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This paper depicts an important story in the history of occupational therapy. The story concerns a small group of women, known as the Curriculum Directors, whose influence prevailed in the growth and development of occupational therapy throughout the 1950s. The account is synthesized from both written history sources and oral history interviews with group members and their contemporaries. It characterizes the Curriculum Directors and describes their influence on the profession as well as others’ perceptions of their accomplishments. This paper also chronicles the forces that emerged in reaction to the Curriculum Directors’ authority and briefly details the dissolution of their power.

Characterization of the Curriculum Directors

For the most part, the Curriculum Directors had been educated by occupational therapy pioneers. These early educators were legendized as a group of independent, intelligent, and well-educated women. The qualities of these pioneers as devoted, action-directed, risk-taking individualists were instilled in many of the Curriculum Directors during their formative years in occupational therapy. When the Curriculum Directors emerged as the second generation of occupational therapists, AOTA, which was still influenced by the pioneers, was quite small and struggling under the jurisdiction of physicians. This environment enabled these young women to become quickly involved in national-level tasks for the Association and to familiarize themselves with the organization’s responsibilities and functions.

Simultaneously, because of their limited number and their involvement in occupational therapy during an era of rapid growth, the Curriculum Directors rose quickly to positions of great responsibility within their work environments in educational institutions. They learned to create new educational avenues and to negotiate for these avenues, often with large universities, while maintaining their power and integrity. They were well trained, well educated, and politically astute and, like the occupational therapy pioneers who educated them, were willing to take risks. For example, at one point during a conflict with physicians representing the specialty of physical medicine regarding control of occupational therapy education, one Curriculum Director recalled being criticized for trying to fight the entire American Medical Associa-
tion. According to her story, she first tried to deny the assertion but eventually stated, "We're not fighting—only acquainting them with the philosophy and functions of occupational therapy... I'm just not going to let them take over my profession." During other interviews, several occupational therapists, recalling the situation, suggested that this Curriculum Director's behavior, although unusual for a woman in the 1940s, was not surprising for a member of that group. The members were known for their determination and commitment to occupational therapy (Colman, 1984).

The Curriculum Directors valued occupational therapy entry-level education that was housed in colleges and universities and that had a broad-based foundation in the liberal arts. Such education resulted in somewhat lengthier preparation than was common in other health care professions. The Curriculum Directors' vision of candidates included mature and experienced students only. In addition, they supported AOTA's ongoing commitment to upgrade educational standards for professional preparation. In conjunction with the American Medical Association's Committee on Medical Education and Hospitals, they accredited 32 occupational therapy programs and upgraded them to baccalaureate-level programs (AOTA, 1964b; Wade, 1958). They encouraged debate about entry-level education, initiated the idea of requiring a master's degree for such education, and set the stage for continuing educational development. Using non-AOTA financial resources, the Curriculum Directors developed and promoted an extensive study of occupational therapy entry-level education curricula known as the "Curriculum Study" (AOTA, 1963a) and implemented a series of related institutes on education to stimulate further improvement of entry-level professional education (AOTA, 1966). Finally, in 1964 they gained AOTA's approval for higher educational standards with the passage of a revised version of AOTA's official educational guidelines document. For the first time, a baccalaureate degree for entry-level education was required (AOTA, 1965), thus legitimizing occupational therapy programs in academic settings. The Curriculum Directors hoped that this would ensure that educational standards would continue to be determined by academic values rather than by technical or medical ones. Soon after the adoption of the new educational guidelines, the Curriculum Directors introduced a curriculum for an entry-level master's degree program in the hopes of once again upgrading occupational therapy's standards for entry-level education.

The Curriculum Directors' work established a style that reflected a sense of confidence in their particular values. As directors of curricula, they influenced a generation of therapists. They traveled to meetings, managed AOTA's business from their academic settings, frequented national workshops, and orchestrated several major studies (AOTA, 1963c). Perhaps such activity enhanced the already publicly defined image of this group as awe-inspiring, successful leaders. These were the women who fought to ensure occupational therapy's autonomy in entry-level education during the 1940s (Colman, 1986). Their activities in upgrading the level of occupational therapy education throughout the 1950s may be seen as the manifestation of that autonomy. The Curriculum Directors' considerable influence, formally and informally, continued for nearly two decades. In that time they boldly publicized their ideals and missions regarding entry-level education in occupational therapy. Their influence extended beyond the boundaries of the educational arena: Several group members were key players in various AOTA projects and functions throughout this era, and five of them served continuously on the Board of Management between 1948 and 1964 (AOTA, 1949a, 1949b, 1955a, 1955b, 1961a, 1961b, 1964a, 1964b). The Curriculum Directors' multipurpose involvement strengthened the perception of their power and influence.

The Curriculum Directors' View of Themselves

The Curriculum Directors' image grew from their visibility, behavior, and accomplishments. Through their speeches and writings, they assumed the role of knowers and thinkers, which helped to promote them as leaders and educators. They generated a tone of self-importance and single-mindedness. An example of this is in a 1958 speech that clearly outlined their educational ideologies:

The educational program attempts to select well-developed, intelligent students of good emotional balance with a basic spirit of service and interest in their fellow man. Programs are designed to help the individual to grow in moral stature and in concept. The American Occupational Therapy Association believes that a broad base of science, art, and social sciences, as well as a study of the humanities is the bed on which the specialized subjects and clinical experience can be more advantageously rooted. All courses in occupational therapy hold this philosophy. (Wade, 1958, pp. 2-3)

According to the oral histories, the Curriculum Directors identified themselves as strong, visionary, and highly educated women. They described the group's membership as upper class, with several members educated at the best women's colleges. They agreed that they possessed two outstanding features: personal charm and a profound interest in the profession. Many of their comments focused on the depth of the group's commitment to the cause, that is, the growth and development of occupational therapy education in relation to their value system.

The Curriculum Directors valued their responsibility as leaders. In the words of one group member,
The Curriculum Directors were known in the profession not only for their accomplishments in setting educational policy but also for their leadership within their academic settings. Many therapists revered the Curriculum Directors for their influence in universities. Several women, educated by members of the Curriculum Directors group, experienced that authority directly by having their own course of study adjusted and refined to suit each student’s special needs. One noted, “We knew [our director] could get anything she wanted, sometimes in a very difficult situation.” Skilled at maneuvering large systems, the Curriculum Directors were also seen as politically and administratively savvy. As such, they served as role models and mentors for new members of the profession.

Many AOTA members admired and respected the continuity and ethics the Curriculum Directors represented as decision makers. One such admirer suggested that the Curriculum Directors’ power base existed because, as a concentrated group who controlled education, they were able to control much of the profession’s destiny. Occupational therapists entering the field in the 1960s saw the Curriculum Directors as authoritative older women who maintained an impressive realm of responsibility. They seemed to embody occupational therapy in ideas and deeds. As such, they were granted significant power, the structure and presence of which remained intact through 1964.

During the 1950s, the profession grew in the numbers of programs and in its membership. More therapists were added to the roster of curriculum directors, and the original Curriculum Directors began...
to retire. Dissent grew within the educational sector of AOTA, manifested as growing acceptance and support of a new set of educational ideologies. An opposing movement developed that focused on a less lengthy educational foundation, neither based in liberal arts nor necessarily housed in academic settings. The supporters of this movement believed in educational preparation that was more technical in nature and more accessible to the average student.

**Support for Technical Orientation in Education**

Throughout the 1950s, AOTA members generally supported the educational values of the Curriculum Directors. Throughout this period, those who advocated technically based education shied away from issues of professional entry-level education and focused instead on the development of an aide or technical position within the structure of occupational therapy practice. As this new ideology gained strength among AOTA’s members, its supporters concentrated on promoting the need for several paths for entry-level education in occupational therapy. This position gained momentum as the Curriculum Directors promoted activities designed to move the profession toward a single route of entry at the master’s degree level.

As late as 1957, a movement remained that supported an educational alliance with physical medicine (Colman, 1984). In an ideological tradition congruent with that of physical medicine, a few occupational therapists continued to express the desire to locate entry-level occupational therapy programs in medical schools and to provide primarily technical preparation (AOTA, 1957). Amid a plethora of continuing pleas to upgrade educational standards in occupational therapy, a letter in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* argued the necessity of fortifying occupational therapists’ performance by improving education from within the existing structure and not by increasing standards (Sokolov, 1957). A 1958 editorial in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* suggested that the focus of educational improvement should be the exploration of alternative routes to professional entry-level training (“Editorial,” 1958). Robinson (1961) urged AOTA to heed the signals in the field and to seriously consider modifying its standards to include technical-level personnel while decreasing educational requirements for professional-level personnel.

By 1963, the voice of the technically based ideology had gained strength. Locher (1962) argued for experience, not academics, as a means of training occupational therapists. Contending that entry into clinical practice should not be delayed by lengthy academic preparation, she suggested increasing the length of required clinical experience for professional-level education. Combining that notion and the idea of alternative routes of entry for professional-level personnel, Thompson (1963) argued against a single channel for entrance into practice. She focused her argument on the diversity of patient populations requiring occupational therapy treatment as well as on the need for more academic and clinical faculty members. Concurrent with growing publicity for more technical preparation, the occupational therapy network of educational programs expanded as well. The directors of these new programs joined the original curriculum directors subcommittee. Several of these newcomers shared their impression of the tight control that the Curriculum Directors maintained within the group. One told of a time when she, as a faculty member, was asked by her program director to attend a curriculum directors’ group meeting. Her attendance was dependent on having one of the Curriculum Directors vouch for her. She recounted feeling both awed and discomfited by their actions. Others joining the group as new curriculum directors also recalled feeling left out of the tight inner circle. One newcomer shared her perception that the addition of the new members made the “old guard” terribly nervous. She recollected the Curriculum Directors’ unsuccessful efforts to eliminate the newcomers from the committee. She also told of the time she was allowed to do some work for the group only after she was endorsed by one Curriculum Director. Another newcomer remembered being painfully aware that she was entering a system closed to new members. She recalled feeling totally ineffective in the policy-making role. A fourth newcomer described her orientation to the curriculum directors’ group as, “Oh! That was a terrible experience!” In her story, she described herself as a young therapist and inexperienced program director who had been involved in the formation of a new program. She recalled feeling overwhelmed and awed by the few Curriculum Directors and their influence. She remembered not feeling respected for her potential ability to direct an occupational therapy curriculum. She, too, described the group as closed in their ideas about education and their acceptance of newcomers. Coming from a background with a different perspective on education, she commented that it was very difficult for her to find her place in that group. Overall, she noted that her experience left her feeling very frustrated and lonely.

**Effecting Change**

In 1955, AOTA formed the Development Advisory Committee to direct the profession’s growth and development. Between 1955 and 1959, the committee members focused their energies on designing a long-
range plan for AOTA. They recommended an in-depth study of AOTA’s committee structure and functions. By 1962, Cresap, McCormick, and Paget, a professional management consultation firm, was hired to conduct the organizational study. Their report, known as the “Cresap Study,” commenced the shift in ideological influence, particularly in the educational sector (AOTA, 1963b). Between 1962 and 1965, the Curriculum Directors continued to work toward supporting an educational system with a single route of entry and toward raising educational standards. The climate in AOTA and among the larger group of curriculum directors was changing, however. Several years of difficult interactions within the expanded group of curriculum directors, coupled with increased support and impetus from the Cresap Study, resulted in many occupational therapists pursuing ways to restructure the closed, absolute power of the Curriculum Directors. The new ideology, perhaps due as much to a reaction against the experience of exclusivity as to the merits of its educational values, began to take hold. This reaction was seen first in the form of a major reorganization of AOTA.

Based on the Cresap Study’s findings, the Development Advisory Committee recommended a structural and administrative reorganization of AOTA. This resulted in two important changes. First, decision-making power was shifted from the Board of Management to the Delegate Assembly (the body of member representatives), thus increasing the members’ involvement in and responsibility for running AOTA. Second, education was delegated to a single committee within the Council on Professional Standards. This Council also included committees dealing with all levels of academic preparation, clinical education, certification, and practice.

These changes directly affected the influence of persons within the education sector on creating and implementing AOTA policy. Those involved in education no longer enjoyed a direct link to AOTA’s decision makers, nor was any one committee responsible for educational decision making. The curriculum directors group, as a separate entity, was eliminated. The new Education Committee included representation from the many facets of occupational therapy education, which, by then, consisted of technical, entry-level, and advanced-level curricula. The autonomy enjoyed by the earlier education sector was eliminated, and the new Education Committee became one of several groups within a council structure. Each council had a steering committee that set work priorities. The leader of the steering committee brought concerns to the Delegate Assembly for action. Thus it became possible to ignore or greatly dilute educational concerns within AOTA. Educational issues, which had been in the forefront of AOTA business for nearly two decades, were relegated to a back seat, competing for AOTA attention.

The Curriculum Directors themselves became quite disheartened by these changes. When interviewed, some of them noted that several of the older members of that group felt as though they had lost something essential when they lost the separate curriculum directors’ committee as a recognized, organized group. Beyond the power enjoyed by that group in its heyday, the Curriculum Directors perceived themselves to be in a unique position. They used that position to solve problems and exchange information. At the time of the reorganization, several of the Curriculum Directors had already retired. Others were in the process of retiring, and those who remained offered only quiet protests. Despite being rebuffed by AOTA administrators, they continued their work through 1966 on their largest project, the curriculum study (AOTA, 1966). Their reign as the primary influencers of education and as the standard-bearers for educational values was over. AOTA was now influenced by other ideologies. Through the diligence of a few supporters of the Curriculum Directors, however, their ideals continued to be voiced in subsequent years, although those ideals had little influence over the direction of educational policy.

Summary

The Curriculum Directors dominated the educational sector and other decision-making arenas throughout an important era in occupational therapy’s history. During that time, they maintained complete decision-making control over education, thus influencing the future of that education. They promoted the raising of educational standards, conducted the most comprehensive study of occupational therapy education to date, solidified the profession’s ability to obtain funding from outside organizations, and educated a generation of therapists.

Such power elicited strong reactions, and by 1964, another group emerged, representing new educational ideologies such as increasing the accessibility of the field, decreasing academic requirements, and substituting experience for academic preparation. This new faction promoted the restructuring of AOTA, which resulted in the dissolution of the Curriculum Directors group. As such, the new group was able to redirect occupational therapy education toward a more technical and less academic preparation. Although these new ideologies continued to hold sway in the profession through the 1980s, the image of the Curriculum Directors in terms of their power, style, and values remains a presence in educational debate.
References


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