



Inclusive Ministry: Equipping Volunteers to Support Children with Special Needs

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BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW

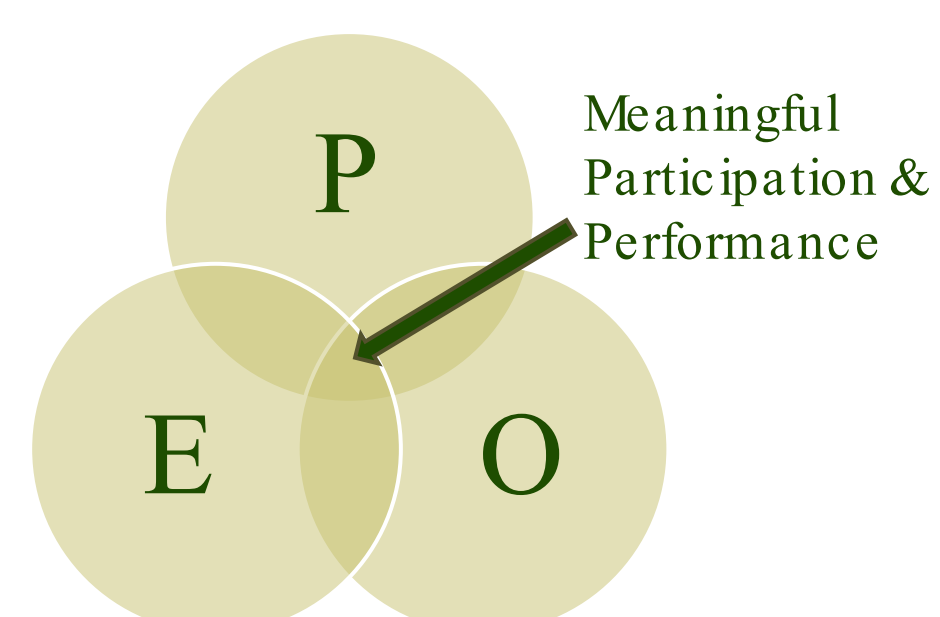
Children with disabilities frequently experience barriers to meaningful participation in faith-based environments, where inclusion often depends on volunteer preparedness, environmental supports, and congregational attitudes. Research consistently emphasizes that faith communities play a significant role in supporting identity formation, belonging, resilience, and spiritual development for children with disabilities (Harris, 2015; Liu et al., 2014). However, inclusion requires more than physical presence. It needs intentional supports, relational acceptance, and accessible programming to ensure authentic engagement (Hobbs et al., 2016). Parent perceptions indicate that congregational participation improves when churches provide structured accommodations and knowledgeable support systems (Ault et al., 2013). Furthermore, training and coaching of faith community volunteers has been shown to increase the use of effective instructional and inclusive practices, directly impacting participation outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Baggerman et al., 2015). Despite positive intentions, many churches lack formalized education and disability-informed frameworks, resulting in inconsistent inclusion efforts. *There is a need for structured training programs and environmental modifications within faith-based settings to enhance volunteer competence, foster belonging, and promote meaningful occupational participation for children with special needs.

The capstone project partnered with Mill City Church, specifically the children's ministry pastor and volunteer team, to address gaps in disability inclusion and volunteer training. This partnership allowed for collaborative development of sustainable, OT-informed resources to enhance inclusive participation within the church environment.



THEORETICAL GROUNDING

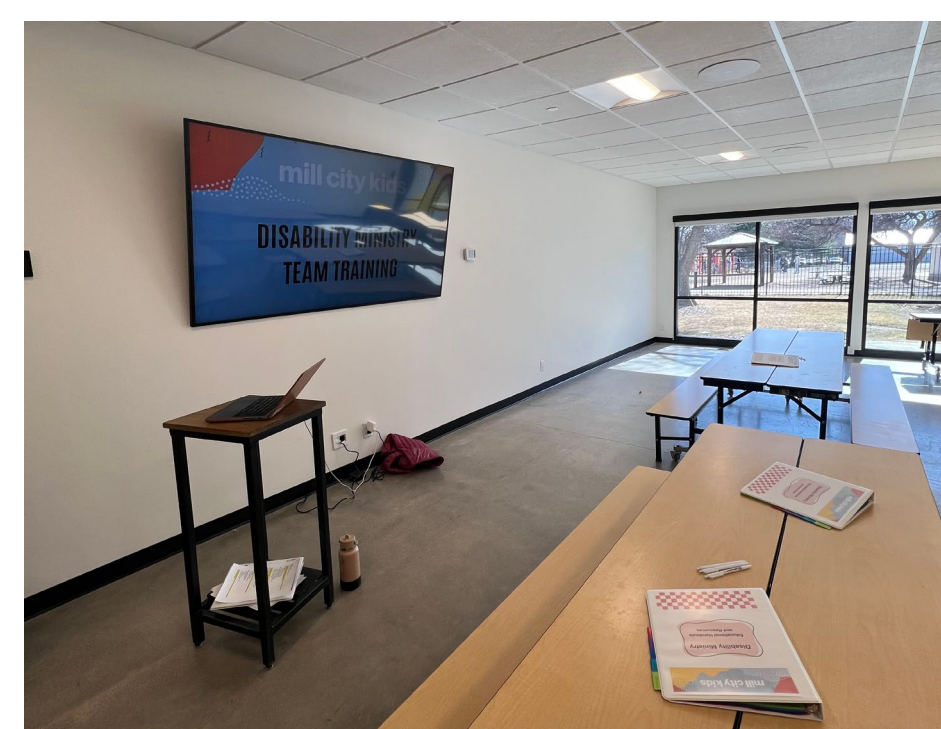
According to the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model, optimal occupational performance occurs when there is a strong fit between these three elements (Law et al., 1996). By increasing volunteers' knowledge and confidence, modifying the church environment through inclusive strategies and resources, and ability to support meaningful participation for children in spiritual and social activities, this project enhanced occupational performance for all involved.



Person	The ministry volunteers and their competence/preparedness
Environment	The church setting, physical and social supports
Occupation	Ability to support children with special needs in ministry activity participation

GOAL

Capstone Goal: to increase volunteer confidence and competence in supporting children with special needs, ultimately fostering an inclusive and supportive spiritual environment.



OBJECTIVES & ACTIVITIES

1	Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment and send out self-efficacy scale to entire ministry volunteer team. (weeks 1-2)
2	Obtain findings from self-efficacy scale and determine needs for resource binder, educational training, and sensory mobile unit. (week 3)
3	Create a mobile sensory unit to be used in classrooms and immediate use. (week 4)
4	Create a resource binder containing education on at least 5 diagnoses and resources on how to support engagement, regulation strategies, and sensory education and tools to implement. Present to children's pastor for feedback. (weeks 5-9)
5	Implement revised resource toolkit for volunteers to use. (weeks 10-11)
6	Conduct an educational training session based off of the resource binder to provide further education to the ministry volunteer team that are interested in participating. (week 12)
7	Administer a post-self-efficacy scale to entire ministry volunteer team. Compare pre and post-intervention data to assess changes in volunteer confidence and preparedness. (weeks 13-14)

DELIVERABLES

- 1.) Mobile Sensory Unit
 - Sensory bags for each classroom & instructions
- 2.) Educational Resource Binder (handouts)
 - Diagnoses: Down Syndrome, ASD, PDA, ADHD, RSD, CP, GLP
 - Sensory Education: Systems and Toys/Tools for Regulation
 - Regulation: Self-Regulation and Zones of Regulation
 - Communication: Best Practices and Sign Language
 - Social Emotional Milestones
- 3.) Educational Training Session
 - Information based off resource binder

Sensory Bags



Educational Resource Binder Handouts



Educational Training Session



OUTCOME EVALUATION METHODS

1. Pre- and Post-intervention Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for the volunteers
 - Assessed perceived confidence and preparedness in supporting children with special needs (pre)
 - Helped determine educational needs for deliverables (pre)
 - Ensured that project deliverables directly addressed identified gaps (post)
2. Weekly site mentor meetings, stakeholder feedback, and informal volunteer input for relevance and feedback on deliverables for overall effectiveness
3. Reflection and planning logs to track progress towards objectives

FINDINGS

Quantitative Outcomes: (post-intervention data)

- Increased volunteer confidence across all domains
- Improved understanding of sensory regulation
- Greater comfort implementing inclusive strategies
- Increased perceived ability to support participation
- Stronger belief in their impact on a child's church experience

Self-efficacy ratings shifted from moderate variability to consistently higher confidence levels post-training and implementation of deliverables.

Qualitative Outcomes: (volunteer report)

- Volunteers reporting feelings more prepared
- Awareness of behavior as a form of communication
- Greater clarity on how to respond to challenging behaviors

DISCUSSION

Role of OT: Promoting meaningful participation, belonging, and engagement, through program development, environmental modification, volunteer capacity building

The 3 deliverables addressed identified environmental and facilitator barriers to participation within the children's ministry setting. Immediate impacts included increased volunteer knowledge and confidence, improved environmental supports within classrooms, and enhanced accessibility of ministry activities for children with special needs.

Sustainability: The anticipated long-term impacts include sustained use of the resource toolkit, integration of inclusive practices into volunteer onboarding processes, and continued environmental adaptation within ministry programming.

In conclusion, this capstone project enhanced volunteer competence and environmental supports to promote inclusive participation for children with special needs in a faith-based setting. By integrating OT principles into program development and training, the project fostered sustainable practices that support belonging, engagement, and meaningful spiritual participation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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KEY REFERENCES

Scan the QR code to access resources utilized to complete this project, and appendix with logic model and self-efficacy questionnaire

