

Educators' and students' needs regarding teaching and learning strategies for integrating spirituality and spiritual care in occupational therapy education

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Abstract

Spirituality and spiritual care are both generating considerable interest as part of holistic and client-centred approaches of the profession of Occupational Therapy. Concerns have been raised regarding the teaching and learning needs of occupational therapy educators and students regarding spirituality and spiritual care. The aim of this study was to explore educators' and students' needs regarding teaching and learning strategies for integrating spirituality and spiritual care in the South African occupational therapy education. An interpretive, qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach was used with nine educators and 29 students who were purposively recruited from a university in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. Four focus group discussions were used for data collection and thematically analysed and managed in Atlas.ti 7. Two themes emerged: "We actually use transformative learning as a pedagogical approach," and "We need philosophical guidelines for integrating spirituality". These results imply that the transformative learning theories could contribute significantly to the integration of spirituality and spiritual care in occupational therapy education. Additionally, the findings support the use of critical reflection and consciousness-raising as teaching and learning strategies for spirituality. Overall, the findings indicated that the phases of transformative learning could be used to integrate spirituality and spiritual care in occupational therapy education. This study suggests a basis for development of guidelines to assist the educators and students to address the need for integrating spirituality in the occupational therapy classroom.

Keywords: teaching, spirituality, spiritual care, occupational therapy, education.

Introduction

There is a growing recognition by occupational therapy educators and students that it is imperative that teaching occurs during occupational therapy education but, unfortunately, a scholarly debate about the teaching and learning strategies for integrating spirituality and spiritual care, seem rarely to take place (Mthembu, Wegner & Roman, 2016; Jones, 2016;

Hemphill, 2015; Morris et al., 2014). Johnston and Mayers (2005) refer to spirituality as “a search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to a belief in God or some form of higher power.” It has been reported that people who have no conception of supernatural belief tend to perceive spirituality as a motivating force that involves an integration of mind, body and spirit (Johnston & Mayers, 2005). This personal belief also shapes an individual’s perspective on the world and is expressed in the way that he or she lives their life (Johnston & Mayers, 2005). It has been highlighted that spirituality is expressed through “connectedness to God, a higher being; and/or by one’s relationships with self, others or nature” (Johnston & Mayers, 2005: 386). Puchalski et al. (2009: 890) define spiritual care as “the connection between healthcare professionals and their clients, thereby listening to their fears, dreams, and pain; collaborate with their clients as partners in their care; and provide, through the therapeutic relationship”. The explanation of spiritual care appears to relate to the importance of humanistic and holistic approaches in the profession of occupational therapy, which accentuate the connection between mind, body and spirit (Morris et al., 2014). The humanistic and holistic approaches guide occupational therapy educators, clinicians and students to promote holistic intervention to clients, although the spiritual element tends to be omitted in occupational therapy education.

Several studies have indicate that learning and teaching strategies of transformative learning could be used in class to introduce spirituality into health sciences’ education through group and individual activities that may foster students’ capabilities, skills and learning styles (Mthembu et al., 2016; Dalla Colletta de Aguiar & Costa, 2016; Bennett & Thompson, 2015; Hasanshahi & Mazaheri, 2016; Schonfeld, Schmid & Boucher-Payne, 2016). These studies identified a variety of learning and teaching strategies, namely self-awareness, self-reflection, role-playing, self-study, exposing students to literature on spirituality, journaling and reflection, small group discussions, and case studies. Hasanshahi and Mazaheri (2016) reports that, in addition, spirituality can be learned through social media, as it promotes students’ spiritual well-being. This indicates that students may connect with each other as part of a group, discussing and sharing their knowledge, perceptions and information about spirituality. Schonfeld et al.’s (2016) and Bennett and Thompson’s (2015) findings reveal that spirituality can be incorporated into existing modules by including instruction on spiritual history as part of social and past medical history. Spiritual history-taking “is the process of interviewing a patient in order to come together to a better understanding of their spiritual needs and resources. Therefore, a spiritual history can be integrated into existing formats such as the social history section of the clinical database” (Puchalski et al., 2009: 893).

It has been indicated that spirituality and spiritual care in health science education seem to be confined to medicine (Chirico, 2016) and nursing (Baldacchino, 2015; Bennett & Thompson 2015). This could mean that “spirituality should be reconfigured in the educational process to encourage a belief in the sense of self and collective capacity for educational action for meaningful change” (Dei, 2002: 356). It appears that there are still no clear teaching and learning strategies that may be used to integrate spirituality and spiritual care, as this focus has not been applied to occupational therapy education (Jones, 2016; Mthembu, Ahmed, Nkuna & Yaca, 2015). Increasingly occupational therapy educators,

clinicians and students seem to be in need of knowledge and skills to deal with integration of spirituality and spiritual care into education as there are limited effective pedagogical approaches available. In order to address this issue, Jones (2016) recommends that further research should be conducted on occupational therapy programmes, and how they are embedded in spirituality and spiritual care in teaching and learning strategies. This indicates that there is a considerable need for exploring strategies for integration of spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy education. The aim of the current study was to explore educators' and students' needs regarding teaching and learning strategies to integrate spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy education in South Africa.

Methodology

Study design and ethical considerations

An interpretive, qualitative exploratory-descriptive research approach was used to elicit educators' and students' perceptions of teaching and learning strategies that could be used to integrate spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy education in South Africa (Grove et al., 2013; Rowlands, 2005). The qualitative research was employed based on the interpretivist belief (Rowlands, 2005) that the phenomenon of spirituality is a subjective experience which is socially, culturally and historically constructed (Inbadas, 2016). Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Research and Ethics Committee (Research Ethical Clearance reference no: 14/4/18). The participants provided informed, written consent to take part in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to protect the participants' privacy. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without repercussions.

Data collection and analysis

In this study, purposive sampling was used to recruit 38 participants (9 occupational therapy educators and 29 occupational therapy students). The participants were employed by the university as occupational therapy educators to teach and supervise students in fieldwork. Occupational therapy students, who were registered as third- and fourth-year occupational therapy students at one of the universities in the Western Cape Province during the period of the study from 2014–2016, voluntarily participated in the study. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were used for data collection, each of which was 45–60 minutes in duration. The participants who participated in the four FGDs were from one of the universities in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. In the first group, there were nine educators (eight females and a male) employed by the university to teach and/or supervise students. The second group comprised ten third-year occupational therapy students (females) and the third group comprised eight third-year occupational therapy students (females). The last group comprised eleven fourth-year occupational therapy students (nine females and two males). The FGDs were conducted until data saturation was reached, to ensure that adequate and quality data were collected. All the FGDs were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were imported to Atlas.ti 7 software in order for

one of the authors (TGM) to organise and manage the qualitative data. Six steps of thematic analysis were used to organise and describe the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clark, 2006). These steps included familiarising, generating codes, searching, reviewing, defining and naming of themes. Finally, the report was written in a narrative form, supported by excerpts from the verbatim transcriptions.

Trustworthiness of the study

Credibility of the findings was ensured through the use of triangulation of data sources (multiple participants including occupational therapy educators and third- and fourth-year occupational therapy students). Member-checking was conducted through two additional groups (one with educators and one with students) to validate the findings. Transferability was ensured through providing a thick description of the research setting, and an audit trail was established through keeping records of all activities from data collection to data analysis and writing-up of the findings. Dependability was ensured by using Atlas.ti7 to capture all the steps and analysis as part of the audit trail and consistency.

Results and Discussion

Two interrelated themes emerged from the thematic analysis: 1) “We actually use a transformative learning pedagogical approach” and 2) “We need philosophical guidelines for integrating spirituality”. These themes are further discussed in relation to the phases of Mezirow’s (2003) transformative learning and the teaching and learning needs of occupational therapy educators and students.

Theme One: “We are actually using transformative learning pedagogical approaches”

In theme one, the transformative learning pedagogical approaches appear as enablers of spirituality in occupational therapy education. The title of the theme emerged in the FGDs of the educators, as educator 8 said “*I really think in our curriculum; we are actually using a transformative learning approach*”. This is supported by the three categories that emerged, including experiential learning approaches, reflective practice and interactive learning, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories and quotations of theme one

Category	Quotations
“Experiential learning approaches”	<i>‘If you want us to learn about spirituality, the best way to learn is through actual experience, not just theoretical, and use of our modules as a platform to experience each other’s spirituality’.</i> <i>‘Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning may be used as another stage in which they could reflect from a personal view as spiritual or occupational beings and, even when they do it according to what they would have learnt, possibly we can build on it as part of journaling’.</i>
Reflective journals were a platform for spirituality	<i>‘The biggest thing that you need is self-reflection to point out what is your spirituality. You have to define it [Spirituality] within yourself, you will also be able to see it in others and self-reflection will be a start’.</i> <i>‘Journals could be used as a path for a spiritual journey. Writing those journals would help us with our spiritual journey in order to understand others’ spiritual journeys’.</i>
Interactive learning is a strategy	<i>‘I don’t believe that spirituality is something that you can lecture and teach to someone but I do believe that it’s an interactive thing so it should be done in a more interactive way’.</i> <i>‘I think that from first, second, third until fourth year, we should have a get together or maybe a class time where we focus on topics like spirituality and culture’.</i>

“Experiential learning approaches”

The concept of praxis-based learning is defined as “the interdependence and integration, not separation, of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action” (Zuber Skerritt, 2001: 15). Praxis-based learning therefore seemed to be an appropriate strategy for consciousness-raising about spirituality through experiences, because it equips students with critical and transformative action to change their lives. Consequently, the participants acknowledged that students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes seem to be enhanced because of the praxis-based learning. This is consistent with the opinion of the participants, who shared that the experiential learning approach is one of the teaching strategies that might be used to integrate spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy education. It is clear that the participants regarded both the experiential learning approach and student-centred learning as facilitators that foster collaborative learning about spirituality through sharing experiences during classroom discussions.

Experiential learning is considered as a facilitator for integrating spirituality and spiritual care into education (Rogers & Wattis, 2015; Leathard & Cook, 2009). This indicates that, through experiential learning, occupational therapy students seem to enhance their critical reflections as part of transformation. Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning theory (ELT) as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experiences (Kolb, 1984). For participants, Kolb’s experiential learning theory was consistently identified as a facilitator in integrating spirituality into occupational therapy education.

This finding is in line with previous studies (Dirkx et al., 2006; English et al., 2005; Dei, 2002) which indicate that the experiential learning cycle in education assists students to use their experiences to engage in self-reflection. These studies highlight that the significance of holistic education is based on the acknowledgement of the intellectual, social, cognitive, emotional, moral, religious, psychological, economic, political and spiritual aspects of the students to facilitate experiential learning. Similarly, Kolb's experiential learning cycle seems to be relevant in facilitating critical reflections. This indicates that the four-stage learning cycle could substantially contribute to participants' self-awareness about spirituality in occupational therapy education. The four-stage learning cycle includes concrete experience, reflective observations, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, which participants felt could be used as part of learning about spirituality. Participants were of the opinion that the experiential learning cycle appears to be an enabler for experiencing spirituality, culture and self-awareness.

Reflective practice “Journals were a platform for spirituality”

According to Correia and Bleicher (2008), “reflection helps students make stronger connections between theoretical perspectives and practice. We view reflection as a skill that can assist students in making sense of their service learning experience”. This is supported by the participants who highlighted the importance of reflection in learning about spirituality in occupational therapy education. Additionally, this means that self-reflection appears to be a key enabler for integrating spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy. The participants identified that there is a need to be competent in writing journals which could enhance their spirituality through self-awareness and self-reflection as part of consciousness-raising in occupational therapy. *For me it's around reflection on a personal level which we are doing right from first year. I try to make them aware about spirituality so that nobody judges anybody; everything is ok even if you feel a certain way about the topic.* (Educator 8)

The findings are consistent with those of previous studies (Paal, Helo & Frick, 2015; Barry & Gibbens, 2011) which indicate that strategies such as recording dreams and writing journal entries might enable students' and educators' spiritual sensitivity to acknowledge their spirituality in order to enhance self-awareness. This could mean that educators should create safe learning environments and platforms so that students might learn about spirituality through self-reflection.

Interactive learning as a strategy

Participants felt that spirituality cannot be taught through lectures alone; they felt that engaging in conversation about spirituality and culture as part of social participation, could contribute significantly to their learning about spirituality in the occupational therapy classroom. Interactive learning was identified as a suggestion for integrating spirituality into

occupational therapy education that could facilitate connections and reflections while students are experiencing spiritual connections.

Critical-dialectical discourse is a strategy for communicative learning that emphasises the importance of critical reflection and critical self-reflection to assess what concepts have usually been taken for granted in teaching and learning in occupational therapy, such as spirituality and culture. The participants suggested that there is a need for a day to be dedicated to raising awareness about spirituality in occupational therapy. This corroborates the outcomes of transformative learning related to openness to other points of view and being able to integrate differing dimensions of experience into meaningful and holistic relationships (Dirkx, 1998).

Theme Two: “We need philosophical guidelines for integrating spirituality”

The second theme captures the participants’ need for guidelines for integrating spirituality into occupational therapy education. The title of the theme emerged from the educators’ and students’ FGDs as they identified a dilemma caused by the absence of spirituality in occupational therapy education. According to Taylor (1998), disorientating dilemmas are described as an acute internal or external personal crisis where individuals search for something that is missing from their lives. This is the first phase of the process of transformation and provides deeper understanding of factors that influence transformative-learning (Laros & Taylor, 2015). Participants identified that there was a dilemma, from which it was evident that the students had referred to Mezirow’s (2003) phases (one: disorienting dilemma, and three: critical reflection). Table 2 presents the categories that emerged from the analysis: that is, need for explicit guidelines, areas for integrating spirituality, teaching strategies and students’ assessment tasks for spirituality. The findings of the second theme are discussed based on the ten phases of transformative learning.

Table 2: Categories and quotations on theme two

Category	Quotations
Need for explicit guidelines	<i>We need a theoretical background to spirituality; therefore, we shall be aware of different types of spirituality which are more important to our clients. We need philosophical guidelines of looking at that, and thinking about that in an embedded type of approach.</i>
Areas for integrating spirituality into occupational therapy education	<i>Spirituality comes out very strongly in the ethics course, as it actually tests the spirituality with morals, belief systems, and cultural differences. Perhaps we can have one or two sessions in each of the human occupation modules, and relate it to those stages of development. We are going to foreground it so that it doesn't become lost. It can be integrated certainly in geriatrics module, as it relates to spirituality.</i>
Teaching strategies for spirituality	<i>Educational activities which can definitely assist us in class include live debates besides the formal lectures. Use of debate facilitated our critical reasoning while brainstorming and we were able to obtain everybody else's perspectives on various concepts such as spirituality, religion and culture. 'By watching documentaries about people practising their spirituality; it will get deeper that way'. 'It would help to learn about spirituality by using case studies'.</i>
Students' assessment tasks for spirituality	<i>We can evaluate the students with a portfolio; maybe at one point they will sort of reflect on spirituality as one of the key concepts. An assignment like the one we had on PEO about leisure activities while growing up. We can add the element of spirituality to show how we have used it to cope through the years of being a teenager. Everyone can write an assignment to present their version of what spirituality means to them.</i>

Need for explicit guidelines

The participants had undergone Mezirow's (2003) phase four recognition that discontent and the process of transformation are shared and they all agreed that there is a need for more explicit guidelines to integrate spirituality into occupational therapy education. The importance of guidelines to embed spirituality into occupational therapy education is reported as a need by the participants, as it is possible that the guidelines of integrating spirituality may enhance the holistic approach in education and practice. As in this study, previous studies highlight that occupational therapy education could contribute significantly to development of guidelines to embed spirituality into occupational therapy education (Jones, 2016; Lewinson et al., 2015; Dugan et al., 2011; Johnston & Mayers, 2005).

In phase five of Mezirow (2003), the exploration of new roles, relationships and actions occurs when students' discourse highlights what should be included in the guidelines for integrating spirituality into occupational therapy education. This leads the participants to

contribute to actions and ideas for integrating spirituality into their education, and is supported by student-centred learning.

Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, which is phase seven of Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning, appeared to be present in some participants. This phase was evident in the participants' discourse because they expressed the need to learn more about spirituality in occupational therapy, in particular spiritual history-taking. Students also indicated that they are often afraid to meet new challenges among diverse clients.

Participants in the study highlight that there is a need for spiritual assessment in occupational therapy. Several studies (Hemphill, 2015; Bennett & Thompson, 2015; Kelso-Wright, 2012) report that occupational therapy students need to be taught how to assess their clients' spirituality in order to promote quality of life. These studies suggest a variety of spiritual assessments, such as FICA (Faith or beliefs Importance, Community and Address), HOPE (H: hope, strength, comfort, meaning, peace, love, and connection; O: organised religion for patient; P: patient's personal spirituality and practice; and E: effects of medical care and end of life decisions). These studies seem to fit in well with phase six of Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning, which deals with planning a course of action to address the needs of assessment of spirituality.

Areas for integrating spirituality into occupational therapy education

Planning a course of action is covered by phase six of Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning, and this phase was evident from the educators' and students' discourse. They felt that human occupation, ethics and geriatrics modules could be used to integrate spirituality into occupational therapy education. The participants indicated that these modules are suitable for integrating spirituality into all stages of human development. The findings suggest that occupational therapy modules, such as ethics, could be used to integrate spirituality. This is in line with Seylani et al.'s (2016) study which explores the process of developing spirituality among Iranian nursing undergraduates, and found that there is a relationship between spirituality and practical ethics.

In Phase eight, which embraces provisionally trying out new roles (Mezirow, 2003), it is evident from the participants' discourse that they would like to acquire more knowledge about the applicability of spirituality in diverse settings where they practise occupational therapy. This links with participants' capabilities to analyse, pose questions and take action on social, political, cultural and economic contexts that influence and shape their learning to become future therapists.

Teaching strategies for spirituality

Participants identified a variety of teaching strategies that they felt were particularly relevant to fostering their learning and reflection about spirituality in the occupational therapy

classroom. Participants acknowledged that educational activities, including debates, brainstorming discussions, guest lectures, self-awareness exercises, group presentations, photographs and documentaries, were all enablers for spirituality in the occupational therapy classroom. These findings are consistent with previous studies that suggest that students could learn about spirituality through critical reflections incorporated into the teaching strategies identified in the current study (Bennett & Thompson, 2015; Frouzandeh, Aein & Noorian, 2015). Contrary to this study, Hasanshahi and Mazaheri (2016) and Rodger and Wattis (2015) find that teaching strategies such as social media, poetry, modelling and narratives, could be used to integrate spirituality into teaching in the classroom.

Student assessment tasks for spirituality

Participants suggested that students should be evaluated through the use of a portfolio of evidence. This suggestion indicated that the portfolio should appear as an enabler for two phases (2: self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, and 3: critical assessment of assumptions) of Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning. The participants suggested that spirituality could be considered as one of the main concepts used to evaluate students' learning as part of reflective practice using the portfolio. This finding is compatible with the results of Harbinson and Bell's (2015) and Hill's (2012) studies which highlight that those portfolios could be employed to evaluate students' learning. Studies have shown that educational portfolios provide students with opportunities to enhance their personal development, self-reflection, cognitive skills and professionalism, as well as affective behaviours (Dalla Colletta de Aguiar et al., 2016; Bennett & Thompson, 2015; Harbinson & Bell, 2015; Hill, 2012). These studies appear to be supportive of transformational learning as they promote self-reflection and meaningful self-directed learning.

Participants felt that an assignment relating to spirituality could be used as a coping mechanism during the adolescent stage, while engaging in leisure activities could be used and structured according to the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) conceptual model by Law et al. (1996). This indicates that students could be evaluated on how they analyse and synthesise the person (being a teenager: physical, affective and cognitive); the environment (social, political, cultural and economic); and through engagement in occupation (leisure activities), to shape and find meaning (coping) in their lives.

In addition, participants felt that an assignment that questions their understanding of spirituality and religion may provide them with an opportunity to share their views. This indicates that learning methods, such as student-centred, could be used to recognise that occupational therapy students take responsibility for their learning. These findings concur with Seylani et al. (2016), Schonfeld et al. (2016) and Dalla Colletta de Aguiar et al. (2016) who report that assignments relating positively to spiritual development could be used to help students with their spiritual queries. These studies highlight that assignments seem to motivate students' critical reflections about the content areas and skills related to spiritual and professional development. Respectively, Lindholm and Astin (2007) encourage the use of student-centred learning to provide opportunities for students' spiritual development and

experience. This indicates that the students may experience the “shimmering moments” that occur in day-to-day teaching practice, as they often experience a “light bulb moment” when the content and their life-world come together in a meaningful way (Lawrence & Dirkx, 2013).

Recommendations for teaching and learning strategies

Several practical steps emerge from the findings of the study which highlight the method and content of the teaching and learning strategies that can be applied to integrate spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy education. These practical steps include self-awareness, experiential learning, learning strategies and students’ assessments.

(1) In relation to self-awareness: Educators and students should be aware of their spirituality prior to attempting to understand other people’s spirituality, which may pose questions about what is meaningful in their lives by considering social, political, cultural and economic contexts. Additionally, self-awareness activities may assist students and educators to experience personal growth and professional development in occupational therapy. This aligns with Freira’s perspective of consciousness-raising which may be achieved through self-awareness (Lloyd, 1972; Ryan, 1974).

(2) Regarding experiential learning: educators should consider the importance of experiential learning and reflective practice as teaching strategies that can be used to provide students with an opportunity to learn about themselves. This would form part of critical reflection and self-reflection through which students can learn about spirituality by writing journals using the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), and may assist students to have a deeper understanding of spirituality in the profession of occupational therapy.

(3) With regard to learning strategies, educators may foster students’ learning by means of group discussions and case studies as part of interactive learning, where they will share their understanding of spirituality in occupational therapy education. It is evident from this study that strategies such as debates, brainstorming, group presentation, photographs and documentaries may be used to facilitate awareness and critical reflection about spirituality in the occupational therapy classroom.

(4) In connection with students’ assessments, it is evident from the findings of this study that students may be assessed by means of assignments that evaluate how they perceive spirituality in relation to engagement in occupations. This research reveals that portfolios could be useful to assess students’ professionalism and development. Educators should evaluate how students reflect on spirituality in their portfolios in connection with social and spiritual history-taking as part of occupational therapy.

(5) The final findings of this study could be used to guide occupational therapy educators to design and develop guidelines to integrate spirituality into occupational therapy education.

Limitation of this study

The findings of this study cannot be generalised to other occupational therapy programmes as they apply only to the educators and students who participated in the research. Further studies are needed to ascertain the educators' and students' needs regarding the teaching and learning strategies necessary for integrating spirituality and spiritual care into occupational therapy education in South African institutions of higher learning.

Conclusions

Overall the findings suggest that spirituality and spiritual care could be integrated into occupational therapy education through transformative learning to enhance students' consciousness-raising and critical reflection. The findings of this study demonstrate that there is a need for guidelines to integrate spirituality into occupational therapy modules. This becomes more evident in educators' and students' discourses when they suggest that they need to be knowledgeable about the relevance of spirituality and spiritual care in occupational therapy theory, education and practice. As a result, the understanding and insight obtained in this study would be of significance to educators and students in occupational therapy, as well as other health sciences' education. Eventually this study could serve as the basis for future studies in relation to designing and developing strategies for teaching and learning about spirituality and spiritual care in occupational therapy education.

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