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Student Perspectives of the Occupational Therapy Doctoral Experience in an Academic Setting

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Abstract

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Student Perspectives of the Occupational Therapy

Doctoral Experience in an Academic Setting

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to gather student perspectives of the 16-week doctoral experiential component (DEC) of the entry-level doctor of occupational therapy educational curriculum from students who completed the DEC in an academic setting. A retrospective qualitative study of a focus group of five students who completed the DEC in an occupational therapy (OT) academic setting was conducted using semi-structured interview questions. Codes were grouped into themes and the findings were summarized. Four major themes emerged: 1) *learning experiences*; 2) *purposeful ambiguity*; 3) *knowledge and skill development*; and 4) *newfound appreciation*. *Learning experiences* included both the academic and other experiences during the DEC. *Purposeful ambiguity* encompassed opportunities the students had navigating experiences that do not have one solution. *Knowledge and skill development* included both the skills needed for the DEC and skills gained after the DEC. The final theme of *newfound appreciation* described how the DEC students expressed their new view of academia and their appreciation of having strong mentorship during this experience to help guide them into becoming a better academician. This study adds to the body of knowledge in OT education by providing a general framework of experiences that can be included in a doctoral experience in an academic setting and displays the benefits of the DEC as one method of preparing future OT educators.

BACKGROUND
In August 2017, the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) mandated the occupational therapy doctoral degree (OTD) as the single point of entry for the profession by July 1, 2027 (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2017). This mandate came from much discussion and consideration for many years with positions both for and against this shift, and with some universities already moving

forward in the transition to an entry-level doctoral program (Brown, Crabtree, Mu, & Wells, 2015). In July 2018, AOTA passed a resolution that the mandate be placed in abeyance due to the concerns from stakeholders (AOTA, 2018). In September 2018, ACOTE accepted AOTA's abeyance of the 2027 doctoral mandate to allow time for further dialogue of concerns related to the mandate (AOTA, 2018). A major concern with this shift is the process that many occupational therapy (OT) institutions must navigate to transition the curriculum from the master to doctoral level. Many program directors indicated that their institutions are not ready to transition to a doctoral level program due to lack of resources such as prepared faculty, institutional support, and institutional classification (Griffiths & Padilla, 2006). The lack of prepared faculty refers to the limited amount of faculty with doctoral degrees, while the lack of institutional support refers to the limited amount of funds available for the universities to create a new doctoral program. With this mandate, OT programs must address these barriers in order to transition from master to doctoral level.

Concern over the lack of prepared faculty for new doctoral programs has surfaced many times in the literature. Griffiths and Padilla (2006) conducted a survey with OT program directors concerning the possibility of transitioning to doctoral level curriculum, and many directors identified the lack of faculty with doctoral degrees as a barrier. The 2018 ACOTE standards, effective July 2020, state that faculty for the OTD degree must have a minimum of a doctoral degree, but the degree is not limited to a doctoral degree in OT, and at least 50% of full-time faculty must have a post-professional degree (ACOTE, 2018).

In general, the profession is experiencing a faculty shortage (Murray, Stanley, & Wright, 2014). In 2008, AOTA created an ad hoc committee to explore this impending faculty shortage. At that time, the committee found a vacancy rate of 8% among full time faculty members, which was expected to increase due to senior faculty approaching retirement (AOTA Ad Hoc Committee, 2008). The committee also found the average faculty member entered academia about 10-12 years following graduation (AOTA Ad Hoc Committee, 2008). This finding suggests that even as there is an increase in OTD graduates, there may still be a delay before those interested in teaching enter OT educator roles. The committee recommended the profession foster students who have interest in pursuing careers in OT education and provide learning opportunities to better prepare them to enter academia sooner after graduation (AOTA Ad Hoc Committee, 2008).

In addition to the faculty shortage, differences between the master's and doctoral educational standards present another challenge in the transition to doctoral level. One of the main differences between master and doctoral educational standards is the proposed 14-week (560 hour) doctoral capstone (ACOTE, 2018). The current educational standard for this experience is called a doctoral experiential component (DEC) and is 16 weeks in duration. The proposed doctoral capstone consists of a capstone experience and capstone project. The aim of this capstone is to provide an in-depth experience in one or more of the following areas: clinical practice skills, research skills, administration, leadership, program and policy development, advocacy,

education, or theory development (ACOTE, 2018). ACOTE describes the general guidelines of the capstone in the 2018 accreditation standards document, but there is much room for individualization due to the nature of this experience. The individualized nature of the capstone experience may pose difficulties for schools creating these experiences for the first time.

One area in which a student can complete a doctoral capstone is in OT education. This type of capstone experience may prepare students who are interested in OT education to become more confident and gain experience in academia. In this type of capstone, students will have experiences in the responsibilities of working in OT academia, which could include teaching, course preparation, and interacting with students. This may influence these students to enter careers in education and assist in reducing the impending faculty shortage. This is an area in the doctoral level curriculum where the AOTA ad hoc committee's recommendations for fostering students who are interested in pursuing a career in OT education could be addressed. However, since the entry-level OTD degree is relatively new, there is limited literature on doctoral capstones, much less on the specific doctoral capstone in education.

The purpose of this study was to gather student perspectives of the DEC (or capstone) when completed in an academic setting. The term DEC is used in this paper to refer to this experience as the student participants completed their DEC under the 2011 ACOTE standards and language. These student perceptions can assist in gaining a better understanding about DEC activities, successes and challenges, recommendations for DEC improvements, and how the DEC has influenced their outlook on pursuing a career in OT education. Additionally, it will add to the body of OT education literature by providing a general framework for the future DEC in an academic setting to assist OT programs as they transition to the entry-level OTD degree. This study is especially relevant at this time due to the transition to the OTD degree and impending faculty shortage in order to gain insight on an aspect of the OTD curriculum that can be used to prepare students for future roles in OT education.

METHOD

Study Design
This study was a retrospective, descriptive qualitative study of a focus group of students who completed their DEC in an OT academic setting. The focus group was conducted for program evaluation of the DEC using semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix). The principal investigator (PI) developed and refined the interview questions based on discussions with other faculty and with graduate students in an education research laboratory within the program. The PI was also the assistant director of the entry-level doctoral program overseeing the DEC. A focus group was utilized because it explicitly uses the group interaction as a part of the method. This allowed for more exploration and clarification of views that would be less accessible through a one to one interview (Kitzinger, 1995). Participants were encouraged to talk to each other, ask questions, and comment on each other's experiences and views. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants were entry-level OTD students from a Midwestern university who were completing their DEC in an academic setting. Students in this program collaborated with a faculty mentor to design their DEC to relate to their professional career goals and to locate suitable settings in which to carry out the experience. After the student and mentor secured a site for the DEC experience, each student collaborated with the faculty mentor and the onsite mentor to develop specific goals to work toward during the experience as well as activities that addressed the stated goals (in some cases, students who completed the DEC at their "home" university may have had one mentor serving as both their faculty mentor and onsite mentor.) All students from one cohort who were completing the DEC in an academic setting were invited to the focus group for DEC program evaluation through electronic communication by the PI. Participants were given the option of attending the focus group either in-person or electronically, as the potential participants were completing the experience in several different academic settings across the region. Three participants joined electronically, and two participants joined in-person for one focus group meeting.

Data Collection

The focus group was held once for one and one-half hours. The PI facilitated the semi-structured interview questions. The questions were aimed at gaining information about DEC activities, successes and challenges, recommendations for DEC improvements, and how the DEC influenced the student's outlook on pursuing a future career in OT education.

Data Analysis

The focus group was transcribed verbatim and de-identified by the research assistant. The focus group recording was destroyed after it was transcribed and de-identified to maintain the participants' anonymity. The transcription was read and re-read by the PI and research assistant for familiarization purposes. The two researchers individually read the transcription, and hand-coded the focus group (no data analysis software was used). A codebook was created to define the 230 emerging codes. Following discussion and refinement of the code definitions created by the researchers, data was re-coded to combine codes that were representing the same ideas. Researchers then met to review the 123 refined codes and discuss potential themes emerging from the codes. The research assistant then grouped codes into the themes. The researchers met a final time to discuss the codes and finalize into 4 themes and 15 subthemes.

Study Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to increase trustworthiness of the study. Two researchers coded the data. This brought two perspectives to the data analysis and interpretation, which increases rigor (Saldaña, 2013). The researchers' codes were compared and were found to have a 90% intercoder agreement. Additionally, the researchers consulted a third researcher with experience in qualitative research on the data analysis process. Finally, the researchers used member checking with one participant of the study. The participant agreed with the statements and conclusions found in this study.

RESULTS

Four main themes emerged from the data: 1) *learning experiences*; 2) *purposeful ambiguity*; 3) *knowledge and skill development*; and 4) *newfound appreciation*. Each theme contains several subthemes, which are described below and supported by participant quotes. See Table 1 for the list of themes, subthemes, and additional exemplar quotes. The acknowledgement that OT educators balance multiple roles and responsibilities was recurrent and therefore is recurrent across multiple themes.
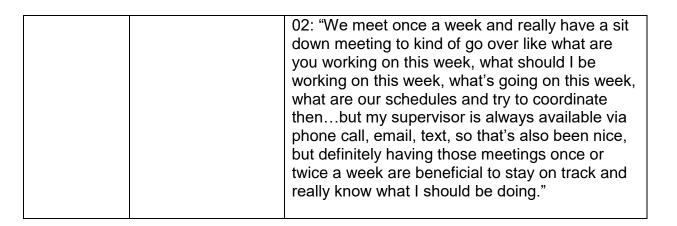
Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Thematic Exemplars

Theme	Subtheme	Exemplars listed by participant number
Learning experiences	Academic experiences	05: "I'm in charge of teaching all the stats labs sections…any of the assignments and grading involved. We really took a lot of material from last year and did an overhaul on it and so I assisted in steering a lot of that in regards to the stats assignments." 03: "I also on Fridays helped out with their pediatric lab course…help grade practicals, grade assignments, and create lectures and lab assignments…"
	Additional experiences	04: "I do the wheelchair and seating evaluations. I do all the documentation with that." 02: "I'm also helping to create a rehab science and technology program within the university."
	Interactions with students	05: "There was one student that would come to my office hours pretty consistently and just came in very prepared, and like at about week 3 or week 4, she was like, 'Ok, I think I'm actually finally starting to get there!' and I'm like, 'Yes!'" 03: "One [student] had a little bit more challenging of an experience and so really being able to work with her and bring her skillset up and really seeing the changes in her skillset and seeing that ah-ha moment for her where it did click towards the end…to get that experience was awesome and to see her actually get it and know she got it and it clicked was cool."

Purposeful ambiguity	Flexibility	04: "I was open to all and any opportunities that arises so they kind of thrown everything at me." 01: "The flexibility of the openness for me as the doctorate student to kind of participate in any domain of the school has been really fortunate because every day it could potentially be something different."
	Academia as unknown	01: "It's been a really great experience going everywhere in the school because everything is completely changing, and I know that is going to happen in a lot of schools in the future." 01: "…learning their curriculum and their syllabi and going through the assignments that the students are doing and then pushing those forward in to like the next era of OT and how everything is changing."
	Expectations	02: "I've kind of learned, talking to multiple peers, that for the DEC it's just hard to know exactly what you're walking into, so I just kind of went to a university hoping to get some teaching experience, some program development experience, and I've gotten that and so much more." 04: "I was given a lot of responsibilities that I didn't expect to have, but I've liked."
	Independent experience	02: "You're going to have to be independent. You're going to have to work independently at most of these DEC experiences…you're going to have to go from like being told what to do at a 12 week fieldwork site: inpatient, outpatient, acute care, to really learning how to kind of slow down and be an independent worker and just kind of set goals for yourself, set deadlines for yourself." 03: "It's very much an independent experience and since it is a variety and very unique to yourself, and very individualized, it's very important for you to be able to work on your own as well as being able to communicate clearly with your supervisor or supervisors to make sure

		that you're on the same page with them at all times and you are getting what you need out of the experience."
Knowledge and skill development	Preparation for the DEC a. Academic preparation	04: "Definitely having that whole semester of TA experience made me feel a whole lot more comfortable speaking in front of students." 02: "But I think having that TA component was huge because [university] does not have a TA component, I'm not really sure if they have any teaching opportunities."
	b. Preparation suggestions	04: "I can't remember if we had any sort of opportunities where we taught each other like OT coursework, but I think that could be something that could be beneficial." 05: "I think maybe there could be some potential improvements in the teaching course, maybe to tie it a little more with the TA experience."
	Preparation for the future a. Soft skills	03: "We don't have to be the expert, I feel like when we are still trying to build this experience, your first instinct is to feel like you need to be the expert, so getting comfortable knowing that that's still not the case and navigating those waters was challenging, but a great experience as well." 04: "It's been interesting to work with [mentor], but also [3 different occupational therapists], plus I think I said [faculty member] already…everyone has their own personality. [Mentor] is very laid back, but then [faculty member], she's very like, everything is very precise. It's been kind of interesting working with like the opposite ends of the spectrum."
	b. Future plans	05: "I think I am really interested in teaching now...if I hadn't been on this DEC, I don't think I

		would have even known exactly what I didn't know about teaching."
		03: "Having the teaching component through the DEC it's kind of like [another participant] said, it makes me a little bit more comfortable and I feel like I'll be a bit more prepared for full on teaching if that opportunity arises a couple years from now."
	c. Experiential learning	04: "[Mentor] refers to me as her 'right hand.' So, it's like I've essentially done everything she's done."
		03: "It's been a very hands-on experience and a lot more hands-on than I expected it to be in terms of direct teaching, but it's been a great learning opportunity."
Newfound appreciation	Complexity	05: "I have been able to see both the bigger picture and the nitty gritty day to day things. I realized exactly how much is involved in the teaching process…there's a whole different set of considerations that you're making that I didn't quite realize."
		03: "I really have had the opportunity to jump in and really directly teach as well as see the process kind of in the background as well, in terms of the systematic methodology that really goes into creating the curriculum."
	Hard work	03: "I have really realized how hard teaching is in terms of especially trying to appeal to a variety of students that come from a variety of backgrounds, what works for some will not work for others."
		04: "For me, doing the clinical stuff as well as the teaching, it was kind of overwhelming how much work it was."
	Mentorship	01: "With [mentor] and I working in an office right next to his office, if there ever was an instance where I have an immediate question, I feel comfortable enough to go and ask him."

		02: "We meet once a week and really have a sit down meeting to kind of go over like what are you working on this week, what should I be working on this week, what's going on this week, what are our schedules and try to coordinate then…but my supervisor is always available via phone call, email, text, so that's also been nice, but definitely having those meetings once or twice a week are beneficial to stay on track and really know what I should be doing."

Learning Experiences

The theme of learning experiences included the range of tasks in which students engaged at each of their respective academic settings. Three categories of learning experiences emerged: 1) *academic experiences*; 2) *additional experiences*; and 3) *interactions with students*.

Academic experiences. The learning experiences in this subtheme related to the academic duties within the DEC. Every participant had responsibilities related to course preparation and development, including creating and grading assignments, lectures, quizzes, and exams. Every participant had an opportunity to teach directly in some capacity. Two of five participants were in charge of teaching weekly lab sections. Two participants were able to give a guest lecture and one participant was a small group facilitator for a course. Two participants attended professional development workshops in relation to teaching and learning and reported back to their DEC mentors how to incorporate what they learned into their courses. One participant's main responsibility was curriculum development to help the university transition the curriculum from master to doctoral level. The participant stated, "I've been studying and basically living in the AOTA standards for a very long time and I've been creating course objectives and creating a mock 4-year plan for students…it's been a lot of determining how best to incorporate the AOTA standards into hypothesized curriculum that the school is trying to revamp and build."

Additional experiences. Even though these students completed a DEC in an academic setting, every participant had additional responsibilities that may not have directly related to traditional academic duties. Three of five participants had various research responsibilities. One participant was in charge of supervising Fieldwork I students in an emerging area of practice. Three participants had clinical responsibilities, including two participants helping with evaluations and documentations at seating and mobility clinics. One participant was involved in program development. This participant stated, "I am also helping to create a rehabilitation science and technology program by having meetings with different educators and people within the university."

Interactions with students. When asked about the most enjoyable part of their academic responsibilities, four participants mentioned the aspect of interacting and working with the students. They each discussed the enjoyment of having the students feel comfortable enough to reach out to them for advice or having opportunities to share their clinical experiences. One participant described an interaction with a student, "That was a really good feeling was like knowing that I actually have gained a skillset in that area and also knowing the fourth [statistics student] was like, 'I heard it through the grapevine that you're really helpful with this. Can we meet up?'…So that's cool…going back to students feeling comfortable reaching out to you and being able to seek help." Additionally, three out of five participants described that their meaningful experiences on their DEC involved helping students overcome challenges in the material and improving their knowledge and skill.

Purposeful Ambiguity
The theme of purposeful ambiguity described experiences in which students had to navigate experiences that did not necessarily have one solution (Fortune, Ryan, & Adamson, 2013). Purposeful ambiguity is fostered when students are able to take the lead, influence outcomes, and work in unknown environments (Fortune et al., 2013). These experiences facilitate problem-solving, critical thinking, and refinement of the soft skills needed to work in a professional environment. The four subthemes under purposeful ambiguity included: (1) *flexibility*, (2) *academia as unknown*, (3) *expectations*, and (4) *independent experience*.

Flexibility. All of the participants addressed the need to be flexible in terms of being open to any opportunities that may arise during the DEC to take advantage of the many learning experiences. Two participants described the flexibility in responsibilities and how their mentors provided opportunities for input and collaboration in designing their learning experience. Two participants described the flexibility in the workday in terms of participating in any domain of the school, creating their own schedule, and making accommodations to work with various student and faculty schedules. One participant described, "You just have to be flexible and it's like I could be fully immersed in the work that I'm doing, but then something comes up and they need my help doing something or need my assistance reading something."

Academia as unknown. This subtheme encompassed the ambiguous nature of academia, both in regard to the DEC students not knowing everything involved in academia and in course and curriculum development due to changes to the profession's entry-level degree. The participants had to learn to navigate the unknown environment of academia and tackle complex tasks, such as course and curriculum development. Every participant had responsibilities in course preparation and development. One participant stated, "I think that if I hadn't been on this DEC, I don't think I would have even known exactly what I didn't know about teaching either." One participant was immersed in curriculum development for a university that was transitioning from master to doctoral level. The participant stated, "I think it was hard at first because [the mentor] knows I am a person who, at the end of a project, likes to have an end product. I like to be able to show something that I did and there will probably not be anything set in stone

because this is a year-long, on-going process developing an entire curriculum for a school." This quote demonstrates the change in structure of clear expectations of class projects versus the ambiguous nature of projects in the professional environment.

Expectations. Every participant agreed there was some degree of unknown about what the DEC would involve. One participant thought that it would be similar to the teaching assistant (TA) responsibilities that they had at their home university. Two participants, as stated in the *flexibility* subtheme, were able to collaborate on the expectations with their mentors. One participant described the expectations conversation with their mentor as: "[Mentor] said, 'What do you want to get out of this because this is the opportunity for you to be really immersed in education and curriculum because everything here is changing within the next couple of years.'" Another participant expressed that they encountered many unexpected responsibilities and sometimes spontaneous responsibilities.

Independent experience. Three participants explicitly stated that the DEC was an independent, self-directed experience. Participants had weekly meetings with their mentors, but much of how they spent their time was self-directed. One participant stressed the importance of being able to set goals and deadlines. Another participant emphasized the importance of clear communication with their mentor to make sure they were on the same page in terms of responsibilities. One participant also explained how the DEC was an independent experience due to the individualized and unique nature of this component of the curriculum. The participants noted the lack of communication between each other and the lack of knowing where their classmates were completing their DECs. One participant stated, "I honestly had no idea what all of you were doing or what everyone else was doing."

Knowledge and Skill Development
Two categories emerged from the data regarding knowledge and skill development including: (1) *preparation for the DEC* and (2) *preparation for the future*.

Preparation for the DEC. Subthemes under *preparation for the DEC* included the academic preparation that was useful to the DEC students and the preparation suggestions the DEC students would have liked.

a. *Academic preparation.* All participants stressed the benefit of the TA course requirement at their home university as preparation for the DEC. One participant stated, "I learned so much from different styles of teaching, from different course requirements, different types of writing tests and practicals, and I just think that the fact that we have that opportunity [the TA experience] … we're lucky to have had that." Another participant described the usefulness of both the TA experience and a seminar course in teaching.

b. *Preparation suggestions.* Two participants suggested improvements to the teaching seminar course. Suggestions included the incorporation of more peer teaching and a clearer relationship between class assignments and the TA

experience. All participants suggested making the OT program track placements available to students, so they could reach out to each other and so that future students could learn about the range of settings available. One participant stated, "I think it would be cool to have a spreadsheet that says, 'Hey, this is where [classmate] is, this is where [classmate] is, this is where [classmate] is' and I think that would be interesting or even like some sheet that organizes like, 'Hey, you eight are all in education or you six are all in an acute care setting.'"

Preparation for the future. Subthemes under *preparation for the future* included development in soft skills, influence on future career plans, and experiential learning.

a. ***Soft skills.*** Research has shown that professionals not only need the technical skills required to perform work tasks, but perhaps even more importantly, they need soft skills to be successful in the work environment. Fortune et al. (2013), described soft skills as a combination of interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and character traits. Some examples of soft skills include the ability to act independently, organize time and duties, communicate effectively, and manage conflict (Fortune et al. 2013). The DEC students described experiences that illustrate the development of soft skills needed for the professional workplace. Two participants described the time divide and learning to juggle multiple competing responsibilities as an educator, such as dividing time between academic duties, research, or clinical duties. One noted the challenge of coming to terms with knowing she did not have to be the expert. Two participants described the challenge of learning to work with multiple supervisors with various personalities and working styles. Finally, one participant described acclimating to the pace of academia versus the pace of a clinical placement.

b. ***Future plans***. All participants expressed that the DEC had a positive influence on their future career path for pursuing some aspect of education. One participant said it strengthened interest in becoming a clinical supervisor in the future. One participant is now considering pursing a PhD. Another participant did not have a strong interest in teaching prior to this experience, but now has a new interest in working in academia in the future. Two participants described how they feel more comfortable with the possibility of teaching due to the skills and experiences provided through the DEC in an academic setting. One stated, "If I had somehow ended up in a teaching position [in the future without having DEC], I would have been so overwhelmed. I would have had no idea what I was doing and I'm sure if I pursue teaching that will still happen, but I'll have a couple more skills under my belt and will be a little more familiar with things and will at least be able to recognize that this might be hard right now, but I'll get it. So, I think it has given me a lot of important skills involving the challenges of teaching."

c. ***Experiential learning***. Completing the DEC in an academic setting is learning by doing. Every participant was involved in hands-on responsibilities as described in the *experiences* theme. In particular, two participants learned by shadowing their mentors all day, every day and being their second set of hands. Another

participant expressed the hands-on nature of the experience and the amount of opportunities for direct teaching.

Newfound Appreciation
The theme of newfound appreciation encompassed the participants' expressions of new realizations and gratitude of everything involved in academia and in the DEC experience. This final major theme was categorized into three subthemes including, (1) *complexity*, (2) *hard work*, and (3) *mentorship*.

Complexity. All participants addressed the realization of the complexities of academia and all that goes into the educational process. Two touched upon the enjoyment of seeing both the day-to-day tasks, but also the big picture and background work that goes into creating courses and curricula. Participants frequently stated they had a new appreciation for education and the many considerations involved in course development. One participant stated, "It's very eye-opening to see… it's a game of balance really, in terms of knowing throughout the process of designing curriculum and coursework and knowing what to include, how to include it, and how to get it across. It's so complicated and it takes a lot of work and so it made me a lot more appreciative of the whole educational process and the work that goes into it." Two participants also talked about experiencing the administrative, political, and methodologic aspects that are included in education.

Hard work. Along with complexity, all participants discussed the hard work of academia. They described that it was hard due to the extensive background work, as described in the *complexity* subtheme. One participant stated, "You see how tedious and how hard it is to develop an entire class that meets the standards." Two participants talked about how difficult it was leading a course, taking responsibility, and teaching subject matter in which they did not feel fully competent. One participant talked about the hard work of balancing academic duties with clinical duties and the variabilities in workload per week.

Mentorship. The final subtheme was the ability to learn from a mentor. Four participants described the usefulness of having scheduled weekly meetings with their mentors in order to make sure they were working in agreement with each other. One participant was with his mentor all day and so communicating with the mentor was more organic. One participant appreciated how the mentor would model how she would teach a lab section, and then allow the DEC student to teach the other sections. Two participants were with their mentors all day and were able to learn by being an extension of the mentor. One participant was involved in a small book club and informal professional development meeting with another DEC student and the mentors once per week. One participant stated, "I feel like it's been so valuable to be able to have had mentorship through my teaching component to be able to have a mentor sit there and give you feedback and give you advice on their experience, what they've done, what you're doing, how you're doing it, how you can change, has been really so valuable to learning how to be an effective teacher."

DISCUSSION

In light of the current atmosphere in the OT profession concerning a possible transition to an entry-level doctoral degree and the faculty shortage in the profession, there is need for research involving OTD curriculum, especially in relation to preparing future educators. This study sought to gain the perceptions of OTD students who were completing a DEC in an OT academic setting. The findings of the study provided insight on what experiences can be involved in a DEC and how these experiences provided opportunities for the students to develop skills for future roles in professional education.

Learning Experiences

The findings under the *learning experiences* theme revealed that each student had a mix of responsibilities. Each had been assigned academic duties, which included grading and creating tests, assignments, quizzes, and lectures. All participants were able to directly teach and be involved in course development. These findings provide examples of responsibilities and opportunities that can be offered to students in a DEC in an academic setting. Additionally, all the participants were balancing other responsibilities, such as research, clinical duties, and program development. These additional learning experiences exposed the participants to the many roles educators must balance on top of the academic work and provide experience in learning to manage multiple competing priorities. In 2009, AOTA articulated the desired attributes of future OT educators. These included traits such as being an innovator, scholar, leader, integrator, and mentor (AOTA, 2009). For example, an innovator is someone who embraces new directions and thinks outside of the traditional boundaries (AOTA, 2009). By providing a variety of learning experiences in the DEC, the students are allowed to grow in all aspects of being an OT educator. For instance, the students can grow in their leadership skills by having experiences where they take more responsibilities in leading a weekly lab or they can grow in their integrator skills by having opportunities to seek out new information and make connections across fields as they would in program development. Faculty advisors and onsite mentors should consider developing a variety of learning experiences that will expose students to aspects of academic education they have not yet experienced as a student. This may include a combination of academic and other experiences.

Purposeful Ambiguity

Another theme that emerged from the focus group was *purposeful ambiguity*. These experiences facilitated problem-solving, critical thinking, and refinement of the soft skills needed to work in a professional environment. As discussed by Fortune et al. (2013), *flexibility* is an important quality to foster in students before entering the workforce, where they will need to be able to adjust to the various demands and tasks that are inherent in a dynamic work environment. Another subtheme was *academia as unknown,* which included the unknown future of the profession, creating new curriculum, and in general, how the scope of academia was unknown to the students prior to this experience. Again, as previously discussed by Fortune et al. (2013), navigating an unknown environment is a key skill to develop early in a professional career because it leads the student to explore various options, problem-solve, make decisions, take the lead, and develop the skills necessary to be an independent professional. The

participants also discussed the nature of the DEC as an *independent experience*. This is beneficial for participants as they transition to the professional workplace and are required to make independent decisions about their work and about their career path. These experiences illustrate the usefulness of the DEC's purposefully ambiguous nature for fostering professional growth and soft skills needed to transition from student to entry-level professional. Educators who are designing future doctoral experiences may consider incorporating purposefully ambiguous experiences to assist students in developing the ability to manage the unknown in future practice as a professional.

Knowledge and Skill Development
The third major theme that emerged was *knowledge and skill development*. This theme included the experiences that prepared the students for this type of experience and the preparation suggestions that the students would have liked to have had before the DEC. All the participants agreed that the TA experience during their graduate education was extremely beneficial to exposing them to the various academic responsibilities and professional communication with supervising professors. As more OT programs transition to the doctoral level, consideration may be given to the value of teaching assistantships as a required or optional part of the educational curricula.
Additionally, this theme included the knowledge and skill gained while on the DEC. The DEC allowed for many experiential learning opportunities, meaning the participants were able to learn by being directly involved in activities. Research has shown that hands-on learning helps with the retention of new knowledge and skills, while promoting clinical reasoning and competence in skills (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2013). Through these experiences, the participants were able to grow not only in their technical skills, but also those soft skills that are necessary for being successful in a complex workplace; such as managing stress, problem-solving, being self-directed, and coping with an unknown or changing environment (Fortune et al., 2013). Doctoral experiences allow students the opportunity to grow in soft skills, which are encompassed in the desired traits of an academic educator. Experiential learning is an essential element of the DEC; OT educators designing doctoral experiences in academic settings should purposefully maximize the amount of hands-on learning offered in the experience.

Finally, all participants described how the DEC positively influenced them in pursuing a future career in academia, in some capacity. The findings are important because they reveal that the DEC in an academic setting had a positive influence on whether students have interest in pursuing a career in academia in the future. This demonstrates how the DEC in an academic setting can be an important aspect of preparing future educators and can be a valuable tool occupational therapy academic programs can use to address the shortage of academic educators in the profession.

Newfound Appreciation
The last major theme was *newfound appreciation*, with subthemes of *complexity*, *hard work*, and *mentorship*. This theme was a new finding; previous research specifically aimed at student attitudes after completing a DEC in an academic setting was not found in the literature. All of the participants expressed that the DEC revealed the complexities and hard work that goes into OT academic education. They experienced both the day to

day work, as well as the broader work of course and curriculum development. The participants experienced the challenges of balancing the many responsibilities that professors have, including academic, research, service, and/or clinical duties. They agreed that after the experience they had a new appreciation and humility about academic education at the graduate level. Lastly, the participants expressed the appreciation they had for mentorship while on this experience. They described how beneficial it was to have a mentor who facilitated hands-on experiences, while also providing guidance and advice to better prepare them for future roles as educators. This subtheme agrees with the literature, in that supervision has been found to increase new graduate confidence and perceptions of competence in practice (Melman, Ashby, & James, 2016; Robertson & Griffiths, 2009). This theme suggests the importance of a DEC in an academic setting for students interested in pursuing a career in academia, by exposing them to the complexities and hard work that go into education they may not have known about beforehand. Additionally, the perceptions suggest the importance of having a mentor to guide and foster skills needed for a role in academia.

Limitations and Future Research
The study provided insight into experiences and perceptions of the DEC in an OT academic setting, however, a limitation of this study was the small sample size and the lack of diversity due to all the participants graduating from one program. This was a retrospective qualitative study, originally intended for program evaluation, which involved only five OTD students who were completing their 16-week doctoral experience in an academic setting. The students completed their DEC in a variety of institutions. Additionally, the focus group was conducted by the assistant program director, which could have influenced the participants to reflect more positively about their educational experience. Future research could involve a larger sample of OTD students from several OT programs and graduation years. This would allow further insight into how doctoral experiences compare across academic programs. Further research may explore how the DEC in an academic setting has affected students' outcomes in the professional workplace. Additionally, research could evaluate whether students who complete academic DECs are gaining desired attributes of future occupational therapy educators (AOTA, 2009) or pursuing careers as academic educators.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice
The current OT faculty shortage combined with the possible transition to the entry-level doctoral degree demands more emphasis on training future OT educators. The DEC is one place in the doctoral curriculum in which to accomplish this because it provides opportunities for purposefully ambiguous, hands-on experiences for students to grow in both the technical and soft skills needed for working in an academic environment. This study provides a general framework of opportunities and responsibilities that can be provided in a DEC in an academic setting, which will be beneficial for universities who are creating OTD curriculum for the first time. The study highlights the importance of allowing students more independence and hands-on experiences, while also providing valuable mentorship to increase students' confidence and perceptions of competence for future professional roles.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to gain the perceptions of a cohort of OTD students who completed their 16-week DEC in an academic setting. It sought to understand a component of OT doctoral education as programs may transition from Master's to doctoral level. Additionally, the focus was in academia, which led to insight on how the profession is preparing students who are interested in pursuing a career in OT education. The findings highlight the experiences that can be included in a DEC in an academic setting and demonstrate the importance of purposefully ambiguous, experiential learning experiences in the development and growth in both technical and soft skills needed for the professional workplace. Additionally, the findings suggest the importance of mentorship during the experience to facilitate growth and development of student skills for future professional roles. Finally, the findings revealed suggestions for improvement in OTD DEC curriculum, including having more opportunities for teaching experience for students interested in pursuing a career in academia and opportunities for interaction and collaboration between students completing similar experiences. The findings from this study give beginning insights into an important aspect of the OTD curriculum and a way to prepare students interested in OT academia.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Focus Group Questions

- Describe where your experience was located and provide a brief description of your responsibilities specific to academic education.
- What were your expectations going into this experience? Did the experience match your expectations?
- How did you negotiate or at what point in your DEC did you discuss with your mentor the expectations around specific tasks that you were doing for teaching?
- What did you like most about your DEC as it relates to the teaching activities in which you participated?
- What did you dislike most about your DEC as it relates to the teaching activities in which you participated?
- How do you feel [university] prepared you to do a DEC experience specifically related to teaching?
- Are there things that we can do better to help you prepare for your DEC experience in an academic setting?
- How did you communicate with your mentor?
- How was your relationship with your mentor? What worked well and what didn't work well?
- How often did you meet with them?
- What would you recommend to future students in an academic setting of what they should look for in a mentor?
- How much did you all communicate with each other and should we be thinking about that more intentionally?
- Did you have any "ah-ha moments" or situations where you felt like you made a significant contribution to the teaching and learning process?
- How do you think this will influence your career path?
- If you did not have this DEC experience in a teaching setting would you still be as excited or thinking about a career in academia without it?