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2025

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Belonging and the Lived Experiences of Underrepresented Occupational Therapy Students

Abstract

Belonging has been explored in research in higher education with a focus on student engagement or performance and the impact of psychological aspects on individuals' learning. Few studies focused on underrepresented occupational therapy students' belonging. Our research aimed to explore the lived experience of occupational therapy students regarding belonging at university. This phenomenological study was conducted with six occupational therapy students from the United Kingdom who volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was carried out through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Three themes were constructed: Theme 1: Representation and belonging - "I was the only non-white person in the room"; Theme 2: Navigating between being and doing - "we've done a lot of talking, what are we going to do?", and Theme 3: Societal and Institutional Oppression - "Are they even aware?". The sense of belonging appeared to fluctuate according to individuals, places, and cultures. Our analysis suggests considerations for further occupational therapy education regarding effective strategies to enable belonging, as well as inclusive practices in higher education.

Keywords

Higher education, belonging, students, occupational therapy

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**Belonging and the Lived Experiences of
Underrepresented Occupational Therapy Students**

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ABSTRACT

Belonging has been explored in research in higher education with a focus on student engagement or performance and the impact of psychological aspects on individuals' learning. Few studies focused on underrepresented occupational therapy students' belonging. Our research aimed to explore the lived experience of occupational therapy students regarding belonging at university. This phenomenological study was conducted with six occupational therapy students from the United Kingdom who volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was carried out through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Three themes were constructed: Theme 1: Representation and belonging - "I was the only non-white person in the room"; Theme 2: Navigating between being and doing - "we've done a lot of talking, what are we going to do?", and Theme 3: Societal and Institutional Oppression - "Are they even aware?". The sense of belonging appeared to fluctuate according to individuals, places, and cultures. Our analysis suggests considerations for further occupational therapy education regarding effective strategies to enable belonging, as well as inclusive practices in higher education.

The growing number of underrepresented students in higher education has resulted in raised concerns among institutions regarding students' participation and development of a sense of belonging (Fernández et al., 2023). Belonging is defined as feeling accepted and part of a community without needing to conform to specific norms (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). A sense of belonging is crucial for students' development, social interaction, motivation, learning, and well-being, influencing both physical and mental

health as well as academic achievement (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Fernández et al., 2023; Taff & Clifton, 2022). Allen et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review identifying key attributes of belonging, such as meaningful social connectedness, interpersonal relationships, respect, diversity, and inclusion. They also noted that belonging is a complex, multidimensional construct shaped by cultural and contextual structural factors. Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023) described belonging as the sense of being part of a space where individuals can confidently express their personal and social identities, supported by harmonious, meaningful relationships in ethnically diverse communities. Taff and Clifton (2022) highlighted that underrepresented students in higher education are often marginalized and risk feeling isolated or unwelcome within universities.

Although literature outside occupational therapy has been increasingly researching belonging, the subjective experience of occupational therapy students concerning belonging is still unknown, with only one study addressing belonging of occupational therapy black students in the United States (Aldridge et al., 2023). Thus, our research aimed to explore the lived experience of occupational therapy students' concerning belonging at university. Our objective was to explore the lived experiences of occupational therapy students who identified as underrepresented within the profession, currently studying pre-registration occupational therapy in the North of England, through semi-structured interviews. The term "underrepresented students" was chosen for this study to encompass a broad spectrum of identities while maintaining specificity and as advocated by the study participants who advised us of their preferred term, rather than using the term Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME), which have been critiqued by authors such as Parry et al. (2023). Therefore, our study included any student who identified as part of an underrepresented group.

The research was conceptualized from an experience of one of the authors, DC, with a Black student who cried in the classroom and said they had no friends in the course or at university. This resulted in the need to explore students' perceptions of belonging to support inclusive practices in higher education. Our research question was: What are the lived experiences of occupational therapy students regarding belonging at university? In our research, we valued the connection between the concept of belonging and its association with three essential elements of occupation which were used in our study to explore belonging: 'doing' (participation and engagement), 'being' (sense of self), and 'becoming' (growth and aspirations; Hitch et al., 2014; Wilcock, 1999; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). For example, interviewing students offered opportunities to reflect on their journey as students (being), expressing their experiences of participation at the University (doing). Furthermore, how the students perceive their belonging and strategies that are working well or not also provides opportunity to reflect on their journey towards becoming occupational therapists (becoming).

Theoretical Perspective: Occupational Justice

Our research was oriented under the occupational justice framework, by understanding underrepresented students' experiences and identifying possible occupational injustices experienced in higher education (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Three premises and

beliefs of occupational justice guided our research: 1) that people need to have a voice on how the occupations they participate in are influenced by structural factors such as policies, economy and culture; 2) that people are different and have unique needs; and 3) that occupational therapists can promote change by recognizing and acting to eliminate occupational injustices; in our case, advocating through this research by hearing and listening to the voices of students (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). If there are barriers to belonging that are out of students' control, this may be a matter of occupational injustice. In our research, by focusing on the students' lived experiences of belonging, we were advocating for occupational justice, the right to participate and have occupational needs met.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological design that was compatible with the aim of knowing the occupational therapy students' lived experiences since phenomenology focuses on "the everyday lifeworld and gives great attention to the careful description of how the ordinary is experienced and expressed in the consciousness of individuals (Luborsky & Lysack, 2017, p. 190). The lived experience of underrepresented students at university is a complex phenomenon that involves a subjective perspective of how these individuals describe their life experiences. This stresses the need for qualitative approaches to capture the reasons individuals think about particular things, meanings, processes and actions by doing an interpretation of their discourse (Lysack et al., 2017). This interpretation is aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1997).

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Local Research Ethics Coordinator at Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom (UK). All participants signed a consent form authorising participation and publication of this research.

Participants and Recruitment

Once ethical approval was granted, participants were recruited from Leeds Beckett University's two Occupational Therapy courses. Emails with participant information sheets and consent forms were sent to all 150 students enrolled in MSc (postgraduate) and BSc (undergraduate) programmes. The inclusion criteria were a) underrepresented within occupational therapy students from the BSc Program and MSc Program and b) being a student in the period of (2021-2022-2023-2024). The exclusion criteria were students from other programs and those who did not identify as underrepresented in the profession.

A total of six students responded to the email request to participate, who identified as underrepresented. This included but was not limited to LGBTQ+, Black, Asian, Neurodiverse, and disabled. Once students had shown interest, they could ask additional questions, and these were dealt with in confidence. Students were not coerced into taking part and there were no benefits to participation except to share and

have their experiences and views heard and listened to. Students wishing to participate signed the consent form and verbally consented before the interview taking place. Students had the right to withdraw at any time up until data analysis with no consequences.

Data Generation

Data generation was through semi-structured interviews carried out by ZM, who was not involved with teaching and was unknown to the participants at the time. This was important, providing rigor to the research as the first two authors were known to the participants. In addition, the interviewer identified as underrepresented within the profession and in higher education institutions. This enhanced the ability of the participants to feel comfortable in sharing experiences.

The interview questions were developed by the three researchers, and aimed to explore belonging, based on the elements of occupation: doing, being, and becoming (Hitch et al., 2014; Wilcock, 1999; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Examples of the interview questions are available in Table 1 with the related constructs that each addressed.

Table 1

Example Interview Questions and Related Constructs

Interview Questions	Related Constructs
Do you feel you belong at the university? Why or why not?	Belonging
Does your classroom make you feel that you are in a safe space?	Doing/ Belonging
Do you feel your cultural needs are respected at university and in the course?	Being/ Belonging
Do you feel you can imagine yourself being 'an occupational therapist' ...if not why; if yes, what do you picture?	Becoming

Following an email to all students in both programs, interested students contacted ZM (third author, a qualified occupational therapist who received training in the conduction of semi-structured interviews) directly, who arranged mutually convenient times to meet. ZM carried out the first interview and reviewed the questions. She found the questions worked to explore the aims and added prompts to explore in greater depth before completing the rest of the interviews. Probing questions were included in the interviews while maintaining sensitivity towards what the students wanted to share. Interviews took approximately one hour online on MS Teams and were recorded with the participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) followed the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2022). Data transcribed was read entirely several times by each researcher to familiarise with the data. A folder on OneDrive allowed researchers to work simultaneously on data, write comments and questions, and share reflections. After this, the three researchers met face to face at university and on MS Teams to read and re-read and discuss important and meaningful data, highlighting and using different colors to identify initial codes. The coding was both latent (to interpret what the participants said and reflect on and construct meaning) and semantic (what the participants said; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes were grouped into themes using all relevant data. Codes and themes were double-checked to generate a thematic map and themes were refined through the cyclical, continuous, distillation (Finlay, 2021). Data analysis was both inductive and deductive (Byrne, 2022), with predominance of inductive analysis whereby the researchers paid particular attention to representing the voices of the participants by providing quotations of their discourse while refining interpretations through the lens of occupational justice and belonging.

Rigor

Our research considered rigor and trustworthiness by applying the concepts: a) investigator triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020); this was accomplished by all three researchers' involvement with the data analysis separately and then together to reach agreements, to reduce single-researcher bias; b) member checking was achieved by the third researcher sending the interview transcripts back to participants to review their comments or add extra information. Only one student added more information to the original interview transcript; and c) reflexivity; the researchers were explicit with reflexive processes throughout to address personal biases, assumptions and values that have influenced the research during the meetings. Reflexivity was an important aspect of our research since the first and second authors were lecturers in the occupational therapy programmes and knew the participants and the context where the research was carried out. The third author had a temporary teaching role which aligned with the timing of the research but did not know the participants prior to the research. By recognizing these biases the researchers offer readers of the study the opportunity to make judgements about the quality of the results presented (Lysack et al., 2017). To increase rigor, we used the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) to write our research article (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Positionality

DC is white and from Latin America and his first language is Portuguese. He has lived experience as a lecturer for fifteen years in South America and UK. DC is gay and, therefore, identifies himself as part of underrepresented and excluded groups. ZM is of South Asian Kashmiri origin and born in the UK. She has lived experience as an ethnic minority within the UK and has been a qualified Occupational Therapist for seven years. AM is of white, British working class decent and has been an occupational therapist since 1999 and in higher education teaching occupational therapy and occupational science since 2009.

Analysis

Because our research involved only six participants from a university in the North of England, demographics are presented broadly to maintain anonymity. Participants were undergraduate and postgraduate occupational therapy students studying at a higher education institute in the North of England. Demographics included Asian, Black, international, Muslim, mature student and varied ages (from 20-40's), parents, married and single, disabilities (dyslexia, mental health), European/Asian, English as a second language, British and non-British born, lower and higher socio-economic circumstances and lower prior educational attainment, female, non-binary, transgender, some working while studying.

Three themes were constructed through RTA: Theme 1: Representation and belonging - "I was the only non-white person in the room"; Theme 2: Navigating between being and doing - "we've done a lot of talking, what are we going to do?", and Theme 3: Institutional Oppression - "Are they even aware"? Each theme's name uses participants' quotations, which encapsulates the essence of the theme and preserves their voices. They were also combined with the author's interpretation (latent), thus consistent with a phenomenological approach. Participants pseudonyms are Aadila, Achiko, Beyza, Charlie, Esme and Iseul.

Theme 1: Representation and belonging- "I was the only non-white person in the room."

This theme represents how participants discussed their sense of belonging in higher education. The participants show that belonging was influenced by a complexity of factors that created structural, cultural, and institutional systemic barriers. These barriers are shown here to be transactional and interrelated.

In our data it appeared that belonging was not only generated by formal education, but also structural factors such as representation of students' cultural and diversity needs. It was connected to 'doing' and interpersonal relationships. For example, Aadila referred to the importance of a physical place to pray and the diversity of permanent teaching staff. However, the diversity within the profession was not always present at practice placement, as highlighted by Iseul and Beyza.

As a student at uni, we do talk about diversity and different races and different cultural backgrounds quite a lot, but that wasn't particularly the case in placement. So, there were times that I was a bit wary about things, I wasn't concerned or anything. I didn't feel like I was disrespected or anything like that, but there were many times that I looked around and I was the only non-white person in the room and that felt a bit weird (Iseul).

We might not see someone in practise on ... placement, that's like you (Beyza).

Nevertheless, this contrasted with some experiences at the university whereby having particular spaces and seeing people in similar attire was reassuring:

For instance, if I need to go pray on a Friday. ...I know where the rooms are to kind of go and pray and stuff like that but also... I've seen many people wear headscarves and I just, I, yeah, just that kind of stuff. I think, ...the uni is very OK with culture (Aadila).

Another interesting finding was that the goal of becoming an occupational therapist, despite adversities, encouraged students to persist in the courses. In addition, they advocated for others like them within the profession and to work with marginalized communities (additional responsibility aiming to diversify the profession):

what else is it that I can do as being a person of colour, ...to actually help people like myself come into this background where I feel like there's a void and a gap (Aadila).

it will be nice to kind of be a difference into occupational therapy and maybe apply my own thoughts and knowledge, in that sense. Then it's also nice to have someone of your own kind of background to look up to, and I think that's sometimes not always thought about (Beyza).

Beyza expressed that social media was a good space to engage with others, reinforcing belonging in the profession, while Iseul described how events to promote belonging and integration at university were focused on undergraduate students rather than postgraduate. This suggested that options for mature students were perceived as missing. This is shown in the following quotation which refers to university beyond the classroom:

So, I guess if there's something like that where we could maybe share our experiences being the master's student, maybe that could be something that I'd be interested in going and meeting other people. I've never really met other people other than my course. So that could have been an opportunity for me to maybe explore a little bit outside my own circle (Iseul).

Three students (Achiko, Esme and Aadila) expressed that diversity of staff contributed to belonging. It appeared that students such as Achiko, Esme and Aadila benefitted from staff and peers sharing ethnicity and shared racial identity:

there's some stuff which could do with explaining in my own language, and I find comfort in just having peers with the same background as me to do such things. I'm so grateful that this university has got like a mixture of students in the course. I think if I didn't have somebody to relate to, [...], I would have struggled a little bit. I think I'd have struggled a bit more (Achiko).

Representation and role models were also identified as highly important:

I don't want to be the first somebody like me to somebody else [...] I saw Dr Akoni leading the open sessions. And obviously for me that just showed a bit of diversity and it was welcoming to see someone like me, doing the open day (Esme).

A dichotomy was identified by Esme who described her sense of anticipated belonging in seeing diversity on the staff team. Still, she described disappointment when she found herself to be the only Black student in her cohort. She described a possible clash, stating she felt “people get along with people that kind of look like them or behave like them, or listen to what they listen to.” The following quotations reaffirm this idea and suggest that belonging was associated with particular groups.

Seeing Adio (staff) made me feel like I was belonging. We just need more diversity. This is a safe space so how can you tell me that out of 22 students...that means out of 100, there will be 5 people. Do you know how ridiculous that is? (Esme).

I did cry to Kate (staff) ...I felt like an imposter, like I wasn't supposed to be there. Especially being in a class of 23/22 people and being the only Black or person of colour, except from Chandice. She's mixed race, but it's a bit different when you're the only fully Black student in the class. There are times where I feel like, am I even supposed to be here? (Esme).

Furthermore, Charlie, from the beginning did not seek to belong at the institution, as described here:

I just don't seek belonging in institutional places. It would be nice, if I started the course and I was like, “oh, I really feel like a part of something”, then I'd be like, “yeah, I'm open to that”. But I didn't come in expecting that and it didn't happen (Charlie).

This theme highlights the importance and complexity of some barriers to belonging for these students. Despite some structural factors affecting belonging, being in place Charlie did not expect to belong whereas others sought and expected it but were disappointed at the dichotomy between expectations and reality. According to student discourse, there were still possibilities to facilitate belonging through diversity of prospective students, for example, use of social media, and integration at small university events including induction week (mentioned by Beyza) all of which made it possible to consider anti-oppressive approaches.

Theme 2: Navigating between being and doing- “we've done a lot of talking, what are we going to do?”

One student felt that culture needed to be explored more in higher education, and also problematized the term BAME as it took away intersectionality, removing nuances and did not respect diversity and individual experiences. For example, asking if someone is BAME, completely negated the cultural differences. Iseul described feeling hurt that the cultural discourse safety of the classrooms did not meet her needs or facilitate comfortable discussion:

There were discussions about BAME several times, but not particularly from my point of view or anything like that. I was feeling like I was hurt at times, but that has to do with my own personality as well because I'm not a type of person who

would kind of voice myself unless people are interested to hear what I have to say [...] I particularly don't really like the term BAME. I think that's just putting everybody in one basket (Iseul).

Raising awareness through research was acknowledged as an important step to address inequalities and inclusion. Learning with students' lived experiences in higher education also showed the need for concrete actions to overcome those inequalities, thus, discussion was acknowledged to be insufficient:

I feel like we talk about some of these things like you know, racism and all of this inclusiveness and diversity but I think we've done a lot of talking, what are we going to do to kind of put it in practice? (Aadila).

According to Aadila, examples of possibilities for action were listed as engaging students in research about underrepresented populations and considering contemporary issues in teaching. Because these 'doings' were based on students' lived experiences, they could be related to their experiential learning. It also appeared that appreciation and recognition of their cultural background was perceived as positive in enhancing belonging. In addition, Iseul and Esme acknowledged a sense of responsibility for change.

I think coming from a different cultural background is going to be a good advantage for me, to start off, and particularly because I'm going into a white dominant ...profession. I feel like I'm in a good position to maybe challenge stuff, thoughts. Because I have the lived experience of what it's like to be a minor ethnicity in this country. ...And I can promote my own cultural background (Iseul).

I see myself being a strong-willed Black woman working in an industry, trying to big up other girls my age, assuming that I'll be like 25, 23. I want to big up girls that are my age also women or men of colour trying to do what I'm doing (Esme).

Aadila expressed how spending time with North American students helped her to know more about their culture. She also suggested promotion of dialogue and discussion of culture on practice placement would be beneficial since all her educators had been white females. Thus, the following shows the student felt the responsibility was on herself to educate others which may be burdensome.

So, they might have different ideas, and I think for me it was my responsibility as well for me to maybe speak up and educate them a little bit as well (Iseul).

Language issues were raised by Iseul and Achiko, not only regarding English not being their first language but also how communication should be accessible to neurodiverse and students with other needs such as brain fog due to Long Covid. Iseul referred to the importance of tutor support and library sessions to facilitate an optimal experience and help develop academic writing. But, she also referred to not having specific cultural representation on the course, impacting her experience. To have diversity of lecturers with different cultural backgrounds, for example gender, maturity, culture, ethnicity, and other characteristics, was also important to Achiko:

I like that there's quite a diverse range of students...Even within the lecturers and stuff, there's a mixture of all backgrounds and races, which I like (Achiko).

Furthermore, Beyza suggested that opportunities to explore diversity through assessments positively reinforced belonging. Esme recommended that workshops, book recommendations, videos and mentorship were highly valued as important to fostering belonging within the course.

While diversity of staff and students had been addressed in the course, Charlie suggested it was harder to change representation on placement but acknowledged this would change the future workforce landscape. Although this will take time, there are still some initiatives to facilitate decentring the White Western perspective, for example, by including literature beyond White Western Society, as pointed out by Iseul. Moreover, training staff and educators in how to decenter White Eurocentric perspectives could contribute to an improved awareness of cultural humility and its practical application since Charlie reported her perception of the lack of knowledge by placement educators regarding people's lived experiences and cultures. Charlie also expressed the complexity of how diversity was ignored or addressed in teaching, and they explained that culture was mainly discussed with non-white case studies indicating that stereotyping was a risk factor.

I just feel like sometimes it goes between completely being ohh this person's Asian so they must have these essentialized traits or being like we're going to be colourblind and be like they're just a person who's completely neutral. But then the version of neutral is White British (Charlie).

Theme 3: Societal and Institutional Oppression- “Are they even aware?”

This theme represents the discourse that oppression or lack of belonging appeared to manifest with different layers of anticipated and unanticipated problems. In some cases, students were cautiously pleased to find that the University was “OK” with culture; for example, Aadila was pleased to have access to faith spaces.

Although Charlie referred to how the university was perceived to have an inclusive agenda and recognized good intentions, dominating narratives made it difficult to navigate barriers. Charlie, Esme and Beyza referred to dealing with ableism, being silenced by a dominant cisgender perspective, and lack of appreciation for the importance of the inclusive agenda. Indeed, Beyza overheard white students saying “...*why are we going on about culture again?*”. This attitude was also found by Charlie who referred to students “*pushing back against it*”. They stated:

Why is this conversation suddenly about my classmates' insecurities around working with people who use pronouns ... aren't the usual binary like she, he? (Charlie).

Esme described a dichotomy of feeling like “an imposter” but also the importance of accessing staff empathy and support in considering how current societal issues impact her well-being. She, like Iseul, also expressed concern regarding anticipated racism.

Iseul referred to a lack of staff awareness at times of heightened racism during the Covid Pandemic:

And there were times that I was maybe contemplating voicing out some of the points from my background, but nobody had asked me I felt that considering that the hate crime against Asian people was happening right then, why wasn't it mentioned ...? So, I certainly wasn't feeling comfortable. It did cross my mind; did they even know? Are they even aware that that's something that is happening right now? Are they concerned about me because I'm here? (Iseul).

Iseul went on to express concern that they were placed in a service for practice placement that they felt may have presented racist threats from clients. They had concerns they may experience “something offensive” and wondered what would happen. In addition, she was curious about the lack of diversity on placement and sought encouragement from the university to seek explanations from her educator:

...I just wanted to know why. I had an open conversation with my educator, which was really good and funnily enough my educator had never really noticed (Iseul).

Sadly, the oppression of students was evidenced by discourses that show how racism could be institutionalised. Achiko's comment suggests that basic requirements and expectations were not taken for granted:

I had an educator, a white British lady..., very respectful as well and they treated me as a human being. I didn't see any mistreatment because of my race or colour (Achiko).

This theme shows that while students acknowledged the inclusive, anti-oppressive agenda at university, their lived experiences were complex, and belonging was insufficiently addressed institutionally and personally. Experiences at university, on the streets, and practice placement were discussed, showing intersectional multifactorial and complex micro, meso, and macro issues of oppression.

Discussion

Our research aimed to explore the lived experiences of belonging among underrepresented occupational therapy students. The analysis highlighted the intersectional challenges these students faced.

Representation and Belonging

Students highlighted the intersectionality of their identities, with factors such as race, gender identity, religion, culture, and sociopolitical context playing crucial roles in their experiences of belonging. Fernández et al. (2023) supported this by showing that belonging is not just about similarity, but authenticity and acceptance of one's true self. This suggests that for true belonging, institutions need to embrace diverse lived experiences and identities.

Several ways to foster belonging were suggested by the students, including creating social spaces for interaction and offering choices in assignments that reflect underrepresented populations. Small group discussions and inviting guest speakers

knowledgeable about diverse communities were also highlighted as important strategies for inclusion. A study conducted in the United States by Alldridge et al. (2023), with Black occupational therapy students, found that some anti-oppressive strategies, such as media engagement and knowledge-seeking, were linked to education. These analyses align with those reported in our study by Beyza and Aadila, reinforcing the transferability of our results. These suggestions resonate with Ahn and Davis's (2019) findings, which showed that social engagement was key to building a sense of belonging in higher education.

Further, the concept of 'intercultural translations' (Santos, 2014) is relevant here, as it encourages students to critically engage with knowledge from multiple cultural perspectives. This process of decolonizing education can help to address the exclusion of non-Western knowledge and practices, aligning with the goals of occupational therapy education to challenge occupational injustices.

Navigating between Being and Doing

Our study demonstrates that belonging is a multidimensional concept requiring a holistic perspective. A study with 426 students in the UK found that belonging involved not only academic and social engagement but also other domains such as one's living space, geographical location, and personal identity (Ahn & Davis, 2019). In line with this, a 'dialogue' about belonging in higher education, as described by Freire (1970), is essential for enacting change. It is not enough to merely discuss issues of inequity; action is needed to transform the social landscape of education. Occupational therapy, as a health profession, must recognize the importance of addressing inequities not just in healthcare but also in educational spaces. This requires a multifaceted approach at micro, meso, and macro levels to ensure a workforce that reflects the diversity of the people served.

As Aadila noted, addressing issues of belonging requires more than discussion—it requires implementing practical, structural changes and engaging in research can be one way to advocate for change. Similar strategies regarding research focused on injustices were identified in previous research conducted in Brazil with Black students (Valerio et al., 2021). Freire (1970) argued that those in positions of power, the 'oppressors,' must engage in revolutionary actions to dismantle the status quo of inequality. Similarly, Hocking (2017) suggested that since human beings create injustices, they have the power to reverse them through intentional, collective action. Based on participants' discourse, it appears that engagement in collective action—through social interactions, critical reflection, and problem-solving—contributes to students' sense of belonging. This process of "doing and belonging" aligns with Freire's (1970) idea of humanization, where true belonging and knowledge emerge through collaboration and the pursuit of shared goals. As the participants in this study demonstrated, the act of connecting with others and questioning inequities in education and healthcare can be transformative for both students and the profession. But, this research shows additional praxis is urgently required.

Societal and Institutional Oppression

Despite various positive actions aimed at creating a culture of belonging, such as those proposed by Allen et al. (2024), students still experienced the effects of systemic oppression. Freire's (1970) concept of "pedagogical oppression" is relevant here, where students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, are marginalized through cycles of exclusion. This aligns with concerns about academic engagement and motivation as described by Allen et al. (2024), and reflects students' internalized oppression, such as feelings of impostor syndrome, where they feel unworthy of being in the occupational therapy program. For instance, Esme's experience reflects Freire's (1970) idea of internalized oppression, where oppressed individuals adopt negative perceptions about their abilities. These feelings of inadequacy are compounded by the absence of a truly diverse staff body, which Achiko highlighted as an important factor in fostering a sense of belonging. These analyses support Bush's (2020) assertion that diversity within staff is vital for student well-being.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of our study was the thick description of our methods, and the similarities between our analysis and previous studies suggest some, although limited transferability to similar settings, enhancing the study's credibility (Ahmed, 2024). A limitation is that our participants were only from occupational therapy courses, which may restrict transferability to other professions. We also acknowledge the subjectivities and positionalities we brought to the study, which were managed through reflexive discussions, diaries, and a sensitive data generation process. Our collaborative approach to RTA strengthened the study's trustworthiness and reduced bias through peer debriefing (Ahmed, 2024). A further limitation is the lack of student involvement in the research design, which may have perpetuated a power imbalance. However, we took steps to ensure participants felt comfortable, were able to provide authentic responses, and endeavoured to ensure their voices were audible.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Our analysis emphasized the importance of representation, inclusive educational practices, and the need for a multifaceted approach to promote belonging among underrepresented students in occupational therapy. This research aligns with the Occupational Perspective of Health framework (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015), which emphasizes that doing, being, belonging, and becoming are interconnected in the context of occupational therapy education and that this is a matter of occupational justice. By creating inclusive spaces that embrace diverse identities and experiences, educational institutions can foster a culture of belonging that benefits students, the profession and society.

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists' position on educational research emphasizes anti-oppressive approaches, equity, and occupational justice (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2021). Marginalization can be seen as a form of oppression, where dominant groups maintain the status quo, as outlined in Freire's (1970) theory, which impacts students' sense of belonging and their relationships with others and places.

It is also important to define anti-oppression (having defined oppression above). In higher education, anti-oppression refers to dismantling systemic ways of oppression by recognising and tackling issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of marginalisation and its roots have an extensive history with the work of Freire (Pooley & Beagan, 2021). Several strategies and layers can illustrate anti-oppressive approaches. Anti-oppressive pedagogies can facilitate reflection on and challenges to power relationships (Zinga & Styres, 2019). Likewise, revising curriculum design, continued critical reflections, students' support, advocacy, and collaborative actions are other examples of initiatives which foster belonging.

Conclusion

Our research explored the sense of belonging among occupational therapy students in the UK, revealing that belonging is shaped by both individual perspectives, societal and institutional systemic inequities in education. The analysis highlighted issues of lack of representation, recognition of diversity. Despite difficulties, students demonstrated a strong sense of agency, seeking to reshape the occupational therapy profession to better support people like themselves. Key initiatives for fostering belonging included diverse curriculum content, assignment choices, staff diversity, and social university events. The study calls for concrete actions and future research to enhance student belonging and well-being.

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