

# **A Profile of Occupational Therapy in Australian Education: Project Report**

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10.21913/TAHS.v4i1.1636

## **Executive Summary**

There is growing evidence for the need for occupational therapists in government-funded primary schools and preschools across Australia. Anecdotally and through some evidence sources, such as documented school policies and an international mapping review conducted in 2019 (Boshoff, Bowen and Gilbert-Hunt), it is evident that there are inconsistencies surrounding the role of occupational therapists across the different states and territories. In order to enable advocacy and further development of the roles, we aimed to establish a clear description of the role of occupational therapy in education, through collaboration with key stakeholders and information gathering from occupational therapists around Australia.

As part of a student project, we gathered information from representatives from each state and territory, utilised existing documentation and worked with a steering group to consolidate the information and develop a summary report describing the role of occupational therapy in Australian education. We gathered information about the employment and funding of occupational therapists in schools, the service delivery models used, strengths of certain models and the challenges facing occupational therapists in schools.

As primary outcome of this project, we provide a description of the occupational therapy role in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools. The information gathered highlights the variation in occupational therapy presence, employment and service delivery

across states and territories in Australia. It is evident that the majority of states and territories lack easily accessible documentation of the occupational therapy presence, employment and service delivery models. Key strengths and challenges were identified. Various recommendations are made for the profession and education communities to further progress the role in education nation-wide.

## **Introduction**

### **Project Background**

This project built upon an international mapping review carried out by Kobie Boshoff, Holly Bowen-Salter and Susan Gilbert-Hunt in 2019. The mapping review provided a description of the different allied health service delivery models in education around the world. It was undertaken to inform future decision-making regarding allied health student placement models within the South Australian public education setting. The review identified that the presence of allied health services in South Australian schools is increasing, however there remains a limited occupational therapy presence compared to other support services.

The mapping review highlighted a need for increased occupational therapy presence and the development of occupational therapy service delivery models in South Australian preschools and primary schools. Therefore, Kobie Boshoff and Susan Gilbert-Hunt proposed a project to take the first step in addressing this need by describing the current occupational therapy presence, employment and role in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools.

## **Occupational Therapy in Education**

The presence of occupational therapy in education varies across the world. Anaby, Campbell and Missiuna et al. (2019) found that 109 countries worldwide utilise health services in their schools, however less than 10 of these countries utilise occupational therapy. In America, schools are the second highest employers of occupational therapists (AOTA, 2019).

Occupational therapists employed in schools work from the individual and group level to whole school health promotion (AOTA, 2019). The service delivery focuses on working with children in the school environment in collaboration with educators to provide individualised, consistent and appropriate assistance (AOTA, 2019). This is in contrast to countries such as the United Kingdom and Switzerland where the integration of allied health into education is still emerging. Where allied health services are utilised, practitioners are typically employed externally to the school and work with individual children as commissioned (Kaelin et al. 2019).

In Australia, there is a lack of consistent documentation around the presence, employment and role of occupational therapists in schools. Queensland documents a well-established model where occupational therapists employed by the Department of Education work in therapy teams within a region of schools (Department of Education, 2019). Occupational therapists support schools in making adjustments to help students access and participate in learning and school activities (Department of Education, 2019).

In South Australia funding was acquired in July, 2020 to hire 10 new occupational therapists through the Department for Education to work within schools. The Department for Education also employed 10.2 FTE occupational therapists to work in South Australian Children's Centres, which provide services to children aged 0 to 8 years old and their families. These positions have recently been incorporated into the Student Support Services unit. The

remaining states and territories do not appear to have publicly available documentation outlining the presence, employment or role of occupational therapists in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools.

### **Current Issues**

The lack of information around the presence, employment and role of occupational therapists in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools is a significant issue. Without describing the current situation, it is difficult to indicate where change or improvement could occur. It is difficult to state that more occupational therapy is required in schools without details of what is currently available.

In addition, the integration of occupational therapy into the education setting is a complex process. The different backgrounds and knowledge of occupational therapists and school staff means that collaboration is often a challenge. For instance, teachers have reported confusion about the role and scope of occupational therapists in schools, as well as a tendency for therapists to assume an expert role rather than working collaboratively with teachers (Rens & Joosten 2013; Truong & Hodgets 2017).

Documenting the presence, employment and role of occupational therapy in schools will contribute to ongoing advocacy for the role and the development of clearer service delivery models. This will assist in achieving a reciprocal understanding of the occupational therapy and education roles and values, combating some of the challenges around integrating occupational therapy into the schools.

## **Project Aim**

To facilitate advocacy for the role of Occupational Therapists in Government-Funded Primary Schools and Preschools in Australia.

## **Brief Project Approach and Process**

Underpinned by primary health care principles of empowerment, equity and social justice, the project aimed to give voice to the occupational therapy community to advocate for their role in Australian primary schools and preschools.

Through a comprehensive needs analysis, we gathered information from representatives from each state and territory, utilised existing documentation and worked with a steering group to consolidate the information and develop a summary report describing the role of occupational therapy in Australian education. We gathered information about the employment and funding of occupational therapists in schools, the service delivery models used, strengths of certain models and the challenges facing occupational therapists in schools.

## **Key Results and Discussion**

The gaps identified include a lack of documentation around the presence, employment and role of occupational therapists in schools, as well as the challenges associated with integrating occupational therapy into education (Rens & Joosten 2013; Truong & Hodgets 2017). The following describes how the project began to address these gaps. It presents the key themes which arose during the comprehensive needs analysis, describes the role and value of networks

within the occupational therapy community, the need for and challenges associated with integrating occupational therapy and education, and project sustainability.

**Key themes:**

It was evident that occupational therapy services in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools vary significantly between states and territories, and that the majority lack easily accessible documentation of the occupational therapy presence, employment, and service delivery. Key strengths and challenges within states and territories were identified and provide valuable opportunities to advocate for and further develop occupational therapy in schools.

**Presence, Employment and Funding:**

The overall presence of occupational therapy in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools is varied and difficult to describe, due to the variety of employment and contracting models. For instance, all Australian states and territories have occupational therapists employed by external providers who visit individual children during school hours. This is at the school principal's discretion and principals may choose to limit or prevent externally employed or funded therapists from entering the school. This is often a result of the additional administration required when visitors are regularly entering the school property, due to teachers feeling overwhelmed by the recommendations provided by visiting therapists, or due to disruptions within the classroom setting.

In addition to externally employed or funded therapists, some states and territories employ occupational therapists through the state education department or directorate. As seen in the Table 1, the presence of occupational therapists employed or contracted by education departments varies significantly. Some states such as New South Wales and Western Australia

do not employ or contract any occupational therapists through the education departments, while the Queensland Department of Education has employed occupational therapists since 1990 and currently employs 85.5 FTE occupational therapists.

Some schools choose to utilise school funds to employ or contract occupational therapists to work directly with their school. This occurs to varying degrees in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. In Western Australia, there appears to be no occupational therapists employed directly by schools, however some therapists choose to be employed as education assistants and work with the school in a different capacity. While it is clear that many Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools (i.e. not the state department itself) have the option to employ or contract individual occupational therapists, the extent to which this occurs in each state and territory is hard to capture. While the project provides an overview of the presence, employment and funding of occupational therapists in schools, there is need for further information gathering to obtain a more detailed understanding surrounding externally or school employed occupational therapists.

**Table 1: Summary Table of Employment/Funding**

|     | Education Department                           |                                                                        | Individual Schools                                                    |                                    |                                  | External Organisations                                                                                          |                                                 |                                  |
|-----|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|     | OTs Employed Centrally by Education Department | Organisation Contracted by Education Department to Provide OT Services | Organisations Contracted by Individual Schools to Provide OT Services | OTs Employed by Individual Schools | Funded by?                       | OTs from External Organisations Providing Individual Services through Funding External to the School (eg. NDIS) | Collaboration Between External & Department OTs | OT Students in Schools           |
| SA  | ✓ (~20FTE)*                                    | ✗                                                                      | ✓                                                                     | ?                                  | School funds                     | ✓                                                                                                               | Weak; incidental                                | ✓                                |
| VIC | ✓ (rare)*                                      | ✗                                                                      | ?                                                                     | ✓ (150+ in SS; <10 mainstream)     | School funds (PSD <sup>1</sup> ) | ✓                                                                                                               | ✗                                               | ✓                                |
| NSW | ✗                                              | ✗                                                                      | ✓                                                                     | ✗                                  | School funds (RAM <sup>2</sup> ) | ✓**                                                                                                             | N/A                                             | ✓                                |
| WA  | ✗                                              | ✗                                                                      | ✗                                                                     | As Education Assistants            | ?                                | ✓**                                                                                                             | N/A                                             | ✓                                |
| TAS | ✗                                              | ✓ (1 FTE)*                                                             | ?                                                                     | ?                                  | ?                                | ✓                                                                                                               | Weak; informal                                  | ? No OT university degree in TAS |
| NT  | ✓ (2)*                                         | ✗                                                                      | ?                                                                     | ?                                  | ?                                | ✓                                                                                                               | Positive                                        | ✓                                |
| ACT | ✓ (~8FTE)*                                     | ✗                                                                      | ✓                                                                     | ✗                                  | School funds                     | ✓                                                                                                               | Varied                                          | ✓                                |
| QLD | ✓ (85.5 FTE)*                                  | ✗                                                                      | ✓                                                                     | ✓                                  | School funds                     | ✓                                                                                                               | Positive                                        | ✓                                |

\* Within a unit: Student Support Services (SA, VIC), PANDA physios (TAS), Teaching and Allied Health Team (NT), Network Student Engagement Team (ACT), Region-Specific Teams (QLD)

\*\* Includes OT Services Provided by state Department of Health

? : Unknown or information not collected

1. PSD: Program for Students with Disabilities; 2. RAM: Resource Allocation Model



**Table 2: Summary Table of Service Delivery Models\***

|     | OTs Employed Centrally by Education Department;<br>Organisation Contracted by Education Department to<br>Provide OT Services |                              |                                      |                                                         | OTs Employed by the<br>Department of Health<br>Providing OT Services to<br>Schools |              | OTs Employed by Individual<br>Schools; Organisations<br>Contracted by Individual<br>Schools to Provide OT Services |                                                  | OTs from External Organisations<br>Providing Individual Services<br>through Funding External to the<br>School (eg. NDIS) |                                                                            |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     | Schools Serviced                                                                                                             | Clients                      | Service                              | Documented Model                                        | Clients                                                                            | Service      | Clients                                                                                                            | Service                                          | Clients                                                                                                                  | Service                                                                    |
| SA  | Preschool, primary,<br>high schools, children's<br>centres                                                                   | School<br>staff,<br>families | Capacity-<br>building                | In development                                          | N/A                                                                                | N/A          | Children, School<br>staff                                                                                          | Individual (pull-<br>out and<br>classroom based) | Children                                                                                                                 | 1:1 (pull-out and classroom<br>based)                                      |
| VIC | ?                                                                                                                            | School<br>staff              | Capacity-<br>building                | RTI Model <sup>2</sup>                                  | N/A                                                                                | N/A          | Teachers,<br>children, parents                                                                                     | Capacity-building<br>and 1:1                     | Children                                                                                                                 | 1:1                                                                        |
| NSW | N/A                                                                                                                          | N/A                          | N/A                                  | N/A                                                     | Teachers                                                                           | Consultative | Children, teachers                                                                                                 | 1:1 and<br>consultative                          | Children                                                                                                                 | 1:1                                                                        |
| WA  | N/A                                                                                                                          | N/A                          | N/A                                  | N/A                                                     | Teachers                                                                           | Consultative | N/A                                                                                                                | N/A                                              | Children                                                                                                                 | 1:1 (Observation in<br>classroom and pull-out);<br>discussion with teacher |
| TAS | ECIS <sup>1</sup> , primary, high<br>schools                                                                                 | School<br>staff              | Capacity-<br>building                | ?                                                       | N/A                                                                                | N/A          | ?                                                                                                                  | ?                                                | Children                                                                                                                 | ?                                                                          |
| NT  | Preschool, primary,<br>secondary and special<br>schools                                                                      | School<br>staff              | Consultative                         | RTI Model                                               | N/A                                                                                | N/A          | ?                                                                                                                  | ?                                                | Children                                                                                                                 | ?                                                                          |
| ACT | Primary (includes<br>preschools), secondary<br>and specialist schools                                                        | School<br>staff              | Collaborative<br>and<br>consultative | RTI Model                                               | N/A                                                                                | N/A          | ?                                                                                                                  | ?                                                | Children                                                                                                                 | 1:1 (pull-out and classroom<br>based)                                      |
| QLD | Primary, secondary<br>and special schools                                                                                    | School<br>staff              | Capacity-<br>building                | GOTaPS <sup>3</sup> , RTI Model,<br>Participation Model | N/A                                                                                | N/A          | ?                                                                                                                  | ?                                                | Children,<br>teachers                                                                                                    | 1:1; Consultative                                                          |

? : Unknown or information not collected

1. ECIS: Early Childhood Intervention Services; 2. RTI Model: Response to Intervention Model; 3. GOTaPS: Guidelines for Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy Services

\*Excludes OT students

On the other hand, most externally employed or contracted occupational therapists who deliver services in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools focus on one to one therapy sessions. These may involve observing or working with a child in the classroom or withdrawing them from class to carry out a session. There is usually a level of collaboration and consultation that occurs between the occupational therapist and the classroom teacher; however, this is at the discretion of the teacher and the therapist. Those who commented on the service delivery of externally employed or contracted therapists stated that one to one therapy involving removing the child from class is generally ineffective, as the child is not being observed in their typical school environment. However, one to one therapy in the classroom for children with specialised needs was considered valuable when external therapists collaborate with the education department or school-employed occupational therapists, to ensure that gaps in service delivery are filled and duplication of services is avoided.

### **Strengths:**

The strengths of occupational therapy in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools differed across states and territories, however two key themes were identified.

Increasing understanding of occupational therapy: All interviewees stated that there is an increasing understanding of the role occupational therapy plays in schools, and a growing awareness of what occupational therapy can offer in schools. This understanding and awareness is particularly growing in teachers and school staff, and is reflected in more schools placing referrals and requests for occupational therapy in schools.

Improved access to services: More than 50% of interview participants reported that children in government-funded preschools and primary schools are experiencing increased access to occupational therapy services. This was particularly evident in South Australia which is

undergoing an expansion of Department for Education occupational therapy services, as well as Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania. All of these states and territories have occupational therapists employed by the education department, working within interdisciplinary teams providing services to regions or clusters of schools. This may have been a contributing factor to participants reporting increased access to occupational therapy services for school children.

### **Challenges:**

Three key themes arose from the challenges reported by interview participants around occupational therapy in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools.

Limited understanding of occupational therapy role: While the understanding and awareness of the occupational therapy role is increasing, four of the eight states and territories expressed a need for this understanding to continue to grow. The primary challenge is around the broad scope of occupational therapy and teachers or school staff not recognising when a referral to an occupational therapist would be highly valuable.

Education department occupational therapists spread thin: Multiple participants expressed that education department occupational therapists are spread thin across a wide geographical area. This was particularly noted in the Northern Territory and Tasmania, where there are approximately 1-2 FTE occupational therapists to cover these states and territories. The challenge of limited occupational therapy staff was also noted in Queensland and South Australia, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Collaboration with fellow occupational therapists: Interviewees from six of the eight states and territories reported challenges in collaborating effectively with fellow occupational

therapists working in schools. Due to the variety of employment, contracting and funding models, any one school may receive visits from occupational therapists employed by the Education Department, the Department of Health, and private practices through NDIS funding. Each often have slightly different goals and service delivery models, and interview participants emphasised the importance of collaboration to ensure services are filling gaps and avoiding duplication. However, this level of collaboration was reported to be time intensive and difficult due to many therapists having little to no contact with one another.

### **The role and value of community networks:**

It became evident throughout the project that the occupational therapy community highly values networking with others working in education settings. Interview participants expressed a limited understanding of the models being utilised and the services being provided across the nation in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools. However, participants consistently reported a desire to gain an understanding of what is working well and what could be improved on a national level. Greater connections within the occupational therapy community would allow individuals to learn from other states and territories to refine and improve occupational therapy service delivery in schools within their own state or territory.

During the comprehensive needs analysis, project managers identified a South Australian occupational therapy in education group and a Victorian occupational therapy in schools working group. These provided valuable connections within the occupational therapy community of those states and often included occupational therapists working within a variety of contexts and models. However, there did not appear to be any working or professional groups for occupational therapists in education nationwide. This significantly limits the ability of occupational therapists to connect with and learn from others in their community. Not one interview participant

expressed the opinion that their state or territory had the perfect model in place, and all appeared to value any opportunity to connect with and learn from other occupational therapists around Australia. This aligns with the results of two studies examining the effect of professional connections and networks within occupational therapy. One study involved an online occupational therapy community group in which participants reported positive opportunities to learn from other professionals and overcome professional isolation (Hoffmann, Desha & Verrall 2011). Another study involving occupational therapists in mental health practice stated that professional networks acted as a protective factor contributing to professional resilience (Ashby et al. 2013).

The project employed a variety of strategies to facilitate the development of these connections within the occupational therapy community. For instance, the formation of a reference group comprised of individuals within the occupational therapy community and weekly reference group meetings facilitated the building of connections between group members. Each member brought their own valuable perspective shaped by different personal and professional experiences. A combination of informal conversation and project-based discussion led to a strengthening of connections that are available to be drawn upon now and in the future.

In addition, a contact list was produced containing the contact details of all involved in the project who had provided consent for their information to be distributed (see Appendix 2). It was suggested by the reference group that a contact list be developed so that it may be shared within the occupational therapy community. The medium-term outcomes of the project have a focus on dissemination and sharing the project's findings with the wider occupational therapy and education communities. The contact list can be used to form new connections should someone wish to find out more about a particular state or territory.

Connections between individuals within the occupational therapy community are highly valuable and appreciated by occupational therapists. The project has taken steps to develop and strengthen these connections and to continue this well into the future.

### **Integration of occupational therapy and education:**

During the project it became evident how important it is to integrate the occupational therapy and education communities. The challenges associated with collaboration between occupational therapists and education staff are widely reported (Truong & Hodgets 2017; Rens & Joosten 2013). Integrating education and occupational therapy communities would provide opportunities for a reciprocal understanding to be developed around the different needs and values of each profession. This need was recognised by all involved in the project, however it was decided that including education perspectives in the information gathering would broaden the scope of the project beyond what was achievable. Instead, the principal of a South Australian primary school, Rob Barton, was welcomed into the reference group in week five. Discussions with the principal confirmed the need for occupational therapists to have a thorough understanding of the education environment, in order to provide services and make recommendations that are suited to the school context and realistic for teachers to implement.

Reference group members and interview participants reported challenges around occupational therapists visiting a child in school for one hour a week and asking the classroom teacher to follow through on implementing occupational therapy strategies during class hours. In many cases, a teacher may have multiple children each with a different visiting therapist, all of whom ask different things of the classroom teacher. When the requests of teachers become too great, the teacher often feels overwhelmed, unsupported and will be unable to implement any of the strategies recommended (Truong & Hodgets 2017; Rens & Joosten 2013). In other cases,

occupational therapists will be prevented from visiting the school altogether due to the disruption it causes to classrooms and the added stress placed on teachers. It appears that even the most carefully constructed occupational therapy service delivery model would not be effective unless it accounted for and considered the school and classroom context.

Just as occupational therapists should have a thorough understanding of the education environment, so too should school staff have a clear understanding of the occupational therapy role and purpose in schools. This project has taken steps to clarify the occupational therapy role in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools and has considered the strengths and challenges primarily from an occupational therapy perspective. The next stage in this process would be to gather information from the education community and increase opportunities for occupational therapists to collaborate with school staff. This will be discussed further in the recommendations section of the report.

In Appendix 3, the detailed summaries from each state is provided.

### **Sustainability:**

The project has taken valuable steps to advocate for the occupational therapy role in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools, however the process does not end here. The information gathered has provided individuals with the initial ground-work to facilitate further information gathering and the formation and dissemination of resources to advocate for occupational therapy in schools. However, sustainability faces a variety of challenges.

In discussion with the reference group, it was decided that the group would reform as need arose. Reference group members did not feel there was value in continuing to meet regularly without project managers leading the discussions and providing new information. This

is reasonable and understandable; however, it highlights the challenge of the community being comprised of professionals with multiple, high priority responsibilities. During the project, reference group members were willing and to set aside an hour for weekly reference group meetings in addition to replying to email correspondence as necessary. This was a significant time sacrifice which is greatly appreciated by the project managers; however, it is not realistic for this to continue to the same degree long term.

In addition, all interview participants are employed occupational therapists with a responsibility to dedicate time and resources to their employed position. Any involvement in advocacy or projects often occur in addition to an already high workload. This aligns with the findings of a study which observed the effects of an online occupational therapy community group. Participants reported challenges around the time and effort required to participate in such groups in addition to an already heavy workload (Hoffman, Desha & Verrall, 2011). Therefore, even with passion or enthusiasm for the cause, it can be challenging to commit time and resources to advocating for the occupational therapy role long-term.

As a result of juggling multiple commitments, there is an undeniable risk of the enthusiasm surrounding advocacy for the role of occupational therapy in schools dwindling over time. Strategies have been put in place to reduce the risk of this occurring as is described in the recommendations section of the report. In addition, the reference group expressed an eagerness to reform should another group of students pick up the project and implement a new stage.



## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were guided by findings from the comprehensive needs analysis and involved consultation with agency supervisors, the reference group and the occupational therapy community involved in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools. Rationale for recommendations and strategies comes from a summary of all information gathered from the different states and territories. External recommendations are those that require higher-level change and continued advocacy to implement. Internal recommendations are what the agency, UniSA, can do to provide continued advocacy for the role of occupational therapy in education. It is the belief that these recommendations will continue the momentum around advocacy for occupational therapy in schools, improve the effectiveness of occupational therapy service delivery in schools, increase the presence of occupational therapists within schools, improve student outcomes and assist teachers understand the differing needs of children in the school environment.

## **Key messages**

- Inconsistencies exist surrounding the role of occupational therapists across the different states and territories in Australia.
- We provide a description of the occupational therapy role in Australian government-funded preschools and primary schools.
- The information gathered highlights the variation in occupational therapy presence, employment and service delivery across states and territories in Australia.
- Recommendations are made for the profession and education communities to further progress the role in education nation-wide, including advocacy for the

role, further development of the role and consistent models across Australia, as well as increased networking within occupational therapy and education.

### **Author declarations**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest and no funding.

| Table 3: Recommendations                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Recommendation                                                                                                                          | Rationale                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Strategies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Create therapy teams within education departments</b>                                                                                | <p>All states and territories reported the unrealistic nature of having an occupational therapist in every school.</p> <p>It was reported that having teams to work with schools in collaboration with external therapists would be the most realistic model.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teams cover a group of schools within a geographical area.</li> <li>Multidisciplinary team including professionals such as speech pathologists, social workers and psychologists.</li> <li>A member of the team liaises with external therapists and schools to assist with implementing external therapists' recommendations for individual children.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve teacher-therapist relationships.</li> <li>Improved student outcomes and wellbeing.</li> <li>Increased knowledge and understanding of occupational therapy.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Service delivery focus:</b> Consultative whole school model focusing on providing training, education and upskilling education staff | <p>All participants stated that a whole school approach upskilling teachers would be the most effective model.</p> <p>Teachers spend substantial time with children; being able to better understand a child's needs and how to manage these within the school</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular professional development opportunities.</li> <li>The therapist's focus is on helping the teacher make reasonable adjustments for the needs of individual children or groups of children.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased understanding of each child's needs.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                     |

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|                                                                                        | <p>environment would improve the child's learning outcomes and participation in the classroom.</p> <p>1:1 therapy withdrawing children from the classroom was reported ineffective in the school environment.</p>                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p><b>Clear boundaries and defined role for occupational therapists in schools</b></p> | <p>Due to the increasing number of external therapists working in schools with individual children, there was an expressed need to establish clear boundaries around external and department of education therapist roles to ensure no duplication of services.</p> <p>It was stated that education department occupational therapists could act</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working in collaboration with external therapists that are coming into and creating a team approach with teachers.</li> <li>• An occupational therapist within education department therapy team liaising with external therapists and the teachers.</li> <li>• Assisting teachers to understand and implement programs or recommendations for students from external therapists.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No duplication of services.</li> <li>• Improved effectiveness of external therapist programs.</li> <li>• Improved relationships between therapists and teacher.</li> <li>• Improved understanding of child's needs and the services occupational therapists offer.</li> </ul> |

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                             | <p>as a liaison between teachers and external therapists.</p> <p>It was reported due to NDIS that this was increasingly becoming important. Due to children having therapists delivering 1:1 therapy in schools. Being able to educate and assist teachers and then collaborate with external therapists and teachers would improve outcomes for the child.</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>Increasing knowledge and awareness of what occupational therapists can offer within schools around Australia.</b></p> | <p>The education representative in the reference group expressed the need for increased awareness of what occupational therapists can provide to schools.</p> <p>It was discussed that there is a need for evidence-based information to be readily accessible within schools. This will assist</p>                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources for schools (eg. posters).</li> <li>• Professional development.</li> <li>• Utilise Occupational Therapy Australia to advocate for what occupational therapists can provide in schools.</li> <li>• Online videos.</li> <li>• Evidence based descriptions and information of the occupational therapy role in education settings.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased presence in education settings.</li> <li>• Increased utilisation of occupational therapists varied skill set.</li> </ul> |

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|                                                                                                                                          | <p>teachers to make more referrals to occupational therapists by understanding the role better.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p><b>Additional occupational therapy services targeted at transition from kindergarten/preschool to the first year of schooling</b></p> | <p>It was reported that some students were entering the school system without necessary supports for schooling life. This included concerns around self-regulation, handwriting, social skills, attention and assistive equipment/devices.</p> <p>This recommendation is to build on what is already in place. In QLD they have a program Early Childhood Development Programs supporting children with disabilities with transition and participation at school. SA has children centres where</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having preschools or kindergartens that are adjoined or aligned with specific schools allowing for increased collaboration around school transition.</li> <li>• Education department therapy teams being responsible for preschools and kindergartens within their area.</li> <li>• Professional development and upskilling of kindergarten/preschool staff. Capacity building approach applies in these settings as it would with primary schools.</li> <li>• Ensure parent involvement is high during the transition year from kindergarten/preschool as they know their child the best.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive learning outcomes and participation of children when they begin school.</li> <li>• Teachers have a better understanding of a child's needs allowing for more effective teaching.</li> <li>• Increase parent understanding of child's needs as they enter the school environment.</li> </ul> |

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|                                                                                            | <p>occupational therapists focus on children aged 0-3 years. In Victoria they are rolling out a 'Readiness for school program' allowing allied health funding for kindergartens.</p>                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <p><b>Increase utilisation of university student placements within school settings</b></p> | <p>Through information gathered there was a clear gap of consistent student occupational therapy placements within schools or education.</p> <p>Placements were often described as ad-hoc or sourced by the university infrequently.</p> <p>Incorporating this into university courses will improve future therapist's</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placement programs within education department. Therapy teams supervise students and engage in different schools in their area.</li> <li>• Universities to work directly with education department or specific schools creating consistent ongoing placement opportunities.</li> <li>• Ensure rural and remote placements are offered.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater exposure to the school environment for future therapists.</li> <li>• Additional resource for the therapy teams.</li> <li>• Increased occupational therapy presence in schools (especially in rural and remote areas)</li> <li>• Increased understanding and awareness of occupational therapist role in schools.</li> </ul> |

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|                                                                                                                                                                       | <p>knowledge of school environments, dynamics of schools and the needs of teachers.</p> <p>Need expressed for greater occupational therapy presence in schools; interview participants recommended using university placements to assist this.</p>     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p><b>Further information gathering or formal research into education staff perspectives of occupational therapists and their role within the school setting.</b></p> | <p>All involved in the project stated the benefit of having the perspectives of education staff on therapists working in schools.</p> <p>This was reported as vital to create the most effective service delivery model within education settings.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews or focus groups with teachers or education staff who have worked with occupational therapists at school.</li> <li>• Gathering information on what education staff want and need from therapists and what they understand about what occupational therapists can provide.</li> <li>• Utilising another student group to take up a project looking at the education perspective of occupational therapy in school.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the effectiveness of occupational therapy services in schools.</li> <li>• Improve relationship between teachers and therapists.</li> <li>• Increase occupational therapist knowledge of what teachers need, want and understand about the occupational therapy role.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Publish polished resources from</b></p>                                                                                                                         | <p>Allows for information gathered to be used to create discussion, raise awareness and</p>                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilise Occupational Therapy Australia connection to assist with publishing an article to the</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased advocacy and awareness for the role of occupational therapy</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                        |



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| <p><b>information gathered to disseminate to the occupational therapy community.</b></p>                                          | <p>continue advocacy as per the projects aims and outcomes.</p> <p>All people involved expressed interest to receive the information gathered and learn what occupational therapy looks like in each state and territory around Australia.</p>                                                  | <p>Occupational Therapy Australia's Connections magazine.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce an abstract for a poster or presentation for the Occupational Therapy National Conference 2021.</li> <li>• Use of individual state and territory summaries as working documents and update these on a yearly basis.</li> <li>• Utilise resources and information gathered to advocate for policy change, additional occupational therapy services and funding.</li> </ul> | <p>within education to a national audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing information and resources to support further research.</li> <li>• Ongoing picture of occupational therapy in education from every state and territory.</li> <li>• Increase presence of occupational therapists in education settings.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Maintaining and strengthening connections made within occupational therapy and education community across Australia</b></p> | <p>It was reported through the information gathering that people are interested in connecting with people from different states about how they are engaging occupational therapy in education. Areas of interest included: service delivery model, employment models and access to funding.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presenting information and resources gathered during the project to other states and territories.</li> <li>• Utilise contact list from project to connect with people around Australia.</li> <li>• Create a national steering group advocating for the role of occupational therapy in Australia.</li> <li>• Utilise reference group established during project to gain more</li> </ul>                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase nation-wide awareness and advocacy for occupational therapists in education settings.</li> <li>• Strengthen relationships and increase communication between state and territory</li> </ul>                                                                                                       |

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|  |  | information, create new resources or conduct new research. | occupational therapists. |
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**Table 3: Recommendations**

| Recommendation                                                                                                                             | Rationale                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Strategies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <b>Create therapy teams within education departments</b>                                                                                   | <p>All states and territories reported the unrealistic nature of having an occupational therapist in every school.</p> <p>It was reported that having teams to work with schools in collaboration with external therapists would be the most realistic model.</p> <p>All participants stated that a whole school approach upskilling teachers would be the most effective model.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teams cover a group of schools within a geographical area.</li> <li>Multidisciplinary team including professionals such as speech pathologists, social workers and psychologists.</li> <li>A member of the team liaises with external therapists and schools to assist with implementing external therapists' recommendations for individual children.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve teacher-therapist relationships.</li> <li>Improved student outcomes and wellbeing.</li> <li>Increased knowledge and understanding of occupational therapy.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Service delivery focus:</b><br>Consultative whole school model focusing on providing training, education and upskilling education staff | <p>Teachers spend substantial time with children; being able to better understand a child's needs and how to manage these within the school environment would improve the child's learning outcomes and participation in the classroom.</p> <p>1:1 therapy withdrawing children from the classroom was reported ineffective in the school environment.</p>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular professional development opportunities.</li> <li>The therapist's focus is on helping the teacher make reasonable adjustments for the needs of individual children or groups of children.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased understanding of each child's needs.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Clear boundaries and defined role for</b>                                                                                               | Due to the increasing number of external therapists working in schools with individual children, there was an expressed need to establish clear boundaries                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working in collaboration with external therapists that are coming into and creating a team approach with teachers.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No duplication of services.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                        |

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| <p><b>occupational therapists in schools</b></p>                                                                                         | <p>around external and department of education therapist roles to ensure no duplication of services.</p> <p>It was stated that education department occupational therapists could act as a liaison between teachers and external therapists. It was reported due to NDIS that this was increasingly becoming important. Due to children having therapists delivering 1:1 therapy in schools. Being able to educate and assist teachers and then collaborate with external therapists and teachers would improve outcomes for the child.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An occupational therapist within education department therapy team liaising with external therapists and the teachers.</li> <li>• Assisting teachers to understand and implement programs or recommendations for students from external therapists.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved effectiveness of external therapist programs.</li> <li>• Improved relationships between therapists and teacher.</li> <li>• Improved understanding of child's needs and the services occupational therapists offer.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Increasing knowledge and awareness of what occupational therapists can offer within schools around Australia.</b></p>              | <p>The education representative in the reference group expressed the need for increased awareness of what occupational therapists can provide to schools.</p> <p>It was discussed that there is a need for evidence-based information to be readily accessible within schools. This will assist teachers to make more referrals to occupational therapists by understanding the role better.</p>                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources for schools (eg. posters).</li> <li>• Professional development.</li> <li>• Utilise Occupational Therapy Australia to advocate for what occupational therapists can provide in schools.</li> <li>• Online videos.</li> <li>• Evidence based descriptions and information of the occupational therapy role in education settings.</li> </ul>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased presence in education settings.</li> <li>• Increased utilisation of occupational therapists varied skill set.</li> </ul>                                                                                                     |
| <p><b>Additional occupational therapy services targeted at transition from kindergarten/preschool to the first year of schooling</b></p> | <p>It was reported that some students were entering the school system without necessary supports for schooling life. This included concerns around self-regulation, handwriting, social skills, attention and assistive equipment/devices.</p> <p>This recommendation is to build on what is already in place. In QLD they have a program Early Childhood Development Programs supporting children with disabilities with transition and participation at school. SA has children centres</p>                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having preschools or kindergartens that are adjoined or aligned with specific schools allowing for increased collaboration around school transition.</li> <li>• Education department therapy teams being responsible for preschools and kindergartens within their area.</li> <li>• Professional development and upskilling of kindergarten/preschool staff. Capacity</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive learning outcomes and participation of children when they begin school.</li> <li>• Teachers have a better understanding of a child's needs allowing for more effective teaching.</li> </ul>                                   |

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|                                                                                                                                                                       | <p>where occupational therapists focus on children aged 0-3 years. In Victoria they are rolling out a 'Readiness for school program' allowing allied health funding for kindergartens.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <p>building approach applies in these settings as it would with primary schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure parent involvement is high during the transition year from kindergarten/preschool as they know their child the best.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase parent understanding of child's needs as they enter the school environment.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p><b>Increase utilisation of university student placements within school settings</b></p>                                                                            | <p>Through information gathered there was a clear gap of consistent student occupational therapy placements within schools or education.</p> <p>Placements were often described as ad-hoc or sourced by the university infrequently.</p> <p>Incorporating this into university courses will improve future therapist's knowledge of school environments, dynamics of schools and the needs of teachers.</p> <p>Need expressed for greater occupational therapy presence in schools; interview participants recommended using university placements to assist this.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placement programs within education department. Therapy teams supervise students and engage in different schools in their area.</li> <li>• Universities to work directly with education department or specific schools creating consistent ongoing placement opportunities.</li> <li>• Ensure rural and remote placements are offered.</li> </ul>                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater exposure to the school environment for future therapists.</li> <li>• Additional resource for the therapy teams.</li> <li>• Increased occupational therapy presence in schools (especially in rural and remote areas)</li> <li>• Increased understanding and awareness of occupational therapist role in schools.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Further information gathering or formal research into education staff perspectives of occupational therapists and their role within the school setting.</b></p> | <p>All involved in the project stated the benefit of having the perspectives of education staff on therapists working in schools.</p> <p>This was reported as vital to create the most effective service delivery model within education settings.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews or focus groups with teachers or education staff who have worked with occupational therapists at school.</li> <li>• Gathering information on what education staff want and need from therapists and what they understand about what occupational therapists can provide.</li> <li>• Utilising another student group to take up a project looking at the education perspective of occupational therapy in school.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the effectiveness of occupational therapy services in schools.</li> <li>• Improve relationship between teachers and therapists.</li> <li>• Increase occupational therapist knowledge of what teachers need, want and understand about the occupational therapy role.</li> </ul>                                             |

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| <p><b>Publish polished resources from information gathered to disseminate to the occupational therapy community.</b></p>          | <p>Allows for information gathered to be used to create discussion, raise awareness and continue advocacy as per the projects aims and outcomes.</p> <p>All people involved expressed interest to receive the information gathered and learn what occupational therapy looks like in each state and territory around Australia.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilise Occupational Therapy Australia connection to assist with publishing an article to the Occupational Therapy Australia's Connections magazine.</li> <li>• Produce an abstract for a poster or presentation for the Occupational Therapy National Conference 2021.</li> <li>• Use of individual state and territory summaries as working documents and update these on a yearly basis.</li> <li>• Utilise resources and information gathered to advocate for policy change, additional occupational therapy services and funding.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased advocacy and awareness for the role of occupational therapy within education to a national audience.</li> <li>• Providing information and resources to support further research.</li> <li>• Ongoing picture of occupational therapy in education from every state and territory.</li> <li>• Increase presence of occupational therapists in education settings.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Maintaining and strengthening connections made within occupational therapy and education community across Australia</b></p> | <p>It was reported through the information gathering that people are interested in connecting with people from different states about how they are engaging occupational therapy in education. Areas of interest included: service delivery model, employment models and access to funding.</p>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presenting information and resources gathered during the project to other states and territories.</li> <li>• Utilise contact list from project to connect with people around Australia.</li> <li>• Create a national steering group advocating for the role of occupational therapy in Australia.</li> <li>• Utilise reference group established during project to gain more information, create new resources or conduct new research.</li> </ul>                                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase nation-wide awareness and advocacy for occupational therapists in education settings.</li> <li>• Strengthen relationships and increase communication between state and territory occupational therapists.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                        |

## **Conclusion**

The project has made valuable progress in increasing the understanding of occupational therapists in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools. The need for documentation around the presence, employment and role of occupational therapists in schools became increasingly evident throughout the project, and the information gathered has been described as highly beneficial for the occupational therapy community.

While the presence and understanding of occupational therapy in schools is increasing, there is still significant progress to make before all occupational therapists are utilised effectively and are widely accessible in school environments. It is vital that the enthusiasm which surrounded this project is maintained and used to inspire further information gathering and resource development for the advocacy of occupational therapy in Australian schools. Agency supervisors, interview participants and reference group members all recognise the need for sustainability and the reality that advocacy for occupational therapy in schools goes far beyond a ten-week project. The information gathered and the connections formed throughout this project lay the groundwork for future projects, information gathering and resource development to advocate for the occupational therapy role in Australian government-funded primary schools and preschools.

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