

# Training Chilean occupational therapists: Project-based learning (PBL) and social project management with vulnerable groups.

## Authors:

Rosa Hernández Montecino.

Caroline Landeros Díaz.

Universidad Andrés Bello.



Facultad de  
Ciencias de la  
Rehabilitación

Occupational therapy is a discipline committed to social reality, to territories, and to the daily needs of communities. From the outset, we need to strengthen our commitment to these contexts, contributing with more relevant and socially meaningful academic programs, with active learning strategies such as project-based learning (PBL), which places students in real and contextualized environments, building bridges between theory and real-life experiences.

In a context of increasing social complexity, higher education has a responsibility to train professionals with solid skills and abilities, capable of integrating theory and practice and thinking critically in diverse settings. From current perspectives, curricula should promote new forms of teaching that connect students with real-world issues, fostering the development of flexible professionals who are capable of adapting to changing contexts and assuming leadership roles. In this context, education is a key area for promoting individual and social change aimed at overcoming inequalities.

This relates to the challenges faced by occupational therapists, who must be able to align their work with the Sustainable Development Goals.

With the 2018 curriculum innovation, the occupational therapy school (Viña del Mar, Santiago, Concepción) has included a management area in its curriculum, whose subjects use PBL and are linked to the institutional VCM policy.

Courses seek to facilitate solutions to community problems through the implementation of participatory projects. 1,200 students have been trained and more than 225 communities have participated.

There is consensus in the literature on the contributions of PBL, but there is still little evidence on how real experiences developed in different educational contexts affect learning acquisition, particularly when applied in less explored areas such as social project management in occupational therapy.

Management understood as the art of administering, organizing, recognizing, living, and planning the lives of the people with whom and for whom we work. Developing management capacity is essential for working with communities facing situations of vulnerability.

## Objectives:

To analyze the implications of PBL for occupational therapy students in the area of social project management. To describe the assessments of community leaders regarding social projects.

Stage	Description
1	Students self-manage their involvement with a local community to carry out a social project.
2	Students gather information and research the scope of disciplinary action according to the characteristics of the community (literature review, related national and international public policies, etc.).
3	Design and implementation of participatory diagnosis (PD) to gather community needs and issues.
4	Design and planning of social project based on DP results.
5	Launch and implementation of a social occupational therapy project.
6	Follow-up and monitoring of the occupational therapy social project.
7	Impact assessment of the social project on the community.
8	Dissemination and communication of results.

Bianchi & Serrata, 2017

Rodríguez-Sandoval & Cortés-Rodríguez, 2010.

Burgos, et al, 2021.

Morales et al, 2022.

Engelen, et al 2020.

Parraguez, et al, 2022

Tenorio, Vergara, 2024.

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Rosa Hernandez, [Rosa.hernandez@unab.cl](mailto:Rosa.hernandez@unab.cl)  
Caroline Landeros, [caroline.landeros@unab.cl](mailto:caroline.landeros@unab.cl)

Dimension	Project summary
<b>Territory</b>	Projects in Viña del Mar (16), Concepción (15), and Santiago (14). Balanced territorial distribution.
<b>Target population</b>	Projects aimed at older adults and children and young people predominate, followed by initiatives involving people with disabilities, caregivers, and women. There are also projects involving LGBTQ+ communities, homeless people, and university students.
<b>Social contribution</b>	They contribute to inclusion, community strengthening, and improving the quality of life of priority populations.

## Method

Concurrent mixed-method design, with a sample of 129 occupational therapy students and 13 community leaders. The data collection strategies are: semantic differential scale and semi-structured interviews. The scale data were analyzed using Excel and JAMOVI, using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for large samples. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic content approach. The study follows the ethical principles of the Helsinki Declaration and Chilean Law 20120, applying informed consent.

## Results:

### Quantitative results in relation to PBL (students):

- ❑ Most highly valued dimension at all three sites: **Commitment to learning: X=6.50-6.53.**
- ❑ Main statements: Learning is ENGAGING: X= 6.53. COLLABORATIVE work is PARTICIPATORY: X= 6.50. Learning is COMMITTED: X= 6.48.
- ❑ In relation to female students, the highest rating is **“The relationship between COLLABORATIVE WORK AND LEARNING”**: X= 6.43 (they perceive it as participatory, reflective, and close).
- ❑ In relation to male students, the highest rating is **“COMMITMENT TO LEARNING”**: X= 6.68) and the lowest rating is “The relationship between collaborative work and learning”: X=6.21.

### Qualitative Results (community-student)

- ❑ Analysis of the discourse of community leaders shows that the social projects developed strengthen professional skills in social management: leadership, collaborative work, and adaptation of interventions to real contexts.
- ❑ These competencies are reflected in autonomous practices, relevant planning, and the use of strategies appropriate to the territory, together with community contributions related to the recognition of diversity and access to social benefits.
- ❑ Students identify challenges in implementing PBL related to “equity” in task distribution, diversification of teaching resources, and strengthening self-management and community engagement.

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	REGISTRATIONS
Development of professional skills in community contexts	Social management and collaborative work skills	<i>“I see that leadership, they simply manage... they organize themselves, all the materials are ready, and that is already part of the management, which is commendable on the part of the students.”</i>
	Planning and adaptation in real-world contexts	<i>“...we felt that they prepared very well to bring things. When they wanted to teach us, they came with materials and demonstrations. They organized their work well before arriving.”</i>
Territorial ties and relevance of social projects	Perceived community contributions	<i>Participating in these types of workshops helps us see each other, not from our own perspective, but from the perspective of the other, who is different from me. “Look, I was able to get a government subsidy for retirees of 190,000 pesos because I wasn't doing it, I didn't know how to do it.”</i>
Areas for improvement in PBL	Collaborative work	<i>“One aspect to consider is fairness in the distribution of tasks, ensuring that some students do not take on the majority of the workload”.</i>
	Lack of teaching resources	<i>“Delivery of more educational information through videos or experiences of other classmates”</i>
	Difficulty in self-management and bonding	<i>It is difficult to find a group to carry out a project; they may have options.</i>

## Discussion.

Students strengthen management skills through PBL, executing innovative projects from their occupation that have strengthened communities and reduced inequalities.

- **Commitment to learning generated from PBL.** Motivation increases, critical skills are developed, there is active participation, increased coordination among students, leadership, conflict resolution, and decision-making. (Villanueva et al, 2021).
- **Men value commitment to learning more highly, while women value collaborative work and learning more highly.** The importance of considering the gender of students may be related to learning support skills. (Fatmawati, et al, 2024).
- Students **highlight the development of multiple skills**, demonstrating that PBL allows them to acquire essential skills for the future (Hidalgo & Ortega, 2022). Development of skills and attitudes (Apaza, et al 2022).
- **Difficulties in developing PBL**, which should be considered in its implementation (Pérez, 2021). There is resistance because it requires a different way of working, which has been enhanced by the use of technology and the availability of materials through digital resources.
- **As the communities themselves point out, the projects have helped to strengthen them as communities**, producing a process of transformation that empowers vulnerable people through belonging, towards a healthier and more inclusive life (Engelen, et al 2020).

## Conclusion / Contribution to the occupational therapy profession.

- Project-based learning is establishing itself as a relevant training strategy for occupational therapists, as it combines the development of social management skills with a commitment to the local area and community responsibility.
- Training in real-world contexts strengthens professional identity and positions occupational therapy as a discipline capable of responding to complex social issues, especially in vulnerable contexts.
- In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, PBL contributes to quality education focused on equity, inclusion, and community well-being. However, its implementation requires strengthening teacher support and institutional conditions that safeguard the quality of the educational process and its social impact.