 years (NYSED, 2015c).

In New York State (NYS), only educationally credentialed school employees have the opportunity to pursue coursework in educational administration. Earning a School Building Leader (SBL) certificate enables one to become a chairperson, an assistant principal, or a principal. Some SBLs may choose to pursue their certificate to become a School District Leader (SDL), such as an assistant superintendent or superintendent. The exclusion of occupational and physical therapy from NYSED educational credentialing restricts these professionals from advancing to formal administration positions (NYSED, 2023).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) is a federal mandate designed to provide disadvantaged students with opportunities to receive a high-quality education with access to teachers and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP), (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapy practitioners). The mandate encourages SISP to engage their full scope of practice in the school community (Laverdure et al., 2023) and requires their involvement in program development, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), and climate initiatives (S. Cahill, 2019; Schneider & Chandler, 2019). Bazyk (2019) reports that best practice in schools includes opportunities to contribute to mental health promotion for all students. A grassroots advocacy group supporting ESSA advocates that the legislation explicitly supports OTPs, as SISPs, to contribute to MTSS efforts by "helping all students participate successfully in health-promoting occupations in the classroom (e.g. sensory processing for self-regulation, stress-reduction activities), cafeteria (e.g. being good friend and having meaningful conversations), recess (e.g. enjoying active play, teamwork), and after-school leisure (e.g. engaging in hobbies and interests)" (Bazyk et al., 2022, p. 1). However, the research indicates that school practitioners in schools have encountered challenges in implementing MTSS as mandated by the ESSA (Laverdure et al., 2023). These challenges include insufficient backing from school administrators and a lack of prior examples where occupational therapy was integrated into broader district-wide programs (S. M. Cahill et al., 2014).

In 2015, NYSED developed a Career Ladder Pathway Framework, which encouraged career advancement opportunities for educators (Rafal-Baer, 2015). The flexible framework provided guidance for school districts to "recognize, reward, and retain" excellent teachers and administrators (Rafal-Baer, 2015, p. 4). Recently, Governor Hochul announced a plan to resolve the ongoing teacher shortage by recruiting educators in NYS and accelerating the certification process (New York State, 2022). However, neither of these initiatives specifically mentions SISP, including occupational or physical therapy practitioners.

Leadership continues to be a central focus of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). The 2017 Centennial Vision states that “occupational therapy is a powerful, widely recognized, science-driven, and evidence-based profession” (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2007). Furthermore, AOTA’s Vision 2025 perceives occupational therapy practitioners as leaders; influential in changing policies, environments, and complex systems (AOTA, 2017). Rioux et al. (2019) predicted that “in the future, barriers in state policy that prevented advancement will have been removed” (p. 499). She aspired that occupational therapy practitioners would hold various leadership positions in the school setting at the local and national levels. Despite these aspirations, the literature suggests that school practitioners face challenges influencing systemic changes (Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020).

Efforts to promote change in education have been undertaken by grassroots organizations, as well as state and national occupational therapy associations. For example, in 2017, Sandra Schefkind, the AOTA Pediatric Program Manager, wrote a letter to the Special Education Departments across the United States. Schefkind (2017) “asserted that moving occupational therapy practitioners into school leadership positions will add value to students, to teams, and to schools” (p. 1). Suggested actions for the State Education Departments included “recognizing that school leadership positions are within the occupational therapy scope of practice” and “modifying existing administrator leadership pathways to include opportunities for occupational therapy providers” (p. 2).

The professions of occupational and physical therapy appear to have a glass ceiling within NYSED. A literature review revealed little to no information on the perceptions of NYS school occupational therapy practitioners regarding leadership, their awareness of legislative leadership policies, or their level of interest in educational administrative positions. Sauvigne-Kirsch (2017) found that a lack of state-level credentialing limited advancement to school leadership positions for occupational therapy practitioners in the United States but did not include information specific to NYS. Franko (2023) identified the national issue that occupational therapy practitioners are grouped with other related service providers at the federal level but not the state level when it comes to eligibility for formal administrative opportunities.

This study is part of a broad NYS multiphase analysis that also explored the perceptions of school physical therapy practitioners and administrators. For this phase, we aimed to fill the gap in knowledge regarding occupational therapy practitioners’ perceptions of leadership opportunities and awareness of legislation policies. This study explored:

- Does occupational therapy in NYS schools meet AOTA’s 2017 Centennial Vision and Vision 2025?
- Do school practitioners want to advocate for change?
- Are school practitioners aware of certification pathways to educational administrative positions?
- If a pathway to leadership existed, would school practitioners consider pursuing educational administrative coursework?
- Are school practitioners performing services to the full scope of practice, including mental health promotion and MTSS?

We suspect that the absence of pathways to formal school leadership in NYS is impacting practitioners' ability to fulfill the provisions of ESSA, participate in best practices, and meet AOTA's vision of OTPs as influential leaders in the school setting. To fully understand the impact of these policies on practitioners and the students they serve, this study also explored barriers to work satisfaction and practitioners' reasons for leaving the school setting.

Method

Design and Instruments

This study was conducted through a researcher-designed online survey. The survey began with a collection of demographics (e.g., years of practice, regions of NYS worked in, etc.). The next section explored perceptions of practitioners as leaders, interest in advocacy, awareness of NYSED policies, and desire to pursue administrative coursework if opportunities existed. The last section focused on current practice trends (e.g., type of employment, involvement in school-wide initiatives, and work satisfaction).

Survey questions were developed based on feedback gathered from networking meetings, teleconferences, and social media sites. Current literature including AOTA's leadership resources and websites pertaining to education in NYS (including the Education Department, United Teachers Union, and Council of Superintendents) were also reviewed and incorporated into the survey questions. Prior to distribution, questions were piloted with research consultants and experts within the field of school OT. This resulted in revisions to eliminate bias, decrease length, and increase clarity in the language of the questions. The survey was also revised after the onset of COVID-19 to elicit responses based on experiences prior to the pandemic.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted through an online survey using Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>), from October to December 2020. The survey was open to current or former NYS school occupational therapy practitioners. The institutional review board of Touro University approval was received (HSIRB 1942-Exempt). Results from the former and currently working school occupational therapy practitioners were combined unless specifically stated otherwise. Participants were recruited through regional social media sites for school and pediatric practitioners, occupational therapy alumni groups, and the New York State Occupational Therapy Association (NYSOTA). Snowball sampling was encouraged via social media. Responses were analyzed with descriptive statistics, and statistical analysis was performed using SPSS statistics (IBM SPSS® Statistics Version 26). Percentages are based on the number of people who responded to each item and missing data was excluded from the analysis.

Results

Overall, 714 practitioners who are currently (84%; $n = 600$) or were formerly (16%; $n = 114$) working as school-based practitioners in NYS were included in the analysis. Ninety-two percent of the participants ($n = 657$) were occupational therapists (OTs), and 8% ($n = 57$)

were occupational therapy assistants. Nearly all the respondents were female (94.8%; $n = 672$), which is an accurate representation of the occupational therapy profession (AOTA, 2023). Participants who indicated they never worked in the NYS school systems were exited from the survey.

Approximately a third of the participants (33%; $n = 207$) reported that they are currently or were formerly employed directly by a school district, followed by (20.7%; $n = 130$) employed directly by the New York City Department of Education (DOE). The remaining respondents reported they are or were directly employed by a contract agency (15.6%; $n = 98$), self-employed by a contract agency (10.2%; $n = 64$), directly employed by a network of self-contained special education schools called the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) (9.3%; $n = 58$) or employed by a private school or preschool (8.3%; $n = 52$). A few respondents reported “other” (2.9%; $n = 18$).

The majority of the participants reported that they are currently or were working full-time (79.2%; $n = 496$), while 13% ($n = 82$) worked part-time, and 7.7% ($n = 48$) were per diem. Regionally, the largest representation of the participants was from New York City (37.6%; $n = 262$) and Long Island counties (22.6%; $n = 157$), but all regions of NYS were represented. Participants ranged from less than one year to greater than 30 years working in the school setting.

Meeting the Centennial Vision

AOTA’s 2017 Centennial Vision states: “We envision that occupational therapy is a powerful, widely recognized, science-driven, and evidence-based profession with a globally connected and diverse workforce meeting society’s occupational needs.” (AOTA, 2007). Out of the total respondents ($n = 663$), nearly half (49.2%; $n = 326$) of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that occupational therapy in NYS schools is meeting this vision. However, 28.2% ($n = 187$) felt neutral; and 22.6% ($n = 150$) strongly disagreed or disagreed.

Interest in Leadership and Advocacy

The majority of the respondents (91.8%; $n = 608$) reported that they think occupational therapy practitioners possess leadership qualities (i.e., being a good listener, an effective communicator, organized, responsible, using data, and having integrity) to pursue an administrative role in the school setting (upon completion of the necessary coursework). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with facts about educational administration coursework. The overwhelming majority of participants (94.7%; $n = 625$) either strongly agreed (76.2%; $n = 503$) or somewhat agreed (18.5%; $n = 122$) that occupational therapy practitioners in NYS should be able to pursue educational administrative coursework required for administrative positions (e.g., principal, director of special education, superintendent, etc.). [Figure 1](#) provides a specific breakdown of practitioners’ responses. The vast majority of participants (94.6%; $n = 625$) also agreed that occupational therapy practitioners in NYS should advocate for policies that would provide them the opportunity to pursue administrative coursework. See [Figure 2](#) for a visual representation of all responses.

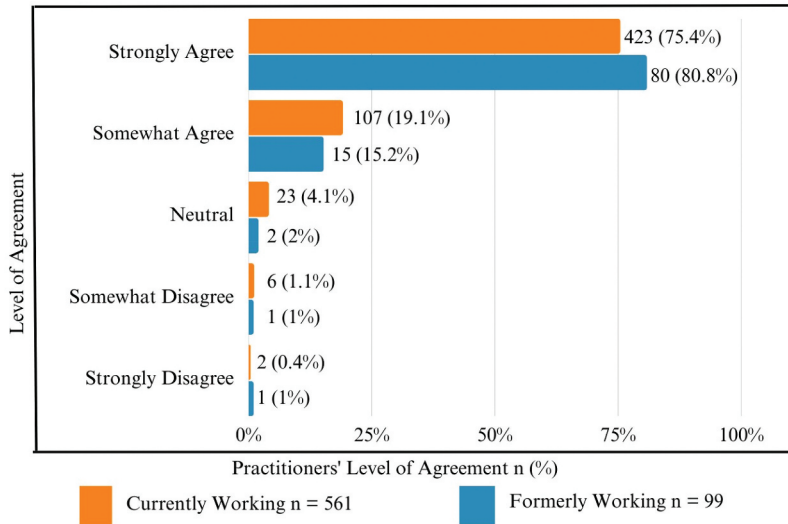


Figure 1. Level of agreement that practitioners should be able to pursue coursework. Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. Not all respondents answered this question. Missing data was excluded from analysis.

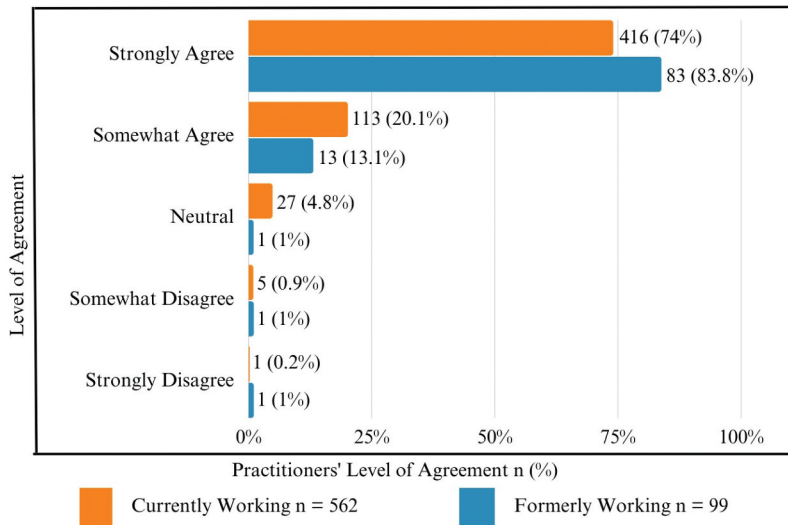


Figure 2. Level of agreement that practitioners should advocate for policies. Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. Not all respondents answered this question. Missing data was excluded from analysis.

Knowledge of State Policies and Interest in Coursework

To determine knowledge of the certification pathways for school administrative positions in NYS, participants were asked to indicate their level of awareness that professionals who are under the umbrella of Pupil Personnel Services (including school counselors, psychologists, and social workers) are eligible to pursue the coursework required for administrative

positions. In response, 34.7% ($n = 219$) of the participants were completely aware; 34.1% ($n = 215$) were somewhat aware; and 31.2% ($n = 197$) were not at all aware. Many participants (41.8%; $n = 263$) were completely aware that occupational therapy practitioners in NYS are not eligible to pursue the coursework required for administrative positions. However, some participants were somewhat aware (21.1%; $n = 133$) or were not at all aware (37%; $n = 233$).

Current (39.6%; $n = 212$) and former (45.8%; $n = 44$) school practitioners in NYS reported that they would consider pursuing the coursework required for an educational administrative position if the opportunity was available. See Figure 3 for a visual representation of responses. The data was further analyzed to differentiate the consideration of OTs and OTAs pursuing coursework required for administrative positions. Of the 47 currently and formerly working OTA respondents, 27.7% ($n = 13$) reported that they would consider pursuing administrative coursework, (34%; $n = 16$) reported they would not, and (38.3%; $n = 18$) were not sure.

Barriers to Work Satisfaction

To determine if access to leadership pathways is a concern for school practitioners, respondents ($n = 629$) identified their top three barriers to work satisfaction. Limited opportunities for advancement up the career ladder (25.8%; $n = 162$) was a high-frequency barrier. The most frequently reported barriers to work satisfaction were paperwork (37.7%; $n = 237$), lack of administrative understanding about their role (33.5%; $n = 211$), and salary (26.4%; $n = 166$). Participants also reported barriers of high caseloads (20.3%; $n = 128$) and working environments (i.e., closets, hallways) (17.5%; $n = 110$).

Current practitioners ($n = 600$) were asked if they have ever considered leaving the school setting. Those who answered yes (44.7%; $n = 263$) were then asked to indicate up to three reasons for the contemplation. Respondents ($n = 261$) indicated that inadequate rate of pay (36.8%; $n = 96$), stress/burnout (36.4%; $n = 95$), and lack of opportunity for a leadership position (27.6%; $n = 72$) were the top three reasons. Likewise, former

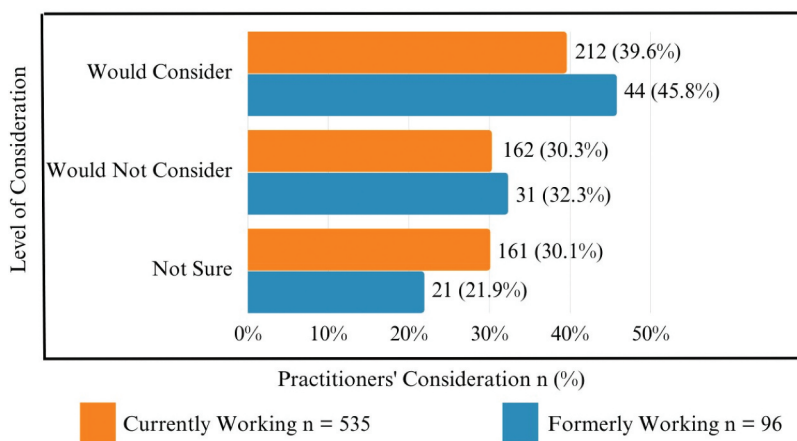


Figure 3. Consider pursuing coursework required for administrative positions. Note: Not all participants responded to this item. Missing data was excluded

practitioners ($n = 114$) who stopped working in schools were asked to indicate up to three reasons why. Respondents' ($n = 105$) top three responses for leaving were moving/relocating (25.7%; $n = 27$), a better job opportunity (21.9%; $n = 23$), and an inadequate rate of pay (17.1%; $n = 18$).

Routine Responsibilities

Routine responsibilities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were explored to understand current practice trends. The most commonly reported duties for currently working practitioners ($n = 534$) were documentation (97.9%; $n = 523$), OT treatment sessions (IEP mandated) (97.2%; $n = 519$), communication/consultation with staff or parents (informal) (94.6%; $n = 505$), IEP meetings (92.1%; $n = 492$), intervention planning and scheduling (91.6%; $n = 489$), and professional development (88%; $n = 470$). Fewer respondents reported MTSS duties aligning with ESSA, such as Early Intervening Services (EIS)/Response to Intervention (RtI) (47.6%; $n = 254$), positive behavioral intervention supports (46.1%; $n = 246$), and pre-referral meetings (44%; $n = 235$). Transition and workplace support were reported by only 18.2% ($n = 97$) of the respondents.

In the context of school mental health, participants were given a list of whole-school mental health programs [as encouraged by ESSA] and asked to indicate their participation. Out of currently working participants ($n = 512$), a noteworthy number reported that they do not use their psychosocial training for any whole-school programs (26.8%; $n = 137$). The most commonly reported programs for current school practitioners who indicated participating in mental health programs ($n = 375$) were social and emotional learning (76.3%; $n = 286$), health and wellness (60%; $n = 225$), and social skills/friendship groups (51.5%; $n = 193$). Fewer practitioners addressed coping strategies, (45.6%; $n = 171$) disability awareness (37.1%; $n = 139$), backpack awareness (32.5%; $n = 122$), and anti-bullying (32.3%; $n = 121$).

Discussion

The United States is facing a shortage of school administrators (National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021; Perna, 2022). In NYS, the looming teacher shortage is also a significant concern (Knudson, 2023; New York State, 2022; New York State Council of School Superintendents [NYSCOSS], 2023b; New York State United Teachers [NYSUT], 2021; Zweig et al., 2021) and may likely contribute to the decline of administrative candidates. Federal policy (i.e., ESSA) categorizes occupational therapy practitioners as instrumental SISP, who must be included equally in the school decision-making process. In contrast, state policies in NYS segregate two professions of SISP (i.e., occupational and physical therapy practitioners) from the other SISP (i.e., counselors, psychologists, and social workers) who are granted an educational credential by their placement within Pupil Personnel Services. This practice omits the pathway to educational leadership, which perpetuates pervasive inequity for occupational and physical therapy practitioners.

Advocate for Change

A substantial majority (94.6%) of survey participants believe that occupational therapy practitioners in New York State should advocate for policies enabling them to become

eligible to pursue educational administrative coursework. These insightful findings offer valuable guidance to key stakeholders, such as the New York State Education Department (NYSED), New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), and United University Professions (UUP). This important revelation can be utilized when revising educational policies and certification requirements, aligning with Governor Hochul's initiative to expedite the certification process and enhance educator recruitment and retention (New York State, 2022). Acknowledging and categorizing occupational therapy practitioners with their counterparts in Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) at the state level would not only bolster recruitment efforts but also encourage retention, ultimately expanding the pool of qualified candidates for critically needed administrative roles.

The goals, priorities, and mission statements of NYS schools' key stakeholders (i.e., United Teachers Union, Education Department, and Council of School Superintendents) include language about equity, diversification of the workforce, and equal opportunity for career advancement (Knudson, 2023; NYSCOSS, 2023b; NYSUT, 2021). Furthermore, the Woman's Committee of NYSUT declares that two of their main goals include highlighting women-specific issues (including inequities in pay, healthcare, and education); and involving more women in union leadership roles (NYSUT, 2023). The Women's Initiative of New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS) strives "to support women leaders, identify women in education who have leadership potential, and help those who aspire to leadership roles" (2023a). These issues are also a significant concern for NY's school occupational and physical therapy professions, which are female-dominated (AOTA, 2023; APTA, 2023).

State policies disqualifying occupational and physical therapy practitioners from obtaining an educational credential significantly impact hiring practices, pay equity, and health-care benefits. These policies also create financial barriers and diminish incentives for practitioners to pursue an advanced degree. In contrast, Classroom Teachers are granted five years to obtain their master's degree. Similar to educationally credentialed SISP, they are typically compensated for increased education. The segregation of occupational therapy and physical therapy from other SISP who are educationally credentialed at the state level restricts career advancement opportunities and contradicts the priorities of key stakeholders. It is also misaligned with federal policies (i.e., ESSA), which categorizes occupational and physical therapy as integral educationally relevant SISP. This is noteworthy, considering that an inadequate rate of pay ranked first as the reason that current practitioners have considered leaving the school setting. Practitioners who left their school positions reported an inadequate rate of pay and better job opportunities among the top three reasons.

Practitioners' Awareness of Policies

An overwhelming number of respondents agreed that practitioners should advocate for change in policies. However, nearly a third (31.2%) were not at all aware of which professionals in Pupil Personnel Services have a pathway to leadership positions. Over a third (37%) were also completely unaware that they were not eligible to pursue educational coursework required for administrative positions.

Perceptions about Occupational Therapy practitioners' Leadership Qualities

The majority of participants (91.8%) felt that occupational therapy practitioners demonstrate the leadership qualities needed to pursue an administrative role in the school setting. School practitioners identify administrative and managerial duties in their roles in the school setting (AOTA, 2013). However, barriers limit them from advancing their careers by acquiring formal administrative titles such as principal, director of special education, or superintendent (Garza et al., 2018; Sauvigne-Kirsch, 2017). While occupational therapy practitioners regularly assume administrator roles in hospitals and clinics (Scheffkind, 2017), NYSED policies prevent this group of educated professionals from taking the required coursework to advance to educational leadership positions in the school setting.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Mental Health, and Leadership

The findings in this study support Seruya and Garfinkel's (2020) concern that current practice trends in the school setting are not in line with the philosophies of best practice. Best practice aligns with ESSA; encouraging the involvement of occupational therapy practitioners in school-wide programming and MTSS to support student participation and educational outcomes. However, this study indicates that MTSS (i.e., positive behavioral intervention supports (PBIS), early intervening services, and RtI) were among the least common routine responsibilities of NYS school practitioners.

Seruya and Garfinkel (2020) reported that "there seems to be a disconnect between intent [to provide service] and current practice trends" (p. 1). Despite their training in mental health, our results indicate that many school practitioners do not use their psychosocial education. This correlates with Nielsen and Hektner's (2014) findings that "therapists do have child psychosocial knowledge but struggle to integrate this knowledge into practice" (p. 1).

Opportunity for Educational Administration Coursework

The overwhelming majority of respondents (94.7%) felt that occupational therapy practitioners should have the opportunity to pursue the educational administration coursework; thus, providing a clear and open pathway to leadership positions. If the opportunity existed, a substantial number of respondents would consider pursuing the coursework. This is noteworthy because a group of potential candidates are interested in filling administrative positions at a time when there is a shortage of school administrators in NYS. However, school-based practitioners without a master's level degree may need to pursue additional coursework to meet the qualifications required for entry into an administrative program.

Lack of Leadership Opportunities and Barriers to Work Satisfaction

Almost half of the respondents who are currently working in the schools reported that they have considered leaving their school positions. A lack of leadership opportunities was one of the top three reasons current practitioners considered leaving their positions. Limited opportunities for advancement up the career ladder and inadequate rates of pay were frequent barriers to work satisfaction for both groups.

Meeting Vision 2025 and ESSA

In 2006, AOTA's Centennial Vision for 2017 imagined occupational therapy as a powerful and widely recognized profession with the capacity to influence and lead in all settings (AOTA, 2007). This study found nearly 23% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed that school occupational therapy in NYS has met the 2017 Centennial Vision. Moving forward, Vision 2025 promotes occupational therapy practitioners as leaders who influence change for the school community (AOTA, 2017).

Occupational therapy has been historically misunderstood, causing practitioners to feel undervalued (Turner & Knight, 2015) or marginalized (S. M. Cahill & Lopez-Reyna, 2013). Recent studies identify administrative barriers, lack of administrative support, and a decreased understanding of the role of occupational therapy in schools (S. M. Cahill et al., 2014; Garfinkel & Seruya, 2018; Sauvigne-Kirsch, 2017; Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020). State policies that prevent inclusion and participation within the full scope of practice may be perpetuating the lack of awareness of the capabilities and contributions of school practitioners.

Limitations and Future Research

Social media was largely utilized to recruit participants. Attempts were made to reach practitioners who are not active on social media, including utilizing NYSOTA's website and e-mail list. However, practitioners who are not active with NYSOTA or social media may have had limited awareness of the survey. Regional representation was not equal, which also may have impacted the results.

Many questions on the survey were optional, which did not always provide a full representation of the total sample size. Respondents who are currently working in the schools were substantially more than those who have left, which impacts the results that were reported together. Many questions were worded to facilitate pre-COVID-19 perceptions, but the survey was fielded during the pandemic, which may have impacted the respondents' answers.

Future Studies

Other phases of this study are in progress, including a survey of the perceptions and awareness of physical therapy practitioners who are similarly impacted by these policies. Although survey participation was limited to school-based practitioners within NYS regions, the restriction of OT and PT from leadership opportunities afforded to other SISPs is a pervasive problem in most state education departments throughout the USA (Sauvigne-Kirsch, 2017). A limited number of states (e.g., Colorado, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington) offer pathways to formal leadership for occupational therapy practitioners (Sauvigne-Kirsch, 2017). Further research needs to highlight the efficacy of occupational therapy practitioners who have obtained educational administrative certificates in one of these states.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

New York occupational therapy practitioners should consider advocating to be categorized as Pupil Personnel Services along with other SISP. This would increase the

chance of inclusion in the teacher's union, creating a pathway to a leadership role in the union, as desired by the Woman's Committee of NYSUT. It is timely to consider changing such policies on the state level since Governor Hochul plans to accelerate and reform teacher certification (Knudson, 2023; New York State, 2022), and NYSED, UUP, and NYSUT have been working to simplify the process. A policy update that allows occupational therapy practitioners to advance would also provide new practitioners with role models and learning opportunities in leadership (Rodger, 2012), effectively preparing the next generation of school OTPs for their role as fully integrated SISPs. Even practitioners who are not interested in securing a leadership position may still value having a highly qualified occupational therapist in an administrative role.

With occupational therapy practitioners at the leadership table, it is anticipated that practitioners in the school setting would be recognized, valued, and utilized for their full scope of practice, including MTSS and mental health. Aligning with ESSA, occupational therapy leaders would promote positive school climates and reduce barriers to learning for individuals, groups, and school communities. This would predictably result in an improved understanding of the distinct value occupational therapy practitioners can bring to the school community.

The profession of OT is historically rooted in mental health. In fact, educational coursework in mental health is a required component of accredited occupational therapy programs (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education [ACOTE], 2018). Mental health components include maintaining health and wellness, managing mental health needs, regulating emotions, and social participation (AOTA, 2020). According to the Occupational Therapy Scope of Practice (AOTA, 2021), occupational therapy services enable students, groups, or communities to engage in "activities needed for learning and participation in the educational environment" (p. 3); and are occupation-based and student-centered, "involving emotional, psychosocial, cognitive, and physical aspects of performance" (p. 3). Occupational therapy practitioners are trained in strategies to address mental health including executive functioning, emotional regulation, attention, and behavior issues of children and adolescents (S. Cahill & Bazyk, 2020). This proactively prepares practitioners to assist with the imminent mental health crisis in the school community (Bazyk, 2023) and positions them as potential administrators to "address personnel issues, to support parents, and to promote social-emotional learning" (Scheffkind, 2017, p. 1). However, this study indicates that many practitioners do not participate in whole-school mental health or MTSS programs. Practitioners are limited from participating to the fullest extent of their practice in alignment with ESSA. This exemplifies the barriers facing school occupational therapy practitioners in today's climate, which may likely be due to the limited number of school practitioners in leadership and the consequential influence on other school leaders' understanding of our full scope of practice.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated limited to no knowledge of the certification pathways in their state. Additionally, more than half the respondents were completely or somewhat unaware that they were ineligible to pursue coursework required for administrative positions. This suggests a need to educate current and future NYS practitioners about the policies impacting the trajectory of their careers. Raising the awareness of occupational limitations for school practitioners may increase advocacy efforts for the profession which could be helpful for the slow rate of change.

Vision 2025's leadership pillar states that "occupational therapy is influential in changing policies, environments, and complex systems" (AOTA, 2017). We suggest that the absence of formal school leadership pathways is limiting the ability to meet the visions of our professional association. This is supported, because occupational therapy practitioners are expected to lead, but are concurrently prohibited from pursuing the required coursework for school leadership positions.

There is a straightforward solution that simultaneously meets the stated values and goals of NYS schools' key stakeholders, AOTA's Vision 2025 and Every Student Succeeds Act. Occupational therapy practitioners should be included in the category of Pupil Personnel Services within NYSED with other SISP. This would open a pathway to leadership and extend the career ladder toward equivalency with other SISP. As we approach 2025, we must increase our advocacy efforts to meet AOTA's vision of occupational therapy practitioners as influential leaders.

Many New York State school practitioners want advocacy to obtain leadership opportunities. Creating a pathway to leadership positions could increase work satisfaction while simultaneously supporting the recruitment and retention of school practitioners. Advocacy for updates to state policies may promote equal opportunities to leadership roles and more adherence to best practice guidelines. The following measures are recommended for practitioners working in a school setting:

- Increase advocacy to state legislators and key stakeholders to promote the fulfillment of their stated priorities. For example, in NYS, advocate to NYSED, NYSUT, & NYSCOSS to promote career ladders, equitable pay for women, and increased leadership opportunities for women.
- Empower and inspire other school practitioners to represent the profession, demonstrate leadership (Scheffkind, 2019), and advocate for change within their school district or state education department.
- Educate school administrators about the full scope of practice of occupational therapy, including mental health and MTSS. Use educational language in conjunction with AOTA documents such as the OTPF-4 (AOTA, 2020) and Occupational Therapy Scope of Practice (AOTA, 2021) to heighten administrators' awareness of the value occupational therapy can bring to their school (Laverdure & Polichino, 2019).
- Advocate for innovative programming to benefit individual students, groups, or the whole school. Highlighting the unique role of occupational therapy in addressing student outcomes may influence a change in the mind-set of decision-makers (Scheffkind, 2019).
- Advocate for leadership parity in NYSED to fulfill the provisions of ESSA and positively influence the entire school community.
- School practitioners without master's or doctoral degrees who are interested in leadership positions may consider the steps to pursuing an advanced degree or completing additional coursework.
- Replicate similar studies in other states to address issues of leadership parity and the impact on students across the United States.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to fill the gap in knowledge regarding occupational therapy practitioners' awareness of state policies and barriers toward leadership roles, as well as their desire to advocate for legislation changes or to pursue administrative positions. The findings indicate that the overwhelming majority of NYS school practitioners support advocating for change, and many would consider pursuing educational administrative coursework. Many respondents lacked awareness of the current certification pathways for school administrative positions in NYS.

“Occupational therapy practitioners have great potential to apply their expertise to school administrative positions” (Scheffkind, 2017, p. 1). To advocate for change, practitioners need practical resources and information about legislative barriers and state policies. To align with ESSA and best practice guidelines, practitioners need to expand their scope of practice within the school community to include mental health promotion and MTSS. The year 2025 is rapidly approaching. To meet AOTA's Vision 2025 of powerful leaders who are capable of influencing systemic change, practitioners need an equal opportunity to obtain school leadership positions. After all, how can we be powerful leaders if we're not allowed to lead?

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