

# Empowered & Resilient OT Students: Becoming Agents of Change After a Servant Leadership Experience in Zambia, Africa

Jill Brown<sup>1</sup>, Wendy B. Stav, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, MI, USA; <sup>2</sup>Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, United States

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Primary Author and Speaker: Jill Brown, [jmkillin@svsu.edu](mailto:jmkillin@svsu.edu)

**PURPOSE:** To understand the professional development process that unfolded as student occupational therapists engaged in a three-week long international service learning experience in Zambia, Africa. This learning experience was interprofessional in nature, and developed from servant leadership principles, to serve the community's occupational needs. This study was implemented to illustrate the transformative learning that occurs when students are immersed in culturally rich contexts to support the future development of international learning opportunities that are pivotal to the acquisition of critical thinking and reasoning skills, and professional development, and leadership of future occupational therapists.

**DESIGN:** A constructivist grounded theory design was utilized to help develop a theory on how social and subjective meaning was derived from a servant leadership immersion after a three-week service-learning experience in Zambia. This study embedded qualitative methodology into the research design to understand the professional development process that occurred as student participants gained valuable experience outside westernized curriculum. This study used convenience sampling to recruit nine occupational therapy students who were enrolled in an international occupational therapy course in Zambia, Africa.

**METHOD:** Three, one-on-one semi-structured interviews occurred for 30-60 minutes on days five and six, 12 and 13, 19 and 20 for a total of 27 interviews with student participants. A field journal was maintained to capture: overall impressions, student successes and challenges, nonverbal behaviors, contextual influences and to support ongoing theory development on professional development occurring. Data was audio recorded and analyzed throughout study and later transcribed and coded with NVivo software. Theoretical codes were developed to represent findings, and a constant comparison method was utilized to transpire findings. Continuous analysis, re-evaluation, and refinement of codes and categorizes occurred to understand the professional development process that occurred for participating students.

**RESULTS:** The grounded theory that emerged was the professional development process that was transformative to the growth the occupational therapy students after participating in a three-week immersion as servant leaders in Zambia. The professional development theory that derived from the data analysis process involved constant comparison of data codes, which were developed into the following categories: critical thinking and cultural thinking changes, confidence as servant leaders, use of self as a change agent, gained leadership skills, and the importance of occupational therapy advocacy. These categories were further refined into the following themes: empowered occupational therapy students and resilient occupational therapy lens.

**CONCLUSION:** This study exemplifies how a three-week servant leadership immersion in Zambia can accelerate the professional development for participating student occupational therapists. The study highlights how gained skillsets such as cultural and critical thinking skills can be enhanced, in addition to gained confidence as servant leaders, becoming agents of change, feeling empowered, and gained resilience can result from a hands-on and cultural-rich environment. Students gained a holistic and resilient lens for working with diverse community members and populations while gaining confidence in advocacy and leadership skills. It is recommended that continued experiential learning opportunities be developed to support an empowered workforce that is responsive to occupational needs of clients, groups, and populations to meet the health and well-being of all people.

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