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Exploring Occupational Therapists' and Teacher Aides' Collaboration in a School Based Setting

A Master's Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the

Graduate Program in Occupational Therapy

Ithaca College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

By Cassandra J. Kiechle June 2021

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Abstract

School-based occupational therapists (SBOTs) interact with many different professionals and paraprofessionals to coordinate programming for students with special needs as part of the students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The work of an SBOT requires building a rapport with students and implementing interventions and strategies that best fit each student. Teacher's aides (TAs) may be a useful source of information and knowledge for SBOTs about students as TAs spend multiple hours a day working individually or in small groups with students. Understanding the multiple roles a TA can play in the classroom and how best to utilize and collaborate with them could help a SBOT provide higher quality care to the students with whom they work. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the role of a TA in relation to the potential for collaboration with a SBOT, understand how TAs collaborate with SBOTs, and determine the potential for TAs to implement occupational therapy interventions in the classroom. Five participants were interviewed, and themes were found relating to the multipurpose responsibilities of TAs, student-oriented motivation and dedication for TAs, TAs as collaborators, TAs training occurring through experience, TAs having case-based knowledge about occupational therapy, and the challenges of being a TA. OTs should understand the complex job of a TA and the dynamics of collaboration to best support student outcomes.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to my parents who have always shown me the value of hard work and have provided encouragement to motivate me to surpass my goals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

A school-aged child's main occupation is being a student and learning the skills needed to lead a successful adult life (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). To that end, students attend school approximately 180 days each year for a minimum of five hours per day depending on state regulations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). During these 180 days in school, students are educated by multiple professionals and paraprofessionals, two of which can be Occupational Therapists (OTs), and support staff such as Teacher's Aides (TAs).

While all students are afforded a free, public education, students with disabilities have additional legal protections that ensure their learning needs are met in concert with their unique abilities. According to the NCES (2021), in the United States during the 2019-2020 school year, about 7.3 million students, 14% of the student population, were recognized as having a disability. Students, ages 3-21, with disabilities are afforded the right to a free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2019). IDEA is a federal law ensuring that students are given the extra supports they need to be successful (IDEA, 2019). Under IDEA, students with disabilities may qualify for necessary educationally-related services, such as various therapies, special equipment or adaptations, and classroom support personnel depending on their needs. Two specific supports available to students through IDEA, if deemed necessary, are therapeutic services provided by OTs and classroom assistance provided by TAs.

School based occupational therapists (SBOTs) work within schools to ensure that students are developing the skills required to participate in daily activities within the educational environment. SBOTs work on social skills, academic skills, vocational skills, behavior

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management, sensory integration, and motor skills (AOTA, 2016). A student may be referred for an occupational therapy evaluation at school if a teacher, school professional, or paraprofessional notice the student struggling to meet their educational goals and are struggling in areas within the scope of practice of OT. After formal evaluation by the SBOT, if the student qualifies for services based on their demonstrated skills and abilities, the SBOT will request that OT services be added to that student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a document created when a student is identified as requiring additional services to meet their educational goals within the classroom. OT services are formally added to the IEP during a meeting with that student's team of professionals and caregivers. SBOTs can work with students one on one and/or in small groups of students to deliver interventions depending on the specific needs of each student. SBOTs also collaborate with educators and parents to ensure interventions are helping the student in the classroom (AOTA, 2016).

A student can also receive support from a TA in the classroom. It is important to note that terminology surrounding the title and job description of a TA varies. According to the United States (U.S.) Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were approximately 1.4 million Teaching Assistants in the country working in schools in 2019 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Teacher's Aide is one of the other names for a Teaching Assistant, in addition to Paraprofessional, Instructional Aides, Paraeducators, and Education Assistants (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The number of Teaching Assistants in the United States is expected to increase by another 55,000 individuals by the year 2028 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Due to the lack of uniformity in terminology, in this study the term Teacher's Aide (TA) and the job description for TA set forth by New York State will be used for the purpose of consistency. TA will be used in reference to literature findings as well.

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Guidelines put forth by New York State explain the role of a TA to include tasks such as managing records, materials, and equipment; attending to the physical needs of students; and supporting instructional tasks when supervised by a certified teacher (New York State Union of Teachers, 2019). A need for a TA is determined by a Committee on Special Education (CSE). In New York State, some considerations used to determine if a TA is recommended are: whether or not the student requires additional adult assistance, the specific role the TA will play, other natural supports that are in place for the student, the class size, and other circumstances specific to the student's ability to access and engage in educational programming (DeLorenzo, 2012). If it is determined that a student needs a TA to be successful in the classroom, it is documented in the student's IEP (DeLorenzo, 2012).

There is very limited literature specific to the role of the TA, and TA and OT collaboration. According to a review of international research, TAs play a large role in assessment of socialization and behavioral management for students with disabilities (Sharma & Salend, 2016). TAs were also found to have the power to make decisions regarding the student's educational resources and were responsible for communication between other educators and the families of the student with whom they were working; some of these duties were made challenging due to lack of collaboration with educators and lack of experience (Sharma & Salend, 2016). Sharma and Salend (2016) also found that TAs stated that communication, collaboration, role clarification, professional learning experiences, and feedback from other professionals all benefitted their ability to successfully help students. This review also found that when TAs do receive adequate supervision and training regarding their job duties, the students' literacy skills, behavior, and social performance all benefit (Sharma & Salend, 2016). In two other studies looking at the impact of TAs on student outcomes, it was found that academic

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skills, such as literacy and mathematics, were positively influenced by the TA's presence and support (Andersen et al., 2015; Gottfried, 2018).

Researchers have examined benefits of teacher and OT collaboration (Benson et al., 2019; Bose & Hinojosa, 2008; Mills & Chapparo, 2018; Villeneuve & Hutchinson, 2012).

However, there is little research specifically exploring TA and OT collaboration in a school setting. One study examining teaching professionals and OT communication more generally found that OTs valued collaboration with teaching professionals, but lack of time for official communication and lack of teacher responsiveness reduced the success of interprofessional communication (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008). Two studies examined the implementation of specific OT interventions within the classroom and found that open teacher collaboration was essential to successfully implementing the OT strategy into the classroom environment but finding the time to effectively collaborate was a barrier (Benson et al., 2019; Mills & Chapparo, 2018). Villeneuve and Hutchinson (2012) explored the interaction between OT and TAs through a qualitative case study. The OT in this study interacted with two TA and student duos differently, but ultimately fostered successful collaboration that had a significant positive impact on each student's performance.

Purpose

There is little research that has specifically examined the collaboration of OTs and TAs. Previous research has shown the positive impact TAs can have on a student's educational outcomes (Andersen et al., 2015; Gottfried, 2018; Sharma & Salend, 2016). It has also been shown that collaboration between a teacher and OT can significantly increase the carryover of interventions into the classroom. This collaboration does not always occur due to time constraints (Benson et al., 2019; Villeneuve & Shulha, 2012). Collaborating with TAs could be an avenue that would be beneficial, as a TA's job is meant to support student learning by assisting

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both the students individually and the classroom teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of a TA in relation to the potential for collaboration with an OT, understand how TAs collaborate with occupational therapists, and determine the potential for TAs to implement OT interventions in the classroom.

Scope of the Problem

Given that approximately 7.3 million students with disabilities, 1.4 million paraprofessionals, and 33 thousand SBOTs interact within the school systems nationwide, the need for collaboration to benefit the students is significant (AOTA, 2019; NCES, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Students interact with a team of multiple professionals, such as a teacher, TA, OT, physical therapist, speech language pathologist, and administrators, throughout the day. It is important that all professionals working on a student's team collaborate cohesively to best support the student. Much of the research that exists within the OT domain regarding team collaboration within a school does not include or specifically mention the TA, even though research has shown TAs can have a significant positive impact on a student's educational outcomes. The lack of research provides a challenge for SBOTs looking to use evidence-based practice as a basis for collaboration with TAs working with students on their caseload.

Rationale/Significance

A SBOT's focus is on helping students reach their highest potential in school (AOTA, 2016). In order to do this, it is important that collaboration between all professionals and paraprofessionals working with each student exists. Time constraints were reported to be a large factor in the success of communication between teachers and educators in a few studies (Benson et al., 2019; Bose & Hinojosa, 2008; Mills & Chapparo, 2018). TAs are often hired to support individual or small groups of students being instructed by a certified teacher (New York

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State Union of Teachers, 2019). TAs potentially have more time to collaborate with OTs and implement intervention strategies when compared to the general classroom teacher. Due to lack of research in this area regarding the specific job description of TAs, the TAs' abilities, and time availability, OTs may not be effectively collaborating with TAs. Research supporting the effectiveness of TAs and the importance of interprofessional collaboration make this area of research worthy of exploring to ensure that best practices for student support are occurring.

Research Questions

1. What roles do Teacher's Aides fulfill in the classroom?
2. What degree of understanding do Teacher's Aides have about occupational therapy?
3. What does the collaboration between Teacher's Aides and Occupational Therapists entail?
4. What knowledge and resources do Teacher's Aides feel they need in order to successfully implement OT interventions in the classroom?

Definition of Terms

Collaboration: Collaboration is defined as "the situation of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2021, 1st definition).

Distributed Cognition: a theoretical framework that is used to "explain cognitive activities as embodied and situated within the work settings in which they occur.... provides a framework for analysing [sic] complex, socially distributed work activities of which a diversity of technological artefacts and other tools are an indispensable part" (Rogers & Ellis, 1994, p. 121).

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE): An education that meets a student's needs and abilities, and "modifications, aids, and related services free of charge to students with disabilities and their parents or guardians" (Office for Civil Rights, 2020, para. 1).

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Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children” (IDEA, n.d., para. 1).

Least Restrictive Environment: A least restrictive environment is one where to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 2017, a.2.i)

Occupational Therapy:

Occupational therapy is the only profession that helps people across the lifespan to do the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of daily activities (occupations). Occupational therapy practitioners enable people of all ages to live life to its fullest by helping them promote health, and prevent- or live better with- injury, illness, or disability (AOTA, 2021, para. 2)

Rehabilitation Act: “The Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by Federal agencies, in programs receiving Federal financial assistance, in Federal employment, and in the employment practices of Federal contractors” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020, Rehabilitation Act para. 1).

School-Based Occupational Therapist (SBOT): School-Based Occupational Therapists “help children fulfill their role as student by supporting their academic achievement and promoting positive behaviors necessary for learning” (AOTA, 2016, para. 1).

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Teacher's Aide (TA): Throughout the United States, aides who work one on one or with a select few students in a classroom can have varying titles such as paraprofessional, paraeducator, teacher's assistant, educational assistant, and individual aide (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Delimitations

There were a few delimitations that support the rigor of this study. One delimitation was that the TA had to be working with three or fewer students each day. This was used as inclusion criteria to ensure that the TA knew the student well and spent a large portion of the day with the student; this criteria excluded TA voices who work with four or more students in a given day. Another delimitation was that the TAs had to be currently working with a student who received OT services. This excluded any TA who may have had relevant unique knowledge relating to OT and their job based on experience.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to a larger population. This study did take place during the COVID-19 pandemic which had a large impact on the routines and tasks that were occurring daily in schools. This study also only looked at collaboration from one of the two parties involved in the collaboration. The broader picture that includes the OTs perspective on collaboration currently occurring between OTs and TAs was not obtained in this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Special Education in the United States

The early 1970s brought about many changes for individuals with disabilities (IDEA, 2004a; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). There were two acts specific to the needs of students with disabilities during this time frame. One was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the other was the Education for all Handicapped Students Act of 1975, now known as IDEA. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 protected the rights of students with disabilities by prohibiting any organization that receives federal funding, such as public schools, from discriminating against any individual with a disability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Disability in Section 504 is defined broadly as “a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more life activities” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006, p. 1). This ensures that individuals with a disability have equal opportunities to access and participate in the services that an organization provides (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). In a school, a student can have a 504 plan that provides accommodations to ensure access to the school building, classroom, and a positive learning environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). A 504 plan is developed by school professionals in collaboration with the student and caregivers. Occupational therapy services can be a service included on a 504 plan for a student with a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was a positive step towards equal opportunities in school for students with disabilities, but it did not provide specialized education to students with a disability. Two years later in 1975, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted (IDEA, 2004a). A child with a disability is defined in IDEA as:

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a child with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (IDEA, 2004, §1401, 3.A.i)

IDEA guarantees students who have a disability a free and appropriate education (commonly referred to as FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004a). Students who are considered to have a disability based on the definition put forth in the act are then given an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to ensure that student is receiving the best possible free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. An IEP is a legal document outlining the student's education plan and created by a team of school professionals, in collaboration with the student and their caregiver(s). The goal is to create this document with the student's unique needs and best interests at the forefront. Included within this document is the student's present level of functioning, services provided (occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, specialized education), their goals, progress measures, specific accommodations (such as aides or testing accommodations), a timeline for the implementation of the IEP services, and a date of when the IEP should be updated (IDEA, 2004a). This education plan is reviewed and updated annually.

Many years of research have gone into education as related to students with disabilities resulting in multiple revisions of the law (IDEA, 2004a). Researchers found through decades of research that students with disabilities were more effectively educated when high expectations were set for them, family was encouraged to be involved, special education services, such as aides and supports in a regular education classroom, were provided as needed, and when professionals were well trained in their respective areas (IDEA, 2004a). IDEA provides the legal

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requirements for a student with a disability to receive an education that is specific to their needs and will challenge them, encourage growth, and provide the basis for a successful life which every child deserves (IDEA, 2004a).

While components of best practice have been embedded in each successive revision of IDEA there are challenges to implementation relating to the school environment, personnel, and resources (Armstrong, 2015; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). In particular, team collaboration and teacher preparedness were and continue to be challenging (Armstrong, 2015; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Lashley & Boscardin (2003) found that it was challenging to enable collaboration between school personnel (administrators, special education teachers, regular education teachers) due to lack of time and training specifically on collaboration. The difficult task of implementing collaboration, when done correctly, can help create accessible, high-quality education for all students (Armstrong, 2015; Hutchings et al., 2012; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

Including students in the least restrictive environment possible was also challenging for teachers and personnel who were not trained to provide services for students with disabilities, especially in the early years of IDEA implementation (Buell et al., 1999). Researchers demonstrated that teachers with confidence in their ability to educate special needs students were shown to be more effective educators for this population (Buell et al., 1999). To help ensure adequate education for teachers, additional legislation was enacted. Among other purposes, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set forth standards for qualifications of teachers to ensure that they were knowledgeable about how to provide all students, including those with disabilities, with high-quality education (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2020b). Heightened standards for qualifications for teachers while obtaining their teaching degree required them to learn strategies to help special education students learn (Office of Elementary

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& Secondary Education, 2020b). This requirement is meant to close educational gaps for all types of students (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2020a).

A more recent addition to supports for students was the Response to Intervention System (The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tiered approach commonly used within school systems to identify and support students who are in need to meet curriculum standards as early as possible (AOTA, 2012; The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). This system has three tiers; an OT can provide services in all tiers (AOTA, 2014a). RTI is used as an early intervention strategy in order to identify those in need before they fall behind significantly (AOTA, 2012; The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). Throughout all three tiers, OTs are working as part of a team supporting students to achieve to the best of their ability. This requires collaboration of team members to provide cohesive and evidence-based intervention to meet each student's needs (AOTA, 2014a).

Tier 1 is provided to all general education students (The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). Within tier 1, it is expected that 80% of general education students will be successful at meeting standards after receiving evidence-based curriculum with high quality instructional, behavioral, and social-emotional supports (AOTA, 2012; The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). Within this tier, OT's can provide training for general education personnel such as classroom teachers and TAs. These trainings can vary depending on the OT's areas of expertise but may include topics such as brain development, sensory and motor development, time management, cognitive development, and mental health (AOTA, 2014a). Also, within tier 1 OTs can provide developmental screenings for large groups of students, share resources and suggestions on how

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to support the learning needs of students with disabilities, and help with environmental adaptations to make the environment more conducive to learning (AOTA, 2014a).

Tier 2 includes targeted group interventions provided as extra supports to help students meet their goals (The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). A team of school professionals will determine what the problem is, what may be the cause of the problem for that student, determine a plan that will support the student in reaching their goals, and then evaluate that plan to determine if it is working (AOTA, 2012; The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). An OT working within this tier can provide environmental adaptations for specific learners, suggest the use of a research-based technique for the general educator to use with specific students, and provide differentiated instruction to a small group of students based on their needs (AOTA, 2014a).

Tier 3 is the final tier and is usually needed for approximately 5% of the general education population (AOTA, 2012). This tier provides individualized interventions at a high frequency (AOTA, 2012; The University of the State of New York The State Education Department, 2010). At this point, an OT can provide individualized suggestions based on evidence and suggest that a formal OT evaluation is conducted to determine the need for individualized therapy sessions (AOTA, 2014a). RTI provides a systematic process that requires collaboration between team members.

Occupational Therapy Definition and Settings

The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF): Domain and Process Fourth Edition created by the AOTA (2020) states occupational therapy is

the therapeutic use of everyday life occupations with persons, groups, or populations (i.e., the client) for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation. Occupational therapy practitioners use their knowledge of the transactional relationship among the

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client, the client's engagement in valuable occupations, and the context to design occupation-based intervention plans. Occupational therapy services are provided for habilitation, rehabilitation, and promotion of health and wellness for clients with disability- and non-disability related needs (p. 1)

Occupational therapy practitioners can include both Registered Occupational Therapists (OT/R) and Certified Occupational Therapy Assistants (COTA). For the purpose of this study, the term OT is used to encompass both titles. OTs can work within multiple different settings providing services and interventions based on their expertise (AOTA, 2019). AOTA (2019) lists some of these settings to include academia (6.9%), community (2.4%), early intervention (4.4%), free-standing outpatient (13.3%), home health (7.3%), hospital (28.6%), long-term care (14.5%), mental health (2.2%), and school (18.8%).

In all settings, OTs work within an established OT domain to support engagement, participation, and health (AOTA, 2020). According to AOTA (2020) the OTPF states that aspects of the occupational therapy domain are occupations (activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living, health management, rest and sleep, education, work, play, leisure, and social participation), contexts (environmental and personal factors), performance patterns (habits, routines, roles, and rituals), performance skills (motor skills, process skills, and social interaction skills), and client factors (values, beliefs, spirituality, body functions and body structures). All of these aspects of the OT domain are equally important and influence one another throughout the OT process (AOTA, 2020).

Role of Occupational Therapy in School-Based Practice

OTs play a unique and important role within schools on the team of professionals who provide a high-quality education for students, especially those with disabilities. According to AOTA (2019), in 2019 18.8% of OTs nationally were working in a school setting making school-

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based practice a major aspect of the profession. The American Occupational Therapy Association ([AOTA], 2016), described school-based occupational therapists (SBOTs) as those who “help children to fulfill their role as students by supporting their academic achievement and promoting positive behaviors necessary for learning” (para. 1). SBOT’s are qualified to help students develop in multiple areas such as social skills, motor skills, academic skills, self-help skills, sensory processing and integration, mental health promotion and prevention, vocational preparation, use of assistive technology, self-regulation (AOTA, 2016; Ball, 2018; Bissel & Cermak, 2015; NYSED, 2003). In New York State, the frequency with which OTs provide services to students is determined when creating or updating the student’s IEP or 504 plan and is based on multiple factors such as: number of goals, therapeutic or educational needs, age, progression of diagnosis, parental involvement, rate of progress, and previous therapy (NYSED, 2003). SBOTs help students succeed in the school environment that has been deemed most suitable (AOTA, 2016; Bissel & Cermak, 2015). Although research has supported OTs positive role in a school-based setting, only about half of teachers surveyed knew what OT was, and about 70% of OTs felt valued by teachers in a recent study (Bolton & Plattner, 2019).

A SBOT’s job description and services provided can also vary depending on if they are hired as a direct or contract employee, the individual school’s needs, and the resources accessible at each school (Bissel & Cermak, 2015). According to AOTA (2014b), SBOTs spend approximately 61% of their time on direct intervention, 24% of their time on indirect intervention or administrative tasks, 11% of their time in consultation with other professionals, and 4% of their time on research and other tasks.

SBOTs are qualified to provide direct services, indirect services, and consultative services (Villeneuve, 2009). Direct services facilitate remediation, adaptation, or development of skills through interaction with activities and the environment (Villeneuve, 2009). Indirect

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services can include but are not limited to: supporting student success through collaboration to increase classroom carryover and set goals, observing the student in the classroom or natural environment, and helping other professionals understand what OT is and its importance (AOTA, 2016; Garfinkel & Seruya, 2018; Villeneuve, 2009). Consultation services are meant to be collaborative to identify what is hindering a student's success and then to determine how that hinderance can be mitigated (Villeneuve, 2009). Provision of successful consultation services requires an OT trained in communication, interpersonal skills, and partnership building (Villeneuve, 2009). Regardless of type of service delivery, SBOTs are expected to work as team members alongside other school professionals (student, teacher, support staff, teacher's aides, and administrators) to collaborate and provide high quality services (AOTA, 2016). Working within the team allows the SBOT to educate others about the role OT plays, to recommend modifications and accommodations, and to help develop the educational plan (AOTA, 2016; Bissel & Cermak, 2015).

Most OT services are provided as pull out (occurring outside of the classroom), direct one to one or small group services focusing on fine motor skills and sensory processing challenges (Bolton & Plattner, 2019). Carry over of OT strategies into the classroom is critically important for success as students spend the majority of the school day in the classroom. Indirect OT services are becoming more common as the benefits of collaborating with the team are being reported. In a phenomenological study including five SBOTs, Garfinkel & Seruya (2018) found that when SBOT's engaged in three weeks of direct service followed by one week of indirect services, there was more collaboration between professionals, higher job satisfaction, and more work done in the student's natural environment.

Another role an OT can play in a school-based setting is that of an educator and advocate regarding what OT is and the benefits that OT can have on students (AOTA, 2016). OT's

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can promote OT services by sharing resources on why OT interventions work, beginning dialogues with other professionals about the core values of OT, and providing in-service trainings for other professionals regarding OT strategies that they can help the student use (Handley-More et al., 2017).

Role and Effectiveness of Teacher's Aides

The number of TAs is projected to grow by 4% in the next 10 years, adding over 50,000 positions to the approximately 1.4 million already employed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Given the substantial number of TAs already employed, and the projected growth, it is important for OTs to understand the role and effectiveness of TAs when working with students with disabilities in a school setting.

Provision of a TA can be legally required for a student if deemed necessary for a student to succeed, and documented in the student's IEP (NYSED, 2003). Guidelines specifying the role and employment requirements of each type of paraprofessional are set forth by each state and vary widely. As an example, according to New York State Department of Education (2013), both a teaching assistant and teacher's aide can assist with delivering special education services but cannot be the sole provider of these services. Some relevant roles a teaching assistant can fulfill under the supervision of a certified teacher are working individually or in small groups with students, sharing information regarding students learning and behavior with the appropriate teacher, helping with instructional programming, and when appropriate, supporting students with medical needs (NYSED, 2013). A teacher's aide can provide assistance to a student and/or the teacher for non-instructional tasks such as: health related support, behavior management, setup of a classroom, administration of tasks, managing equipment, and supervising students (NYSED, 2013). In New York State, to become a teaching assistant, one must have a high school diploma or passed the General Education Developmental Test (GED), pass a 100-question skills

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competency exam, attend three workshops on child abuse, school violence and harassment/bullying and receive fingerprint clearance from the state of New York (NYSED, 2020). In New York State, there is no certification or test that an individual must pass to become a teacher's aide (NYSED, 2004). The most common education requirement is a high school diploma or GED (Indeed, 2021). Due to both of these titles being used interchangeably in other research and throughout the U.S., both of these terms are encompassed in the definition of TA used in this study.

IDEA (2004a) states that TAs may "assist in the provision of special education and related services as long as they are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law" (§ 300.156). This is a broad definition. Survey research done by Gibson et al. (2015) to further understand the specific tasks engaged in by TAs included 163 participants and found that TAs often worked individually and with groups of students, collaborated with the teacher, promoted social skills, and adapted a student's work. Another specific task that TAs engaged in was communication with the teacher (Gibson et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2004). Warren et al. (2004) interviewed 12 teachers about their interactions with TAs and found that communication with teachers was not always occurring due to the extra planning required by the teacher to adequately educate and engage the TA, and the teacher's perception of the perceived lack of expertise of the TA. When communication did occur, the TA often had more responsibilities, an increased understanding of the student's progress, and a larger impact on the classroom (Gibson et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2004).

Implementing a TA successfully into a classroom to support students does come with some challenges. Studies have reported that TAs work in multiple classrooms, have a lack of clarity in role definition, and may lack training (Angelides et al., 2009; Mansaray, 2006; Sharma & Salend, 2016; Warren, et al., 2004; Webster et al., 2011). Specifically related to OT, one study

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in Australia completed using an anonymous online questionnaire found that 10.9% of TAs were unprepared to provide therapy assistance, and 13.3% stated that there was a substantial need for therapy assistance training. The need for training in therapy assistance was reported as the highest level of need when compared to all 18 tasks included in the study (Gibson et al., 2015).

In addition to the reported challenges, the effectiveness of a TA can be dependent on the task or skill they are trying to support and how they facilitate that task (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Hemmingsson, 2003). Student outcomes may be correlated to what the TA knows about a specific skill and how to facilitate it. TAs have been shown to positively influence student outcomes in multiple different domains such as emotional support, communication, social support, personal care, mobility, relationship building, and academic subjects such as mathematics and literacy (Abbott et al., 2011; Andersen, 2015; Angelides et al., 2009; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Gottfried, 2018; Helker & Ray, 2009; Rutherford, 2009; Takala, 2007). All of these domains can fall within the scope of OT practice in a school-based setting. Therefore, working with TAs to promote carry over in the classroom is an opportunity for SBOTs' interventions to have a greater effect on student success.

Collaboration Definitions, Benefits, and Challenges

Collaboration is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary (2021) as “the situation of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing” (1st definition). In studies examining collaboration, participants described collaboration as consisting of all team members feeling equal, valued, trusted, and interacting well with each other to achieve a common goal (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008; Collins & Crabb, 2010). Collaboration requires a professional to have the ability to communicate effectively, have adequate knowledge within their field, and have strong problem-solving skills (Friend & Cook, 2000; Snell & Janney, 2000).

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IDEA requires the team members working with a student to collaborate (IDEA, 2004a). Collaboration between school professionals has been shown to be an important aspect of successfully supporting and educating students with special needs (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Clark & Miller, 1996; Handley-More et al., 2017; Nochajski, 2001). This is especially evident when students with special needs are included alongside their peers in regular education classrooms (Nevin, 2000; Sands et al., 2000). Handley-More et al. (2017) stated that collaboration helps professionals identify the needs of each student and is necessary when looking to implement strategies into the classroom to increase student participation. Using collaboration to solve a problem can help develop solutions that are more creative and beneficial than the solutions a team member might create on their own; discussing multiple ideas leads to better solutions (Dunn, 1990; Gutkin, 2002). According to Coben et al. (1997), professionals develop new skills by collaborating with others and sharing their ideas. This process also benefits the student by creating a team that works cohesively towards achieving the student's goals (Dunn, 1990; Gutkin, 2002; Handley-More et al., 2017).

Although there are many positives to collaboration, it does not occur without challenges. One large challenge is that the role each professional has on the school team is not always clearly defined leading to a lack of understanding of expectations for each professional (Nochajski, 2001; Coolman et al., 1998; Fairbairn & Davidson, 1993; McEwen & Shelden, 1995). Another large barrier is lack of time to meet and engage in collaboration to implement new techniques, discuss progress and goals, and share helpful knowledge (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Nochajski, 2001).

Theory of Distributed Cognition

Hutchins and colleagues at the University of California in San Diego developed the Theory of Distributed Cognition to provide a framework for understanding how the knowledge

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of collaborators is created and altered through interactions with each other, the environment, and physical items (Hutchins, 1991). There are two assumptions one must understand before using distributed cognition as a theoretical base. One is that the two parties involved must share a common language and can understand the signals being exchanged, whether that is body language or verbal language. If the two parties do not understand each other, information may not be exchanged appropriately. A second assumption is that the two individuals have knowledge that is unique to them (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). If neither party has a novel piece of information to exchange, then their viewpoints will not change.

Using these assumptions, the authors of the theory describe multiple elements that are involved in collaborative efforts leading to distributed cognition. The primary goal of the theoretical application is that the individuals involved teach their personal knowledge and learn the other individual's distinct knowledge (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). The first major element involved in creating distributed cognition is the *central unit*, which is composed of people, artefacts, and their interrelationships (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). *Cognitive activities* are how the brain understands information that is being transferred between individuals (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). *Media* is information that is stored mentally and information that is physically written on a computer or piece of paper (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). *States of representation* are how information transforms within an activity (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). *Communicative pathways* are ways in which information is shared such as through verbal language and body language (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). The main goal is to understand how the central unit interacts with the environment and representational media to create distributed cognition and a cohesive team (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). All of these elements come together and interact to influence the end result of what is understood by each individual (Rogers & Ellis, 1994).

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When applying this to collaboration that occurs between the SBOT and paraprofessional, the central unit is the SBOT, the paraprofessional, and the physical resources available to them. Their main goal would be to interact with each other and their environment in order to collectively have knowledge about the student, so they are prepared to best serve the student's needs. Their cognitive activities would be understanding and interpreting what the other individual has to say via verbal and body language and then incorporating that knowledge with what they already know. The result might change the individual's state of representation or the way the individual was thinking about the student and their needs. Ideally, when you combine the knowledge and perspectives of multiple individuals, the result will be more comprehensive (Shulha & Wilson, 2003). In this case, a more comprehensive result will better serve the student and their specific needs.

Collaboration Specific to Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapists often work in a team, regardless of the setting. This makes collaboration an important aspect of their job. The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) (2018), puts forth standards that each accredited program must meet for their graduates to be eligible to become registered OTs. These standards acknowledge a need for OT graduates to develop the skills to work in a team by including collaboration in their standards. In the ACOTE Standards Interpretive Guide (2018) the word "collaboration" appears 28 times. When looking specifically at the accreditation standards for an entry-level master's degree, the word collaboration is used in six of the standards. Collaboration is also mentioned nine times in the body of the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, 4th Edition which is an official document created by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) to describe occupational therapy process (AOTA, 2020). It is a clear requirement of the

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profession for entry level therapists to have knowledge about how to successfully collaborate with other professionals working on a team.

Collaboration can take shape in many ways. Collins and Crabb (2010) set forth five building blocks for occupational therapists to help ensure successful collaborative intervention. The first of these building blocks is for the OT to create an environment where all parties feel respected, trusted, and able to communicate freely. This may take time to create but is integral to having a collaborative relationship. The second building block is to work as a team to determine the problem and set goals. The third is to create an intervention plan as a team that keeps the student's, the therapist's, and the caregiver's best interest in mind. The fourth building block is to ensure intervention fidelity by providing instruction, demonstration, explanations, feedback, and answering questions. It is very important that anyone using OT techniques has a clear understanding of what they are doing and how it is helping. Lastly, it is important to follow-up with team members to make sure that the plan is being followed and there are no adjustments needed, questions to be answered, or instruction to be provided (Collins & Crabb, 2010).

Following a successful model of collaboration is important for many reasons. One of those reasons is that when an OT takes on a noncollaborative expert role wherein they simply tell a TA what to do without reciprocal conversation, carryover and outcomes are often lacking if the TA does not understand the importance of and potential results of OT techniques (Collins & Crabb, 2010). Another reason that collaboration is important is that it can increase the relevance of OT intervention for the student (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008). An OT may not have the full picture of the student's needs and natural environment without collaboration with personnel who work closely with that student (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008).

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Occupational therapy has included training on collaboration within their accredited academic programs, showing that it is a necessary skill of the profession. In the late 1990s, SBOTs reported that they were increasing the amount they were collaborating with other professionals who were working with the same students (Barnes et al., 1997; Case-Smith & Cable, 1996). Currently, AOTA considers SBOTs to be key contributors to the educational team by collaborating with students, parents, educators, paraeducators, and administrators (AOTA, 2016). There are few recent studies that have been done specifically looking at the collaboration that is occurring within schools that includes the OT. One study done by Bose & Hinojosa (2008) included the perspectives of six OTs and found that OTs valued collaboration and felt collaboration played an important role in keeping all team members student-centered and striving for the same outcomes. Another study by Handley-More et al. (2017) found that collaboration helped to identify the problem, create and implement a treatment plan that prioritizes the most important challenges, and support the role of an OT. It is integral to ask teachers what is occurring in the classroom to understand what is challenging for a student and what supports are beneficial (Mills & Chapparo, 2018). A few studies have found that collaborative consultation and collaborative services where students are receiving supports from those other than the OT directly have been equally or more effective than one to one, direct intervention (Dreiling & Bundy, 2003; Hanft & Shepherd, 2008; Sayers, 2008; Villeneuve, 2009).

In a study including 40 teachers who worked with students receiving OT services, Barnes and Turner (2001) found that collaboration between teachers and OTs varied greatly in topics being discussed and how that discussion was occurring. Some OTs were monitoring OT strategies being used in the classroom, some were allowing the teacher to monitor the OT strategies being used in the classroom, some had team meetings, and some OT and Teacher

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pairs developed goals and objectives together as a team (Barnes & Turner, 2001). The variation may be due to the many challenges associated with collaborating. One challenge found by Bose & Hinojosa (2008) was that not all teachers, especially those who have been in the profession for a long time, were receptive to collaboration. There was also a lack of resources within the schools, such as a lack of time and a lack of training, both of which can lead to insufficient scheduling of and follow through with formal meetings (Bayona et al., 2006; Benson et al., 2019; Bose & Hinojosa, 2008; King et al. 1999). Yet another challenge was confusion caused by misunderstanding in communication (Bose & Hinojosa, 2008).

There have been many studies showing that collaboration between OTs and teachers can have positive impacts such as improved student performance, improved teachers' understanding of occupational therapy's role, greater teacher awareness of students' special needs, improved relationships between the teacher and OT, increased OT carryover, and positive attitude changes (Benson et al., 2019; Bundy, 1995; Case-Smith & Cable, 1996; Clark & Miller, 1996; Dunn, 1990; Fairbairn & Davidson, 1993; Garfinkel & Seruya, 2018; Hanft & Shepherd, 2008; Priest, 2006; Reid et al., 2006; Sayers, 2008; Spencer et al., 2006). Although these studies showed positive outcomes supporting collaboration between the OT and teacher, no studies have expanded to explore the impact of collaboration specifically with TAs who spend a large portion of their day working individually with students or in small groups.

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative, phenomenological approach. This type of study “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). This approach was determined to be the most conducive for obtaining the most detailed and accurate information after careful consideration of previous literature. Due to the scarcity of previous literature, there were few known details about the TA’s lived experience and the collaboration with OTs that took place in school settings. Open ended survey questions allowed the researcher to obtain unique and personal information from the TAs to begin to develop a base of information for clinical application and future research efforts. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (215) was obtained to interview TAs who worked with students who received OT services. The IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A. Data collection occurred through researcher created semi-structured interviews. Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to the first interview. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix B. The interviews took place virtually via Zoom. Each participant answered the same interview questions; there was some variation in follow-up questions during the second interview. The follow-up questions were created after the first interview to obtain any necessary clarifying information relating to the first interview questions. At the end of the second interview, participants also answered demographic questions. The semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Researcher Description and Researcher-Participant Relationships

Throughout my life, education has been a high priority. Many of the women in my immediate and extended family are elementary school teachers. I obtained my undergraduate degree in Human Development and had a minor in Education. Learning about how students

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learn is very interesting to me. When considering what to do for my thesis, I became interested in the idea of obtaining the TA's opinion because they tend to be overlooked by many professionals. Since there are significantly more TAs in the United States than OTs, TAs could help increase the positive impact that OT has on students by increasing our reach. I intend to become an SBOT during my career as an OT and was interested in exploring how to improve my own effectiveness within this setting.

The TAs were recruited using word of mouth methodology: all had a connection to someone I personally reached out to regarding the study. None of the participants had a previous direct connection to me.

Participant Characteristics

The goal was to include five to ten TAs who worked within the United States and who worked directly with three or fewer students per day. One of the students the TA was assigned to assist must have been receiving OT services. The participant was required to be fluent in English, have held their position for at least one year, be employed full-time, and be 18 years of age or older.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited via my personal connections within schools. A formal recruitment script (Appendix D) was shared with teachers, building principals, and multiple types of school employees to share within their buildings. The recruitment script was also posted on my personal Facebook account. Potential participants contacted me via email or phone to express their interest in participating. Once their eligibility was confirmed, the interviews were scheduled. Given the COVID pandemic, all communication was done through electronic media. Each participant signed a consent form prior to the beginning of the first interview.

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Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection was a researcher designed semi-structured interview. After piloting the interview questions with a school professional and an experienced SBOT, the edited final interview structure included two interviews that consisted of 13 questions each. The interview questions were created by considering the literature and collaborating with professionals who were familiar with working with OTs, TAs, and/or research. Each participant answered the same interview questions; there was some variation in follow-up questions during the second interview. The follow-up questions were created after the first interview to obtain any necessary clarifying information relating to the first interview questions. At the end of the second interview, participants also answered demographic questions. The semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Interviews were video and audio recorded via Zoom. I downloaded transcriptions from the Zoom platform and edited them for accuracy. Prior to the second interview, I noted what clarifying questions were necessary to obtain the full picture from interview one. I watched each recording; data relating to tone of voice and body language was recorded in the margins of the transcriptions.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). To begin the analysis, I carefully listened to each interview and edited each Zoom generated transcription to ensure accuracy. After the transcription was edited for accuracy, I read through each interview and made general notes in the margins to become familiar with the data. The next step included generating multiple initial codes such as OT role, TA role, OT strategies, TA strategies, and challenges. I then highlighted specific phrases that aligned with each of those codes. Those codes were then examined to determine any commonalities within each individual

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interview and across participants. In addition, I triangulated my findings by having my thesis committee members read and analyze my transcripts and engaged in a round table conversation about potential themes and meanings. All commonalities were then used to determine themes that were the most prevalent and clear. Finally, powerful quotes were extracted from the transcriptions to support each theme and the themes were related back to the literature review and research questions.

Chapter 4: Results

Demographics

In this study, five of six potential participants fully completed both virtual interviews. One participant (participant 4) began the first interview but did not complete the interview as it became clear she did not meet the inclusion criteria. The data from participant 4's first interview was not included in this analysis. Demographic information relating to personal and school characteristics of the five included participants is shown in Table 1.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Information	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 5	Participant 6
Job Title	Teacher's Aide	CSEA Aide	Individual Aide	Educational Assistant	Special Education Teaching Assistant
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female
Years of Experience	13	29	5	13	35
Education Level	High School Diploma	2 years of college	3 years of college, currently enrolled	2 nd year of college, currently enrolled	AS degree plus 1 additional year
State	NY	NY	NY	MD	NY
Grade Level	4 th	5 th	3 rd	Ungraded	3 rd
Number of students per day*	2 or 3	3	1	1	2
Number of students who receive OT	1	1	1	1	1
Frequency of OT service	1x/week	N/A	2x/6 day cycle	Student dependent	2x/week
District Size	3,500-4,000	3,500-4,000	1,000-1,500	Unknown**	6,500-7,000
Type of School	Public	Public	Public	Non-public, Behavioral School	Public
Type of Classroom	Inclusion	Inclusion	Inclusion	Self-Contained	Inclusion
Hours per Work Week	32.5	35	40	40	35

Note. *For participants 1, 2, 3, & 6 they worked with the same students throughout the entire school year. Participant 5 worked with one student per day, but that student changed every three months.

** This school drew from multiple different school districts.

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In Table 1, all the participants in my study had different job titles even though they all met the inclusion criteria. All of the participants worked full time and worked with one student who received OT services 1-2x per week. The majority, 80%, of the participants identified as female, worked in New York State inclusion classrooms within districts of varying sizes, and had some form of higher education after high school. When looking at this data compared to the job requirements, the education level of the participants may be abnormally high compared to the general population of TAs.

Participants were interviewed to answer four research questions:

1. What roles do Teacher's Aides fulfill in the classroom?
2. What degree of understanding do Teacher's Aides have about occupational therapy?
3. What does the collaboration between Teacher's Aides and Occupational Therapists entail?
4. What knowledge and resources do Teacher's Aides feel they need in order to successfully implement OT strategies in the classroom?

The themes that emerged from data analysis painted a broader picture than the specificity of the research questions. The broader picture that emerged is presented alongside answers to the specific research questions. The themes identified are as follows: multi-purpose responsibilities, student-oriented motivation and dedication, teacher's aides as collaborators, training occurs through experiences, case-based knowledge about OT, and challenges of being a teacher's aide.

Multi-Purpose Responsibilities

It was clear from the data that TA's have a multipurpose job that requires them to be able to think and act swiftly to ensure a student's education goals and safety are prioritized. In response to questions relating to "What roles do Teacher's Aides fulfill in the classroom?" several work responsibilities emerged. TAs reported fulfilling multiple roles such as facilitator,

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encourager, organizer, supporter, and manager to support the learning and safety of students with diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and medical needs. They engage in tasks such as reminding students to complete necessary tasks, addressing behaviors, providing encouragement to complete a task, assisting the teacher, providing breaks, and providing visual and tactile cues. The job of a TA varied depending on the classroom, student, and district. General tasks reported by participants included, but were not limited to, work within the classroom and during recess, during arrival at and departure from school, and when accompanying students to various places within the school building throughout the day. The goal of engaging in these tasks was to support the students' learning by adapting activities to provide the just right challenge. At times, knowing when to back off and allow the student to engage in a task independently was reported as a challenge for TAs.

Participants mentioned that their job entailed duties such as helping students meet their goals, helping students stay on task and focused, and providing encouragement. Participant 3 stated "actually part of our job is to make sure that we are helping meet the goals of our students." Participant 6 stated "[I have] tricks up my sleeve to get him to do the work." When asked what those tricks were, she explained multiple different strategies to motivate, encourage, and focus the student. Additionally, participant 1 stated "and that's not really our job, but we still do it" exemplifying the point that their jobs really were multipurpose, even if they were not required to be.

Student-Oriented Motivation and Dedication

Helping students succeed was the main motivation for TAs. Four of the participants had a family member with special needs and one participant had personal experience with a student with special needs. These experiences showed them the impact they could have on students'

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lives. Every participant noted at some point throughout their interview that watching the student succeed was extremely rewarding. When asked what their favorite part of their job was, a smile came to all of their faces and their voices were more energized. Most answered without hesitation stating without a doubt the students were the best part and then continued on to explain why. Participant 2 stated “my favorite part is when they struggle so hard to get something and then the light bulb goes off and they finally get it and it’s like, there it is!” Participant 6 stated that “when I see that they can do it, after like we’ve practiced it and I back off and I’m like yay! You know, so it’s very rewarding.” Participant 5 went even further stating that “my job has affected the man I’ve become” and that it’s those “they give you chills moments” that are the best part of his job.

Teacher’s Aides as Collaborators

The participants were asked specifically how they would define collaboration. Most participants responded, stating that collaboration is working together. One participant avoided the question and described different aspects of their job. An example of participant 2’s definition of collaboration was “Collaboration is everyone working together with the child to, to meet the goals that the child has.” TAs reported appreciating opportunities to collaborate and felt they had valuable information to share about the student. The opportunities to collaborate with OTs were often informal and haphazard in terms of scheduling. All 5 participants felt that they knew the student(s) they were working with very well because they spent so much time working closely with their student(s). Participant 1 stated “[teachers] don’t know what’s going on in the background. They’re just focusing on teaching. So I’m able to tell them what’s going on while they’re teaching.” Participant 2 stated “we’re with them more than anyone else. Probably as much as, when we’re a normal school day, we’re with them as much as their parents are. So, we know them. Much more better [sic] than anyone else does in the building.” Participant 3

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mentioned that “we have knowledge of what they do all day during, in the classroom. What they struggle with, what they can, maybe what they can’t do.” The participants did report that they felt valued, especially by the teachers within the classroom. Often the teachers would ask for the TAs input prior to going to an IEP meeting for that student. One participant stated that they felt undervalued in regard to compensation and appreciation for what they do every day. The participants did not specifically report if they felt valued by the OT.

When it came to the collaboration that was occurring, participants had differing viewpoints. A clear theme relating to collaboration emerged when all participants’ points of view were considered together. Collaboration is desired and does occur, but it is not without flaws. In general, participants reported that collaboration with teachers and OTs varied based on the personality and experience of the individuals involved. Specifically, participant 1 stated that “she [teacher] knows how I work. I know how she works. So I really don't have to tell her. But when I first started there, yeah, there is [sic] teachers that you have to tell everything you do.” Differing levels of communication between the TA and teacher was a common occurrence among the other participants as well.

When talking about OT collaboration, all participants stated that collaboration with school professionals such as the OT was not specifically listed in their job description. They did report that they were willing to collaborate regardless because they wanted to help the students. This was especially true when the TA seemed to have a positive relationship with the OT. TAs preferred face to face collaboration which mainly occurred before or after OT sessions to talk about strategies. Participant 1 stated “I’ve learned that, throughout the years, that I can communicate with the OT.” Participant 2 mentioned “we have a small amount of time before and a small amount of time after [school], but it’s not normally enough to sit down and actually go over anything big.” She also stated that “you’ve got to work together to be able to help each

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other reach a certain goal or help the child reach a goal” and “your [the OT] information could be exactly what they [the TA] need to get the child on task and doing what needs to be done and it could help them.” Participant 5 built on that concept when he stated, “people come to me, ‘well, how did you get your student to know, your student is doing so good [sic]!’ Well, I listened to the OT!” Participant 5 stated that

there are a lot of techniques that OT wants to implement that I don’t understand. So, I should be comfortable enough to say, well, why do you want to do it that way? And you shouldn’t feel attacked to say, well, this is the way we're supposed to do it

He also mentioned that he was comfortable asking questions but “that’s the problem. Most of the time, the majority of people don’t ask the question.” Participant 6 stated that “usually it’s us going to her” and that “I’ve heard other teachers say, oh she’s, you know, she’s not very respectful of TAs. That, you know, she’ll [the OT] only talk to the teacher.”

When asked questions relating to “What does the collaboration between Teacher’s Aides and Occupational Therapists entail?” participants had viewpoints that aligned with each other. The collaboration that occurred between teacher’s aides and occupational therapists was usually face to face (but could be through email, phone calls, or notes), was informal, and occurred before or after OT sessions as the student was being dropped off or picked up from the session. At times this collaboration occurred with a third party involved such as a special education teacher. These conversations often included discussions about strategies and goals for each student. Often, the TA was the one who sought out the opinion of the OT when the TA noticed a student struggling within the classroom.

When asked “What knowledge and resources do Teacher’s Aides feel they need in order to successfully implement OT strategies in the classroom?” TAs mentioned the need for OTs to communicate with them openly and honestly. TAs reported wanting to build relationships with

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OTs and to have two-way discussions, so both voices were heard. They also reported desiring OTs to include both visual and verbal instructions to increase the TAs understanding of OT strategies. When collaboration did occur, participants reported that they were willing to implement OT strategies into the classroom if they understood what to do.

Training Occurs Through Experience

TAs reported receiving on the job training catered to the specific situation and needs of the students they were working with as their main form of training. All 5 participants stated that they did not receive any formal training prior to beginning their job. Their training consisted of sitting down with a teacher to talk about the student they would be working with, which often involved talking through what was written on the student's IEP. Some TAs were given the exact IEP to look over, others were given a written guide listing modifications and goals, and others simply talked through the IEP with a teacher as their training. Participant 1 stated "I didn't have no [sic] training, nothing. I learned. It took me years just to know how the school runs and what was my job. Yeah, yeah, and it's sad because we should know." Participant 2 talked about receiving written information when stating that "the special ed teacher has a quick reference for us that, that just lists the modifications that the kids need." Participant 6 stated that her training was more verbal stating that it consisted of "sitting down [with the teacher], looking at the IEPs and their goals." Participant 5 noted that it's "kind of learning on the run and it's more reactionary than proactive. So everything that we do training wise is to fix a problem that happened, as opposed to being preemptive.... it's not very effective." Many of the participants were provided with training regarding crisis intervention and/or managing challenging behaviors at some point throughout their career. Professional development days occurred for all the participants but were often organized without the TAs input and at times were reactionary to an event that had previously occurred demonstrating the need for the training. Two participants

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were enrolled in college part time with hopes of getting their bachelor's degrees to further their careers in teaching. The training that was provided by the school districts themselves seemed to be very limited and not prioritized.

Due to the infrequency and case-by-case basis of most training, participants reported that on the job experience was correlated with their confidence level and knowledge base in the areas of OT strategies and collaboration. All of the participants had multiple years of experience and noted that they had gotten better at communicating and using OT strategies as they gained experience. When asked to rate their confidence when implementing OT strategies in the classroom on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being no confidence at all and 10 being very confident, all participants rated their confidence level between a 7 and 10. When asked if that confidence level increased with experience all of the participants stated that it did. Participant 2 stated "right now, it's a 10. I've been doing it a long time. When I first started, maybe it, probably was a 2." Participant 3 talked about the relationship between herself and other professionals stating that "once we all know each other, it's a lot easier to communicate." Participant 5 stated that "I've been doing it long enough where I think I have something valuable to bring to the table" making it seem that when he was inexperienced, he did not see himself as valuable. He also stated that "because I've seen the results, I will collaborate with everybody" exemplifying the need for the value of OT to be explained early on in a TAs career.

Case-Based Knowledge About Occupational Therapy

All participants were asked what their understanding of OT was and how they would describe it. This resulted in a variety of reactions from participants and answers that were heavily based on other attributes of the schools and the students with whom they worked. Based on their answers, the participants seemed to have a narrow scope of the definition of OT. Many participants hesitated prior to answering the question of how they would define OT and

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seemed a bit embarrassed they did not have a concrete definition to give. Participants often gave examples of what they had seen in OT instead of an actual definition. One participant avoided answering the question altogether by simply stating “it’s a hard job” and changing the topic of conversation. The other participants did not seem to exude confidence when answering this question. Participant 2 said “so when they get out in the real world, they can get a job.” Participant 3 stated “it’s for children who need work on fine motor skills and whatnot.” Participant 5 stated “of course there is a lot of things you all do, but I think the main thing would be to kind of teach people how to self-regulate” and Participant 6 stated “giving them the tools to help them, help them stay on track and focused.” These answers suggested that TAs learned limited information about OT as a profession and had limited ideas of what the OT did with the students. The common OT strategies mentioned by TAs were either sensory, handwriting or attention based, and often included strategies such as weighted vests or blankets, chewys, swings, pencil grips, and fidgets. A deeper understanding of why some of these strategies were used was not reported.

Challenges of Being a Teacher’s Aide

TAs reported facing a plethora of challenges, which have been escalated and added to as they have been working through and adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. When specifically asked about what challenges TAs face with regards to communication, TAs were hesitant to answer. They stated that there were no large barriers, but that time or clear communication could be a barrier in some instances. When asked about the most challenging part of their job, many participants stated that meltdowns and dealing with student behaviors were what they felt were most challenging. Throughout the interview, many other challenges were revealed that were not explicitly asked about. Participant 1 stated “I don’t know what’s going through their head. I want to help them. I, you know, it’s just so hard.” Participant 2 talked about her

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role within the larger school system saying, “some will allow other people to have a voice and some just put you where they want you.” Participant 5 talked about the challenges with keeping quality staff stating, “a lot of people get discouraged really, really quickly that these kids aren’t learning the way you think they should learn” and “I’ve seen so many quality people leave because they can’t feed their families [due to pay rate].” Participant 6 talked about how “they [teachers] in fact encourage us to look at the IEP or they’ll go over it with us or. If we get to it. That’s the thing. There’s usually other things.”

The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have a large impact on how TAs were doing their job and how OT services were functioning within the schools. Some participants were working in a school that was fully remote at the time, and some were in a hybrid format (partially in person and partially online) to decrease the number of students physically attending the school. This decreased the number of times students were receiving in person OT each week. It also increased the amount of time students got one on one attention during in person learning. OT services were also more likely to take place within the classroom than they were prior to the pandemic which was reported to be more distracting for the students and teachers involved. Participant 3 talked about challenges relating to OT services occurring in the classroom now that health and safety protocols require services to be push-in. She stated that “it’s hard because you’re still having teachers teach at the same time as the OT’s in there.” She also talked about how “their [OTs] schedules are pretty packed, so we don’t get to talk quite as much.”

Summary of Results

The TAs in this study had jobs that were multifaceted in order to best serve the students with whom they were working. They began this multifaceted job with little to no formal training. Their job did come with some challenges, but the students were the main motivation for TAs to work through the challenges. They felt they had unique valuable information about their

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students. At times they felt they were under-utilized when it came to collaboration. This resulted in a narrow base of information relating to OT and OT strategies. The TAs often had to seek out the OT for a face-to-face discussion regarding areas of concern and new strategies to use with their students. A quick reference to the themes and aspects of each theme can be found in Table 2.

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Table 2

Thematic Chart

Themes	Aspects of the Theme				
Multi-Purpose Responsibilities	Fulfilled roles such as facilitator, encourager, organizer, supporter, and manager.	Complete tasks such as providing breaks and cues, addressing behaviors, and assisting the teacher.	Work with students who have diagnoses of Autism, ADHD, Learning Disabilities, and medical needs.	Help students meet their goals, stay focused and remain motivated.	
Student Oriented Motivation and Dedication	Watching students succeed is the main motivation and the most rewarding part of the job.		A personal connection to someone with special needs was initial motivation to become a TA.		
Teacher's Aides as Collaborators	Collaboration is working together.	TAs know the students they work with very well.	Collaboration is desired and does occur but is not without flaws.	TAs desire face to face, open, honest, and two-way collaboration.	Collaboration with an OT is not required in their job description, but TAs are willing to if it helps the student.
Training Occurs Through Experience	No formal training is provided prior to beginning the job.	Sitting with the teacher to discuss students' needs informally is common.	Professional development does occur but is often reactionary and created without input from TAs relating to what they need training in.	Crisis intervention training is often offered to TAs during their career.	Experience is correlated with confidence level and knowledge base of OT.
Case-Based Knowledge of Occupational Therapy	Knowledge is heavily based on attributes of the school and the students with whom the TAs worked.		TAs have a narrow scope of the definition of OT.	Common strategies mentioned were either handwriting, sensory, or attention based.	
Challenges of Being a Teacher's Aide	Clear communication could be a barrier to collaboration at times.	Dealing with challenging student behavior was the most challenging aspect of their job.	Keeping quality staff as colleagues to work with and support the students.	COVID-19 pandemic created challenges relating to a hybrid schedule and health and safety precautions.	

Chapter 5: Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the current state of and potential for collaboration between OTs and TAs. Prior to this study, there was no research looking specifically at the relationship and/or collaboration that occurred between SBOTs and TAs.

The role of the TA varied widely based on classroom dynamic, experience of the TA, and the needs of the specific student(s) with whom they were working. This finding was consistent with the findings of previous studies that examined the role of a TA (Gibson et al., 2015; Warren et al. 2004). TAs also had a broad definition of collaboration simply stating that it was working together. The definitions that participants gave aligned well with the definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary (2021) which is that collaboration is “the situation of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing” (1st definition). When considering both the varied roles of a TA and the participants’ broad definition of collaboration, multiple challenges can occur as part of collaboration between OTs and TAs.

Collaboration Based on Building Blocks

Some of the TAs may have been reporting that they were collaborating, but based on these results, true collaboration, with all five building blocks set forth by Collins and Crabb (2010) was not occurring frequently, if at all. The building blocks are much more detailed about what successful collaboration entails. Building block one sets the stage for a positive relationship by building rapport and creating a safe environment (Collins & Crabb, 2010). I do not think this was occurring as early on or as frequently as it should be based on TAs stating how long it takes to understand their job and that the TAs were often the ones seeking out the OT. Many of the participants felt they gained confidence and knowledge through years of experience. They did not feel confident at the beginning and the OT may not have been reaching out to them as early on in their career as they should be. Building block four relates to ensuring both parties

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understand what strategy to use and why it is important (Collins & Crabb, 2010). Based on the results, OTs often taught the TAs how to implement a strategy, but why it would be beneficial was not always evident. The OT would often show the TA how to use a strategy, but because their collaboration was often informal and quick, the explanation of why was left out. Without understanding why a strategy was important and its true benefits, the TA may not incorporate that strategy as often as possible to benefit the student. The TAs in this study also never reported being observed implementing the strategy in the classroom so the OT did not have a chance to give them feedback on the techniques used in the strategies. Building block five relates to following up (Collins & Crabb, 2010). Many of the participants felt that the OT would ask if it was working or not, and if anything needed to be altered. But if the TA didn't always understand why the strategy was being used, the follow up may have then been skewed. The TA may have said the intervention was working, when in reality it was not working ideally, and the strategy could have been altered to improve performance.

Variables That Impact Collaboration

In terms of work experience, it was reported that a TA with less experience may not be given as much autonomy when working with a student. The teacher may supervise very closely and want to have input in all aspects of the student's education. A TA with more experience may be given more freedom to adjust how they are working with a student. Experienced TAs also reported that they felt more confident using OT strategies and communicating with others on the students' teams. This experience and confidence may also change the collaboration dynamic. For an OT, this may be challenging given the fact that the collaboration style would be altered based on the dynamic of the classroom professionals. Within different classrooms, the ideal collaboration may include different people.

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How much the OT and teacher value the TA and their opinions may also change the collaboration dynamic. Warren et al. (2004) found that communication between the teacher and paraprofessional occurred less often when the teacher felt the paraprofessional lacked expertise. Based on these findings, it can be assumed that there may be a power differential involved that influences how much the TA is valued by other professionals such as OTs and teachers. Both a teacher and an OT are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, whereas the TA is only required to have a high school degree or equivalent (in New York State). The degree differential may influence this power differential. If the teacher or OT highly value the TA, they may be more willing to include the TA in true collaboration regarding the student. If the TA is not highly valued, collaboration with the TA may not occur as it may not seem important to student success.

Participants were all very devoted to helping their students succeed. Four of the participants were inspired to become a TA by a family member with a disability and one participant had a powerful experience with students with disabilities. These experiences showed them the importance of their jobs and led them to desire to go above and beyond their basic TA duties mentioned in their job descriptions if it helped the students succeed. Collaboration with other professionals, such as the OT, was not specifically listed in any of their job descriptions. This may be a result of the fact that New York State only lists sharing information with the appropriate teacher under the job of a Teaching Assistant (NYSED, 2013). All of the participants in this study stated willingness to collaborate with the OT in order to help their student, but this may not be the case universally due to the high education of and devotion of the TAs included in this study. This may present a challenge for OTs as it seemed that TAs would have to be willing to go above and beyond to collaborate with them. OTs must be cognizant about the job requirements of a TA when collaborating. Keeping collaboration simple, clear, and concise is one

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example of how OTs can still facilitate that beneficial collaboration without considerably increasing the workload burden on the TA.

Implementing Collaboration

If true collaboration as described by Collins and Crabb (2010) is to occur within a school setting between the OT and the TA, then both parties would initiate collaboration when needed. This was not always the case based on the reports of the participants of this study as TAs were often the ones reaching out to the OT. When an OT does try to initiate true collaboration, each TA may react differently. It is important for an OT to adjust their collaboration style and strategies based on what will work best for that TA and the student with whom they are working.

Students can also have a wide variety of needs. This means from year to year a TA may be required to provide very different supports based on the student's needs. Understanding this challenge and collaborating with the TA as they navigate learning how to provide the highest quality care for their specific student is imperative to successful collaboration.

The collaboration that did occur between OTs and TAs was often informal and initiated by the TA, when the TA identified a need in the classroom. This can be problematic given that the TAs base knowledge about OT was often case based and experience driven, and that not all TAs may be confident enough and willing to initiate this collaboration. Previous research by Gibson et al. (2015) found that 13.3% of TAs who participated in their study stated that there was a substantial need for OT assistance training. This may mean that TAs are not confident enough in their base knowledge to reach out to an OT when they observe a student struggling. OTs can approach a resolution to this issue in a few ways. OTs can begin by initiating collaboration with any TA who is working with a student on their caseload. Scheduling formal meetings before or after school to discuss a student's goals, progress, and strategies with a TA

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can be beneficial to help with establishing a rapport and a relationship which are both a crucial foundation for collaboration. Having these formal meetings allows for more time for the OT and TA to both clearly share their own valuable insight with each other, ask questions, provide explanations and feedback, and come to a firm understanding of one another. This is a time when an OT can share not only what the strategies are and how to use them, but also why it is important to use them and why they help the student. This is the fourth building block to ensure successful collaboration in Collins and Crabb's (2010) process.

When collaboration between OTs and TAs does occur, participants were more than willing to implement OT strategies within the classroom as long as they had an adequate understanding of how to implement the strategy. This is in line with the results of a study done by Collins and Crabb (2010) showing that when there was no collaboration and OTs simply took on the role of an expert, carryover of interventions into the classroom decreased. It can be assumed that if a TA has a better understanding of not only how to use the OT strategies, but why they are important and beneficial, they would be even more willing to incorporate the strategies into their daily routine to help the student. This allows the student to benefit from these OT strategies more frequently than if they were only being used during OT services which generally only occur two or three times a week for half hour intervals. The increase in OT strategy use can make the TA more effective and help the student make larger progress.

OTs can also provide education and trainings relating to the broader scope of what OT is and how OTs can have a positive impact on students with a variety of needs. The TAs in this study mentioned that OTs work with sensory strategies, attention, and handwriting but did not mention other areas in which an OT can be involved and beneficial. Multiple sources state that OTs are qualified to provide services in areas such as socioemotional needs, mental health, recess, lunch, self-care, assistive technology, vocational preparation, and cognitive needs other

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than attention (AOTA, 2016; Ball, 2018; Bissel & Cermak, 2015; NYSED, 2003). The participants also only reported what the strategies were. They were not specifically asked why they were using these strategies, but when asked what they talked about with the OT, they reported that they talked about what to do. None of the participants reported talking about why implementing these strategies was important. If true collaboration was occurring between the OT and TA, the conversation would include why using these strategies is important to really promote understanding for the TA. Increasing their knowledge about what OTs do may allow TAs to implement a variety of strategies more frequently in the classroom to best support the student in achieving their goals.

Challenges to Implementing Collaboration

Time was a limiting factor for TAs. A few of the participants in this study reported that everyone was busy which at times was limiting for collaboration. Multiple other studies have reported time being a limiting factor for collaboration as well (Bayona et al., 2006; Benson et al., 2019; Bose & Hinojosa, 2008; King et al. 1999). A TA, especially an individual aide, could attend the OT session to observe what the OT was working on with the student and explain strategies as the OT does them in the session. This could improve the understanding a TA has relating to OT strategies. It could also improve the relationship between the OT and TA as they would spend more time together which would allow them to collaborate about what the student is doing in the classroom and what the OT is trying to work on in OT sessions to improve the classroom performance. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many SBOTs working with the TAs in this study to begin conducting more push-in services due to health and safety protocols. This could be an opportunity for OTs to begin incorporating TAs into their sessions as the TA is already in the room when the session is occurring. This could improve the collaboration that is occurring.

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One of the most challenging aspects of a TAs job was managing behaviors of their student(s). An OT has expertise in areas such as sensory integration, socioemotional development, environmental adaptations, and routines that could help the TA understand the cause of behaviors and implement strategies that reduce the frequency of behaviors (AOTA, 2016; Ball, 2018; Bissel & Cermak, 2015; NYSED, 2003). For this to work, the TA must share with the OT what behaviors are occurring and in what circumstances. The OT must then share their expertise on the reasons why these behaviors are occurring and strategies to help. This is a perfect example of where collaboration can be beneficial for the student, the TA, and the OT. A previous study done by Bose and Hinojosa (2008) found that collaboration between a teacher and OT increased the relevance of OT intervention for the student due to the fact the OT had more relevant information for creating the intervention plan. This benefit could also be seen in OT and TA collaboration, but it was only seen in one participant's experience.

TAs also had differing access to each student(s) IEP depending on the school where they worked. An IEP is created by a team of professionals, the student, and the student's caregiver(s) in order to provide a learning plan for the student (IDEA, 2004a). None of the TAs in this study were part of the "team of professionals" who created the IEP. Some TAs were given the exact IEP to look over, others were given a written guide listing modifications and goals, and others simply talked through the IEP with a teacher. The IEP includes information such as the students present level of functioning, services provided (such as OT), goals, progress measures, and accommodations (IDEA, 2004a). The knowledge a TA has of the information in the IEP, such as goals, can vary due to differences in access to the document. An OT must keep this in mind when collaborating with a TA. An OT should learn the policies regarding the access TAs have to students' IEPs and never assume that the TA already has a base knowledge of what the OT is working on with the student.

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Training was found to be experience based, largely dependent on the student(s) whom the TA was working with, and reactive rather than proactive. This is important for an OT to consider when asking a TA to implement strategies into the classroom. IDEA (2004a) states that TAs may assist with special education services as long as they are adequately trained. OTs must provide training for the TA relating to the use of an OT strategy prior to asking them to implement it in the classroom. This training can occur through formal trainings or collaboration. Many of the participants mentioned going above and beyond to obtain training outside of their workplace, such as attending trainings offered by outside organizations or furthering their education at a higher education institution. This may be a result of their workplace not offering relevant and desirable training to increase the confidence of the TAs. TAs may have varying levels of expertise relating to their job due to these variations in training. OTs must keep this in mind when collaborating with TAs and adjust collaboration techniques and verbiage to ensure effective collaboration for all parties.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to a larger population. The results of this study were likely influenced by some of the characteristics of the participants. The participants had similar years of experience, worked with similar grade levels, and, with the exception of one, were from similar school settings. The participants had all been working as a TA for at least five years and were clearly dedicated to their job as shown by their responses to the questions. These findings may not represent the full picture for inexperienced TAs or those who may not be as dedicated to their jobs. This study also took place during the COVID-19 pandemic which had a large impact on the routines and tasks that were occurring daily in schools. Although asked about collaboration in non-COVID times, there were clear references to the current pandemic situation which might have nuanced participant

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responses. This study also only looked at collaboration from one of the two parties involved in the collaboration. The broader picture that includes the OTs perspective on collaboration currently occurring between OTs and TAs was not obtained in this study.

Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

SBOTs interact with many different professionals and paraprofessionals to coordinate programming for students with special needs as part of the students' IEP. The work of an SBOT requires building a rapport with students and implementing interventions and strategies that best fit each student. TAs may be a useful source of information and knowledge for SBOTs about students as TAs spend multiple hours a day working individually or in small groups with students. Understanding the multiple roles a TA can play in the classroom and how best to utilize and collaborate with them could help a SBOT provide higher quality care to the students with whom they work. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the role of a TA in relation to the potential for collaboration with a SBOT, understand how TAs collaborate with SBOTs and determine the potential for TAs to implement occupational therapy interventions in the classroom.

Five participants were interviewed, and six broad themes were found. One theme encompassed the multipurpose responsibilities of TAs. It was found that TAs fulfilled many roles and engaged in multiple tasks to support student learning. A second theme related to the student-oriented motivation and dedication that TAs have. All the participants were passionate about helping students succeed and were dedicated to going above and beyond to make that happen. Another theme that emerged related to TAs as collaborators. This showed that TAs had broad definitions of collaboration but felt they should be included in collaboration between other school professionals as they know the students best. A fourth theme that emerged was that TAs training often occurs through experience. Many of the participants reported that they were not given any formal training prior to beginning their jobs and they mainly learned by doing. Another theme that became clear was that TAs often have case-based knowledge about occupational therapy. TAs are often learning from experience which also often led to their

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knowledge about OT being dependent on the students whom they have worked with and the OT needs of those specific students. One final theme that emerged was the challenges of being a TA. TAs reported challenges such as lack of time, challenging student behaviors, and lack of clarity in their job descriptions.

Overall, OTs should understand the complex job of a TA and the dynamics of collaboration in order to best support student outcomes. The themes that evolved from the research were informed by characteristics of the participants and the nature of the research methods used. There were some caveats that are important to consider. The participants had similar years of experience, worked with similar grade levels, and except for one, were from similar school settings. The participants had all been working as a TA for at least five years. These characteristics provide a viewpoint from individuals who are dedicated to their work. The themes that emerged were informative for SBOTS who work with experienced TAs and can be extrapolated to TAs who are less familiar with their role.

Implications for OT Practice

The results of this study provided multiple implications for school-based OT practitioners.

1. OTs need to reach out to TAs to establish rapport, similarly to how they would establish a rapport with the student. The burden of reaching out to the OT should not be placed solely on the TA. Collaboration should be a reciprocal relationship where both the OT and TA are valued and feel comfortable reaching out to the other individual.
2. Based on TAs reported desires, this collaboration from the OT should be open, honest, and judgement free to ensure that both voices are heard. OTs should set aside time for formal meetings to build the rapport needed for collaboration to occur and to facilitate

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true collaboration relating to the students' goals and OT strategies that can be implemented to support a student in their learning.

3. OTs should also be aware of the school culture relating to what information about the student the TA has access to, how valued the TAs are by other professionals, and how much of an impact TAs within this culture can have on the students with whom they are working.
4. As part of having a say in the school culture, OTs should provide in-service trainings to school professionals and paraprofessionals to help others within the building to understand what OT is and the importance and benefit OT can have on students who receive our services.

Future Research

This study focused on the perspective of the TA relating to collaboration between the OT and the TA.

1. Further research should be done exploring the perspective of OTs relating to the collaboration that occurs between OTs and TAs. This would allow for a comparison of perspectives to build a broader picture of the collaboration that is truly occurring.
2. Researchers should also examine the impact that frequent, true collaboration between the OT and TA has on student outcomes relating to OT. This would help to provide quantitative evidence to support collaboration between the OT and the TA. The goal of both the OT and the TA is to help the student reach their educational goals. If collaboration can help the students reach their goals faster and to a higher expectation, then this would demonstrate the need for implementation of more consistent collaboration practices.

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3. Future research could also examine the perception that OTs and TAs have about collaboration when true collaboration is occurring as compared to when it was not occurring. This would provide qualitative evidence of the benefits of OT and TA collaboration.

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Appendix A- Ithaca College IRB Approval Letter

To: Cassandra Kiechle
From: Ithaca College IRB
Subject: Protocol #215
Date: 10/08/2020

RE: 215 Exploring Occupational Therapists' and Teachers Aides' Collaboration in School Based Settings

The Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research (IRB) has reviewed your proposal and has determined that by the IRB Guidelines, this project can be approved for an exemption from ongoing oversight.

Please add the IRB approval number (**IRB 215**) to ALL recruitment and consent materials.

In certifying that your research is exempt, the IRB indicates that there will be no continued oversight. Should the project be continued beyond the semester, you may do so without additional involvement with IRB provided that the same procedures as described in the application are followed. If there are changes in design, the application would have to be resubmitted to the IRB.

College policy requires you to maintain, as part of your records, all correspondence with the IRB (including the complete, approved Request for Review or Application for Exemption), all documentation of informed consent, and any lists used in assigning codes or other identifiers to participants for a period of three years. Researchers may keep, at their discretion, completed data collection instruments provided they continue to be protected in the manner specified in the Request for Review or Application for Exemption and as described to the subjects in the process of obtaining informed consent.

This approval is issued under the Ithaca College's OHRP Federal-wide Assurance #00004870. Please feel free to contact the IRB at irb@ithaca.edu with any questions or concerns.

Best wishes for a successful study.

Sincerely,



Warren Calderone
Director of Corporate, Foundation Relations, and Sponsored Research
Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research

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Appendix B- Informed Consent Form

Title of the Study: Exploring Occupational Therapists' and Teacher's Aides' Collaboration in School Based Settings (IRB 215)

Principal Investigator: Cassandra Kiechle, OTS, Ithaca College

Co-investigator: N/A

Faculty Advisor: Diane Long, Ed. D, MOTR/L, Ithaca College

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must have been employed as a Teacher's Aide for at least one academic year, work with three or fewer students per day, work with students who receive occupational therapy services, be at least 18 years of age, and be fluent in English. Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You are not required to participate in this study. You may stop or withdraw your participation from this study at any time.

Important Information about this Research Study

Purpose of the study: To explore the role of a Teacher's Aide in relation to the potential for collaboration with an OT, understand how Teacher's Aides collaborate with occupational therapists and determine the potential for Teacher's Aides to implement OT strategies in the classroom.

If you choose to participate, you will complete two 40-minute interviews via Zoom with the principal investigator at times that are determined to work for you and the interviewer.

The total time commitment for participation is 80 minutes.

Risks and discomforts associated with this research: There are minimal risks that are no greater than those encountered in everyday life when participating in this study.

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Direct benefits to the participants: There are no direct benefits to participation in this research.

Each participant will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card via email or USPS upon completion of the study.

Please read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether you would like to participate in this research study.

1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of a Teacher's Aide in relation to the potential for collaboration with an OT, understand how Teacher's Aides collaborate with OT's and determine the potential for Teacher's Aides to implement OT strategies in the classroom.

2. Benefits of the Study

There are no direct benefits to the participants in the study. Each participant will receive a \$15 gift card for participating in this study. Participating in this study will help me complete my master's thesis in occupational therapy at Ithaca College. This study will provide information to occupational therapists who work with teacher's aides in schools about how best to interact with and collaborate with teacher's aides in order to serve students.

3. What You Will Be Asked to Do

You will be asked to participate in two 40-minute, recorded Zoom interviews to discuss aspects of your job as a TA and how you interact and collaborate with OT's. The interviews will be arranged at a time that is convenient.

4. Withdrawal from the Study

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. You may refuse to answer any of the interview questions if you feel uncomfortable answering. If you withdraw from the study,

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you will receive a gift card with compensation proportional to your participation. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all data will be securely discarded.

5. Risks

There are minimal risks of participation. Participants might feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions about their employment and/or knowledge base or feel that demographic questions are too personal.

6. How the Data will be Maintained in Confidence

Each participant's identity will be kept confidential. Each participant will be given a pseudonym to be referred by during the analysis.

Video recordings of the Zoom interviews and signed informed consent forms will be kept on a USB and stored in a locked drawer for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study.

7. Use of information beyond this study

Identifying information may be removed and this de-identified information used for future research without additional informed consent from the participant.

8. Compensation for Injury

If you suffer an injury that requires any treatment or hospitalization as a direct result of this study, the cost for such care will be charged to you. If you have insurance, you may bill your insurance company. You will be responsible to pay all costs not covered by your insurance. Ithaca College will not pay for any care, lost wages, or provide other financial compensation.

9. If You Would Like More Information about the Study

If at any point before, during or after the study you would like more information, please contact the primary investigator, faculty advisor, or Ithaca College IRB with the contact information provided below:

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Primary Investigator:	Faculty Advisor:	Ithaca College IRB
Cassandra Kiechle	Diane Long, Associate	Peggy Ryan Williams
Graduate Student	Professor and Chair	Center
Department of	Department of	953 Danby Road
Occupational Therapy	Occupational Therapy	Ithaca, NY 14850
315-767-4543,	607-274-3093,	irb@ithaca.edu
ckiechle@ithaca.edu	dlong@ithaca.edu	(607) 274-3113

I have read the above and I understand its contents. I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

Print or Type Name

Signature

Date

I give my permission to be videotaped.

Signature

Date

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Appendix C – Guiding Questions

Hello, thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. It is nice to meet you.

I would like to start by just reminding you about the purpose of the study and what we are going to do today.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of a Teacher's Aide in relation to the potential for collaboration with an OT, understand how Teacher's Aides collaborate with occupational therapists and determine the potential for Teacher's Aides to implement OT strategies in the classroom. This interview will consist of questions regarding your role as a TA, your interaction and collaboration with school based occupational therapists, and your comfort level with occupational therapy strategies. Are you ready to get started?

Interview 1

[Study inclusion criteria:]

So, let's get started with some general information.

I know that job titles are different in different school districts and states. What is your official job title?

How long have you work as a _____?

And in the course of your work day, how many children do you interact with one-on-one? Is it the same children each day?

Do these children receive occupational therapy services? How often do the children receive occupational therapy services?

If at this point it is clear that the individual does not meet the inclusion criteria the interviewee will be thanked, and the interview will be ended.

Questions for the interview once confirmed:

1. Can you tell me a bit about how you decided to become a teacher's aide?

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2. Did you have any other experience working with children, (such as babysitting, working at a summer camp, or any other professional experience), that you think influences your ability to do your job as a teacher's aide?

a. Possible follow-up questions:

i. In any of those experiences, were you working with children who had special needs?

3. When you first started, were you provided with any training prior to beginning work as a TA? Can you explain what that training entailed if so?

a. Possible follow-up questions:

i. Are you provided with any ongoing professional development?

ii. Is there a requirement to complete professional development throughout your years as a TA?

Questions related to Research Question 1: What roles do Teacher's Aides fulfill in the classroom?

4. Can you tell me what your day to day routine looks like?

a. Possible Follow-up Questions:

i. What specific tasks do you complete?

ii. How many students do you work with, how long with each student?

iii. Do you work with students in groups or individually?

iv. Do you have break times? What do you use your break times for?

v. Is there time allotted for collaboration or to do other needed tasks with other professionals?

vi. Do you work in multiple classrooms?

5. Can you describe the diagnoses and specific challenges of the children you work with?

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- a. Possible follow up questions:
 - i. Have you worked with children with other diagnoses in the past?
 - ii. Are you confident enough in what you know about each diagnosis that you can support each student?
6. Are your students included in regular education classrooms or are your students in a special education classroom? Can you explain the classroom dynamic (very active, calm, supportive, stressful)?
 - a. Potential follow-up questions:
 - i. Does that impact your ability to perform your job as a TA?
 - ii. Are you the only TA in the classroom?
 - iii. Are there other students in the room who take up some of your time?
 - iv. Are there a lot of children in the classroom who can be a distraction?
 - v. What type of training does the classroom lead teacher have?
7. Are you encouraged/allowed to be involved in your student's education decisions such as attending IEP meetings, and/or collaborating with others on the professional team?
 - a. Potential Follow-up questions:
 - i. Does the classroom teacher ask you questions prior and following IEP meetings or educational decisions?
 - ii. Who do you feel values your opinion and knowledge? Who does not?
 - iii. What is your role on the team?
8. Does your school provide you with resources that help you succeed at your job? What do they provide?
 - a. Possible follow-up questions:

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- i. Has the OT in your building ever given you materials or resources to use with your student(s)?
- ii. Do you ever spend personal money on materials your student(s) would benefit from?

9. What do you like most about your job?

10. What are some of the challenges?

Questions related to Research Question 2: What degree of understanding do Teacher's Aides have about occupational therapy?

11. What is your understanding of occupational therapy? How would you describe it to someone else?

12. How are occupational therapists integrated into the classroom in your school?

a. Potential follow-up questions:

- i. What does their interaction within the classroom look like?

13. What valuable information do you feel you can contribute to the occupational therapist?

b. Potential follow-up questions:

- i. What do you think is unique about your job and knowledge about each student that would be important for the occupational therapist to know?
- ii. What do you think the occupational therapist would know that would help you in the classroom?

That is the end of the first interview. Do you have any questions for me at this time? Thank you for your time today. I look forward to talking with you again for our second interview on [insert previously decided on date and time].

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Interview 2:

Questions related to research question 3: What does the collaboration between Teacher's Aides and Occupational Therapists entail?

1. How would you define collaboration?
2. Do you attend occupational therapy sessions with any of the students who you work with?
 - a. Potential follow-up questions:
 - i. Where do these sessions take place?
 - ii. How involved in the session are you?
3. Does the OT collaborate with professionals in the classroom? If so, can you describe the collaboration and who it is with?
 - a. Potential follow-up questions:
 - i. What aspects of this collaboration do you feel are effective and/or needed?
 - ii. How does this collaboration relate to you?
4. What, if anything, is included in your job description regarding communication and collaboration between you and other professionals?
 - a. Potential follow-up questions:
 - i. How do you feel collaborating with the OT fits into your job description?
5. When you interact with the OT what does that interaction consist of?
 - a. Potential follow-up questions:
 - i. What do you talk about with the OT? Ex. Goals, progress, interventions, strategies etc.

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- ii. Do you observe sessions? If so, how often, where, what is your role in the session?
 - iii. Do you implement strategies in the classroom that you have discussed with the OT?
 - iv. What is your satisfaction with the interaction between yourself and the OT?
6. Can you describe how you communicate with the OT? For example, face to face discussion, email, phone calls, formal meetings, notebooks?
- a. Potential follow-up questions:
 - i. What kind of types of communication occurs?
 - ii. Where does the collaboration occur? For example, is it in a classroom, hallway, OT room, elsewhere?
 - iii. How often does indirect communication through another professional occur?
7. What, if any, barriers to collaboration do you experience?
- a. Potential Follow-up questions:
 - i. What is the largest barrier and why do you think that is?
 - ii. Do you have suggestions to help make these barriers less burdensome?
8. What advice do you have for occupational therapists who want to collaborate with Teacher's aides?

Questions related to Research Question 4: What type of occupational therapy techniques do Teacher's Aides feel equipped to implement in the classroom?

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1. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being no confidence at all and 10 being extremely confident, what is your comfort level with implementing any OT strategies in the classroom?
2. What types of strategies do you use on a regular basis?
3. What could the OT do to help ensure you are comfortable implementing strategies that are beneficial to your student(s)?
4. What impact would implementing more collaboration have on your confidence level?
5. Based on what you have seen or what you know about occupational therapy are there occupational therapy strategies that you think could be implemented in the classroom that you currently do not do?

Ask predetermined follow up questions to expand on unclear answers from interview 1.

[Demographic Questions]

Before we end, it would help if you fill me in on some of the demographic information I need for my study. Questions would be asked if not supplied in the other interview questions.

1. What gender do you identify with?
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
3. What state do you work in?
4. How long have you been working as a Teacher's Aide?
5. On average, how many hours do you work during the work week? (might be answered in question 4)
6. What school district do you work in?
7. How many students do you work with one to one throughout a typical school day?
(asked above in question 4)

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8. What grade are the students in whom you work with? (might be answered in question 4)

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time and all your explanations. It was very helpful.

TA AND OT COLLABORATION

Appendix D- Recruitment Script

Email/Online Posting:

My name is Cassandra Kiechle and I am currently a graduate student studying Occupational Therapy at Ithaca College. I am recruiting Teacher's Aides (or the equivalent, as official job title may vary) to be in a study exploring the collaboration that occurs between Teacher's Aides and Occupational Therapists in school-based settings (IRB 215). I am looking for Teacher's Aides who are 18 years of age or older, are fluent in English, are employed full-time, have at least one year of experience, and work with three or fewer students in a given school day. The students whom the Teacher's Aides work with must also receive occupational therapy services. Due to COVID-19, teacher's aides who are currently not working, but met the above criteria prior to March 2020 may also participate in this study.

This study involves completing two 40-minute interviews with the primary researcher via Zoom. There are very minimal risks for this study, only the possibility of psychological discomfort due to answering personal questions related to your work. After completing the interview, participants will be given a \$15 Amazon gift card in appreciation for their time.

For more information or to sign up, please contact:

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Or my faculty advisor at:

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