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The formation of masters in the specific postgraduate course in occupational therapy: an overview of research production in the area

A formação de mestres na pós-graduação específica em terapia ocupacional: panorama da produção de pesquisa

La formación de maestros en el posgrado específico en terapia ocupacional: un panorama de la producción investigativa

Simone Costa de Almeida – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais | Belo Horizonte | Minas Gerais | Brasil. E-mail: salmeida@ufmg.br / Orcid: http: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4624-8004

Kátia Maria Penido Bueno - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais | Belo Horizonte | Minas Gerais | Brasil. E-mail: katiapenidobueno@gmail.com | Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6611-6469

Marcella Guimarães Assis - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais | Belo Horizonte | Minas Gerais | Brasil. E-mail: marcellagassis@gmail.com | Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1636-555X

Abstract: Mapping the research production of a postgraduate program is essential to identify successful results and implement changes that improve its quality. This article analyzes characteristics of the dissertations defended in the inaugural specific *stricto-sensu* graduate program in Occupational Therapy. This is a descriptive exploratory study with a quantitative approach through the consultation of 107 dissertations from 2012 to 2019. It was found that 67.3% of the research obtained funding; the most studied topics were assessment, context and foundations (67.2%); the qualitative method predominated (57.9%) and 65.4% resulted in articles. The application of the knowledge produced in postgraduate studies in scenarios of academic training and professional practice is a challenge.

Keywords: postgraduate; research; occupational therapy.

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Resumo: O mapeamento da produção de pesquisa de um programa de pós-graduação é fundamental para identificar resultados exitosos e implementar mudanças que aprimorem sua qualidade. Este artigo analisa características das dissertações defendidas no programa inaugural de pós-graduação *stricto-sensu* específico em Terapia Ocupacional. Trata-se de um estudo descritivo, do tipo exploratório, com abordagem quantitativa, por meio da consulta a 107 dissertações no período de 2012 a 2019. Constatou-se que 67,3% das pesquisas obtiveram financiamento; os temas mais estudados foram avaliação, contexto e fundamentos (67,2%); predominou o método qualitativo (57,9%), e 65,4% resultaram em artigos. A aplicação do conhecimento produzido na pós-graduação em cenários da formação acadêmica e da prática profissional é um desafio.

Palavras-chave: pós-graduação; pesquisa; terapia ocupacional.

Resumen: Mapear la producción investigativa de un programa de posgrado es fundamental para identificar resultados exitosos e implementar cambios que mejoren su calidad. Este artículo analiza las características de las disertaciones defendidas en el primer programa de posgrado específico stricto sensu en Terapia Ocupacional. Tratase de un estudio exploratorio descriptivo con enfoque cuantitativo a través de la consulta de 107 disertaciones de maestría del 2012 al 2019. Se encontró que el 67,3% de las investigaciones obtuvo financiamiento; los temas más estudiados fuerón evaluación, contexto y fundamentos (67,2%); predominó el método cualitativo (57,9%) y el 65,4% resultó en artículos. La aplicación del conocimiento producido en los estudios de posgrado en escenarios de formación académica y práctica profesional es un desafío.

Palavras clave: posgrado; investigación; terapia ocupacional.

1 Introduction

A landmark in Brazilian postgraduate education, the Opinion number 977 of the Federal Education Council, reported by Newton Sucupira in 1965, outlined the main reasons justifying the urgency of its creation. These purposes were connected to the qualification of faculty for higher education, aiming to enhance the quality of this offering, to stimulate the development of research, and to train high-level technicians and intellectuals who could contribute to national development in various fields. Since then, nearly six decades have passed, and it is the level of higher education that has advanced the most in the country. It can be asserted that the activities of the courses have contributed to our scientific, economic, and social expansion, constituting a case of success (Alexandre Netto, 2018; Medeiros; Leta, 2020).

The Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), established in 1951 from a national campaign with the goal of enhancing higher-level personnel, can be seen as the cornerstone of this story. The National Postgraduate System (SNPG) was implemented by CAPES in 1976 and has since played a crucial role in the development of postgraduate education and scientific and technological research in the country. Notably, it evaluates the quality of existing programs or those in the process of being created. Considered a well-systematized and complex process, it has undergone incremental and operational modifications and has faced criticism regarding the need to revise the assumptions and evaluation instruments, given some undesirable effects. Among these, a recurring point focuses on the greater emphasis placed on the quantity of scientific publications, without contesting their importance, but recognizing that other aspects, such as academic training and teaching preparation, are often overlooked (Barata, 2019; Marques *et al.*, 2020). Although subject to differing opinions, the importance of designing and expanding this evaluation model must be acknowledged for strengthening a national evaluation system that has "become a compass," shaping institutional and behavioral standards in Brazilian higher education (Serafim; Gonçalves Junior; Dias, 2022).

Evaluation and promotion agencies, Capes along with the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), represent two pillars that underpin the solidity of the postgraduate system, also associated with the National Education Plans (PNE) (Carvalho; Oliveira, 2022). According to the PNE 2014-2024 (Brazil, 2014), goals 13 and 14, specific to stricto sensu postgraduate education, aim to "Enhance the quality of higher education and increase the proportion of masters and doctoral holders among the teaching faculty actively engaged in the entire higher education system to 75%, of which at least 35% are doctoral holders"; and "Gradually increase the number of enrollments in stricto sensu postgraduate programs, so as to achieve an annual graduation of 60,000 (sixty thousand masters) and 25,000 (twenty-five thousand doctorates)".

Specifically regarding goal 14, a recent analysis found that it is very close to being met, as, considering the period from 2012 to 2018, there was a significant increase in the number of masters and doctoral degrees awarded, reaching 64,432 master's degrees in 2018, with significant growth in the North, Northeast, and Central-West regions; and 22,984 doctoral degrees, mainly in the Southeast, South, and Northeast regions. However, despite the fact that most of this masters and doctoral training takes place in postgraduate programs at public universities, this profile is subject to change due to policies of budget cuts or freezes for these institutions in recent years, which directly affect postgraduate activities and research (Carvalho; Oliveira, 2022). Considering the large number of postgraduate programs on a national scale, it becomes important to map them and investigate their scientific output. This process can provide information that contributes to reflections on the current situation of a specific area of knowledge. In this context, improvement actions can be implemented in the program from the moment the coordinators of these Programs also become aware of the exposed results (Medeiros; Leta, 2020; Silva *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, the main objective of this study is to provide an overview of the postgraduate research within a specific program in occupational therapy, in order to identify key aspects of the production achieved by the field over nine years since the implementation of the academic master's program. In these terms, this study is doubly novel as it addresses the first postgraduate course in the profession and analyzes the inaugural journey of its research in the academic master's program.

1.1 Occupational Therapy: 40 Years from Professional Regulation to the Creation of Postgraduate Programs

Recently, in 2017, the centenary of the emergence of the occupational therapy profession was celebrated. This profession generally originated in the United States during the context of World War I with the initiative to integrate disabled individuals into the workforce. In Brazil, the profession was regulated in 1969, fifty-three years ago, and efforts have been made throughout this trajectory to establish the specificity of its area of practice and its field of knowledge.

Revisiting specific aspects of the history, the first occupational therapy courses in Brazil were established by the School of Rehabilitation in Rio de Janeiro in 1956, and by the Orthopedics Institute of the Clinical Hospital of the University of São Paulo in 1957. Initially, occupational therapy courses were characterized by technical training. In 1961, with the enactment of the Minimum Curriculum Law, the course became a university-level program (Soares, 1991). Currently, there are 34 undergraduate courses in Occupational Therapy operating in face-to-face mode, with the highest concentration in the Southeast region (41.2%), and 61.8% offered in public Higher Education Institutions (IES) (Reneto, 2020).

When the professional practice of Occupational Therapy was primarily clinical, occupational therapists sought training in specialization courses that met the needs of the job market. By the end of the 1970s, with the introduction of new undergraduate courses in the field, a new area of professional activity emerged, focused on higher education and the teaching career. This shift made it essential to train specialized teachers and researchers in Occupational Therapy (Emmel; Lancman, 1998).

The process of training Brazilian occupational therapists through enrollment in postgraduate programs became more quantitatively significant starting in the 1990s, with the peculiarity that the postgraduate education took place in related areas, due to the absence of a specific occupational therapy program. This qualification was guided by the need to produce knowledge to meet the demands of the profession, as well as to qualify faculty to teach in undergraduate courses (Lancman, 1998; Malfitano *et al*., 2013; Folha *et al*., 2018).

The establishment of a specific stricto sensu postgraduate program in Occupational Therapy moved from a dream (Lancman, 1998) at the end of the 1990s to reality with the creation of the Postgraduate Program in Occupational Therapy at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), which began its activities in 2010, offering an academic master's degree, and, starting in 2015, an academic doctoral degree. It is important to highlight those two programs in Rehabilitation Sciences, created in 2002 by the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) and in 2005 by the University of São Paulo (USP), linked to area 21 of Capes, included the participation of occupational therapists and researchers from related fields (Malfitano *et al*., 2013).

Recently, the establishment of two new programs offered by public universities in the southeastern region of the country, both in 2019, is significant for their potential to contribute to the increase in the number of researchers in the field and to strengthen scientific production (Borba *et al*., 2021), as well as to promote the dissemination of occupational therapy knowledge (Monzelli, 2018). The academic master's program at UFMG, titled "Occupation Studies," and the professional master's program at USP, named "Occupational Therapy and Social Inclusion Processes," are primarily composed of occupational therapists and include partnerships with other specialties.

The areas of focus for the three programs offered by public universities generally aim to train professionals whose knowledge is linked to the themes of developmental contexts, everyday life, and social inclusion processes (Malfitano *et al*., 2013). Another emphasis is on training human resources to address occupational issues affecting the population served by occupational therapy (Van-Petten; Fortini; Magalhães, 2019); and also, to prepare occupational therapists for practice related to inclusive public policies (Almeida; Oliver, 2019). The offering of these programs, which combine knowledge production with human resource training, can be a major ally in the search for solutions to regional and national problems (Rodacki, 2015).

Considering the specificities of the programs, a common goal is the possibility of increasing knowledge production in the field of Occupational Therapy, which remains a challenging objective in order for the profession to consolidate its academic and scientific legitimacy. Aiming to contribute to this discussion, this study sought to characterize the theses defended in the first postgraduate program in Occupational Therapy, thus outlining key aspects of the profile of the production achieved by the area over nine years of the program's implementation.

2 Methodology

This is a descriptive, exploratory study with a quantitative approach. This type of research has been used in previous works to analyze the scientific literature produced by the profession (Lopes *et al*., 2016; Folha *et al*., 2017, Folha *et al*., 2019).

A amostra foi composta pelas dissertações defendidas no primeiro programa de pós-graduação *stricto sensu* em Terapia Ocupacional, mestrado acadêmico de uma universidade pública brasileira. À época da coleta de dados (março de 2020), embora estivesse disponível no repositório as teses da primeira turma do doutorado (iniciado em 2015), optou-se por trabalhar exclusivamente com o acervo das dissertações produzidas até dezembro de 2019.

2.1 Data collections procedure

The data were accessed on the website of the Occupational Therapy department of the mentioned university, specifically under the postgraduate tab. The total volume of theses defended from the first cohort in 2012 through 2019 was investigated. For characterization purposes, it was considered:

a) Number of theses produced per year;

b) financing: all dissertations were consulted as to whether there was mention/thank you to the research bodies for granting the scholarship;

c) The theme of the dissertations, based on the listed objectives, was conceived from categories listed in previous studies (Borell *et al*., 2012; Folha *et al*., 2019), which are: Assessment: studies aimed at assessment including the description, cross-cultural adaptation, and psychometric properties of measurement instruments (Folha *et al*., 2018) and studies that sought to assess a health or occupational condition or other; Intervention: studies of prognosis and situational description of the investigated public, use of resources, techniques, methods, and treatment processes, as well as the description of the effectiveness of interventions; Services: description of services, programs, and actions; Training: teaching methodologies and professional training experiences in

occupational therapy; Foundations: theoretical and historical aspects related to the constitution and practice of occupational therapy as well as professionals' perceptions of their practice (Folha *et al*., 2019); Living Conditions: focus on the life situation of individuals or groups (Borell *et al*., 2012). This theme was named by the authors as context. The Public Policy theme was added to mark the studies that focused on the actions, goals, and plans that governments (federal, state, or municipal) devise to achieve social welfare;

d) the method: each dissertation was reviewed in the method/methodology/methodological procedures section to check the nature of the method used, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed;

e) the publication: to investigate whether the research developed in the dissertation resulted in a publication in the form of an article, the advisor's curriculum on the Lattes Platform was consulted to check for joint production with the advisee. If affirmative, the article was accessed to verify if there was a mention that the article resulted from the dissertation developed in the program. This information was provided more frequently, but not always, when the publication occurred in journals specific to occupational therapy. In other publication outlets, explicit mention of the dissertation was often not made; however, it was possible to ascertain that the article's objective, methodology, and sample were equivalent to those of the dissertation, deducing that the article was a product of the dissertation. Pioneering national journals of Occupational Therapy were also consulted: the Journal of Occupational Therapy of USP and the Brazilian Journals of Occupational Therapy, through the names of the professor and the academic.

2. 2 Data analysis

A database was organized with the information in an Excel spreadsheet, and quantitative analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequency).

3 Results

A total of 107 dissertations completed over an eight-year period were accessed (Table 1).

Table 1 - Distribution of absolute and relative frequencies of dissertations defended/year

Year	Number of dissertations (AF)	Number of dissertations (RF)
2012	17	15,9%
2013	11	10,3%
2014	18	16,8%
2015	13	12,1%
2016	15	14,0%
2017	11	10,3%
2018	12	11,2%
2019	10	9,3%
Total	**107**	**100%**

Legend: AF – Absolute Frequency; RF – Relative Frequency

Source: Own elaboration (2021).

The data related to funding are described in Table 2.

Table 2 - Distribution of absolute and relative frequencies of funding/year

Year	Number of dissertations	Number of fundings	% Of funded works
2012	17	9	52,9%
2013	11	8	72,7%
2014	18	12	66,7%
2015	13	6	46,2%
2016	15	13	86,7%
2017	11	6	54,5%
2018	12	9	75,0%
2019	10	9	90,0%
Total	**107**	**72**	**67,3%**

Source: Own elaboration (2021).

Regarding the source of funding, 95.7% came from Capes and 4.3% from the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

Regarding the publication of research in journals, it was found that 65.4% of the defended dissertations resulted in publications, as recorded in Table 3.

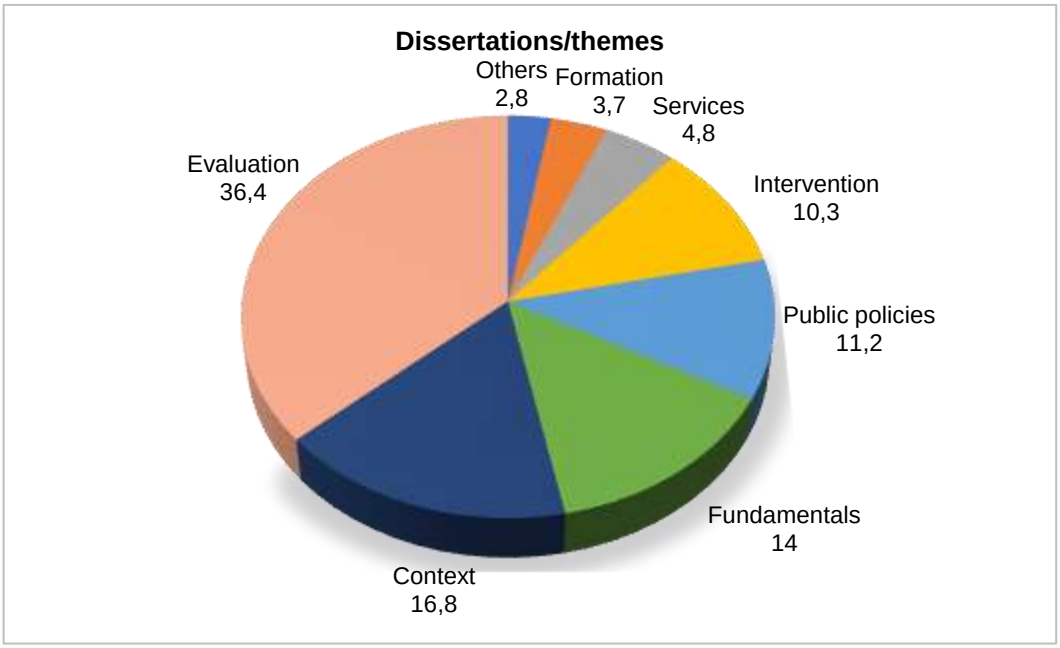
Table 3 - Distribution of absolute and relative frequencies of publications (articles) per year

Year	Number of dissertations	Number of publications	% Of works published
2012	17	15	88,2%
2013	11	6	54,5%
2014	18	14	77,8%
2015	13	9	69,2%
2016	15	8	53,3%
2017	11	7	63,6%
2018	12	5	41,6%
2019	10	6	60,0%
Total	**107**	**70**	**65,4%**

Source: Own elaboration (2021).

The themes of the dissertations are illustrated in Figure 1.

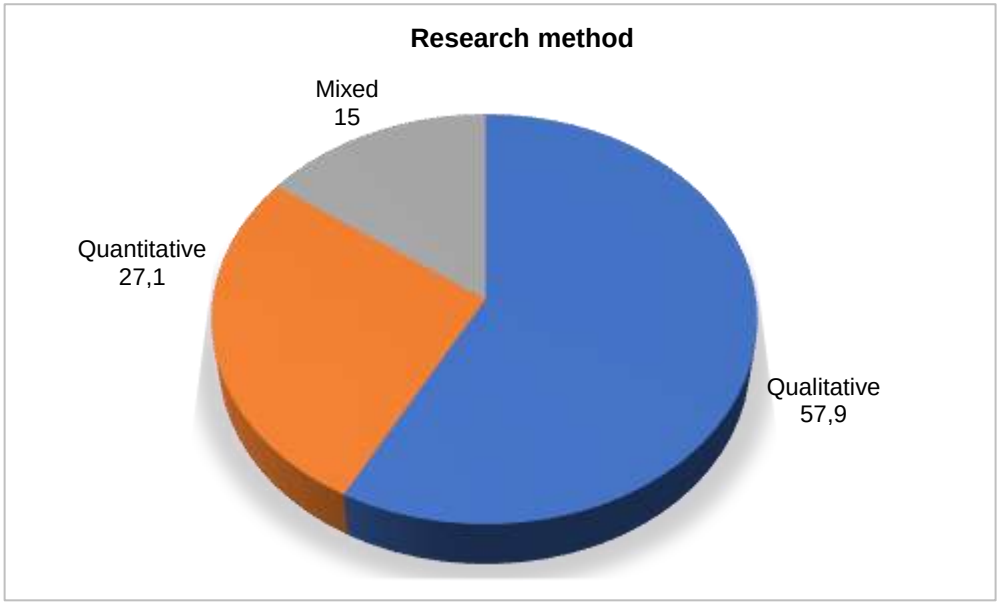
Figure 1 - Distribution of Dissertation Themes



Source: Own elaboration (2021).

Regarding the research method, it was found that qualitative methodology prevailed, with the main data collection procedures being interviews, document analysis, and literature review, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Description of research methods used



Source: Own elaboration (2021).

4 Discussion

Considering the one hundred and seven dissertations produced during the analyzed period, the first specific postgraduate course in Occupational Therapy had an average of 13.4 dissertations per year over eight years. There was a higher than average number of dissertations at the beginning of the defenses, with 17 dissertations in 2012 and 18 dissertations in 2014. This data partially composes the scenario described in the study by Folha *et al*. (2018), which found that, on a national level, those years saw the highest number of occupational therapists completing their master's degrees, with 91 and 88 professionals, respectively.

By combining the results of the research presented with the publication by Folha *et al*. (2018), it can be asserted that the postgraduate program of the university consulted in this study contributed, in 2012, to the training of 18.6% of the masters in Occupational Therapy, and in 2014, to 20.5%. This data reveals that a significant portion of occupational therapists continues to seek qualifications in related areas, perhaps still due to the limited availability of specific programs concentrated in the southeast region.

On the other hand, in the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, a lower volume of dissertation production was observed, with 11, 12, and 10 defenses respectively, as illustrated (Figure 1). This data is also corroborated by the research of Folha *et al*. (2018), which, assessing the period from 2012 to 2017, indicates that the latter year had the lowest number of occupational therapists completing their master's degrees. A recent publication by Marques (2022) may help to understand this scenario. Due to the impact on the Brazilian postgraduate system caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a reduction of 15% in the number of people awarded master's degrees and 18% in doctoral degrees was identified; however, signs of this crisis were already evident before the public health emergency. Researchers from the University of Brasília (UnB) found that, between the years 2009 and 2020, although there was growth in the number of graduates, there was a reduction in enrollments from 2016 to 2019 in programs with higher ratings and an increase in dropout and withdrawal rates. Still without full clarity on the occurrence of this phenomenon, experts draw attention to conjunctural factors, such as the cooling of the economy, and also to structural issues that encompass the depreciated value of scholarships granted by federal research funding agencies and the reversal of students' expectations regarding an academic career (Marques, 2022).

The data from the research presented reveal that, up to 2019, 67.3% of the research projects carried out had scholarships from funding agencies, mainly from Capes, despite the unfavorable conditions for higher education over the last six years, which threaten the prospect of developing research production in the country across various fields. The high percentage of scholarship funding suggests that the pioneering nature of the course is marked by the faculty's investment in guiding research projects with social relevance.

Regarding the publication of dissertation results, it was found that 65.4% of completed dissertations resulted in publication in article format, although there was not necessarily a direct correlation between obtaining funding and achieving publication, as indicated by Tables 2 and 3. To address this "double act" between publication and funding, it is interesting to mention the experience in the United Kingdom, where Occupational Therapy has a Research Foundation that offers scholarships, requiring researchers to submit an article to an English journal and an abstract to an annual event of the English occupational therapy colleges. Thus, it was found that most researchers published in various journals and disseminated findings at conferences (Sainty, 2013). In addition to publication, other significant impacts of funded research revealed in this English study pertain to the use of research results in educational activities, the establishment of collaborative partnerships in terms of the clinical application of research outcomes, and the emergence of opportunities for subsequent funding or other projects. Although it is not possible to make this correlation with the current research, it can be inferred that there must be similarities in the interface established between the production of dissertations and undergraduate teaching, meaning that the latter tends to have its quality enhanced. It is also important to heed the assertion that failing to publish, for any reason, breaks a link in the process and, consequently, interrupts an advancement in the research area where the cycle is embedded (Meneghini, 2012).

It was examined that, of the total publications, 70% of the articles were published in national journals specific to Occupational Therapy. Regarding the possible factors influencing the centralization of this publication, it is considered that the knowledge production generated by this stricto sensu postgraduate program, master's degree, is an important channel for promoting the edition of the main national journal of the profession. Another point open to analysis is that the profile of faculty with expertise for publication in higher-impact journals is still in the process of being established, and thus there is only a small group whose academic output meets these demands.

Despite the preponderance of publications in national journals specific to the profession, the literature reveals that there has been an expansion of publication by Brazilian occupational therapists, especially originating from Higher Education Institutions (IES), mainly public ones (Lopes *et al.*, 2016; Folha *et al.*, 2017). According to Folha *et al.* (2017), in the year 2016, more studies were published than all the publications made up until 2000, reflecting the growth trend observed in the national scene.

Considering that science and education are still peripheral issues in the Brazilian political-economic agenda and that conducting research is always a challenge, the number of dissertations that received scholarships and the volume of publications produced outline, despite the still present limitations, the investment in Occupational Therapy towards the consolidation and recognition of this field of practice and research.

In the research presented, it was found that the study themes, which covered seven categories, most frequently dealt with assessment, context, and foundations (67.3%), as illustrated in Figure 1, emphasizing that these themes often intersected. However, it is important to note that the analysis conducted by the authors regarding the categorization of themes is subject to different interpretations by other researchers, as, despite having concepts to classify the studies, it was observed that the phrasing of the objectives sometimes made it difficult to identify the theme.

Illustrating studies on assessment, one can mention the research on the effects of tilt and recline positioning on pressure distribution in seating for individuals with tetraplegia, or the research on assessing the accessibility of elderly people in their homes. The cross-cultural adaptation of questionnaires, such as the Functional Mobility Assessment (FMA), was also an assessment study conducted.

The study theme classified as context included research on the life histories of young people who use illicit drugs and their social networks, as well as aimed to understand the daily lives of adolescents after serving closed custodial socio-educational measures, or even the economic life and dynamics of daily exchanges of African women who chose São Paulo as their place of residence, among other topics. This theme, which involves populations in situations of social vulnerability, is historically very present in both the theoretical and practical fields of Occupational Therapy, given our insertion in a country that remains socially unequal, with high rates of unemployment, violence, low education levels, among other indicators that compromise occupational participation in daily life (Drummond; Cruz, 2018). It should be emphasized that such research is relevant insofar as it can facilitate decision-making and promote changes in social policies.

The dissertations that addressed the foundations of the profession can be exemplified, among others, by the research on the processes of knowledge production about Brazilian occupational therapy through professional trajectories, outputs, conceptions, and theoretical-methodological perspectives, and by the study concerning the analysis of the uses and concepts of the terms activity, occupation, and daily life in Occupational Therapy in Brazil.

The composition of this trio of most studied themes—assessment, context, foundations—while recognizing their particularities and without discrediting other topics, seems to suggest the importance of this specific postgraduate program in Occupational Therapy as an academic locus suited for addressing issues that confer identity to the profession. Concurrently, it may also reveal the need to adjust the lens, in order to develop more research that investigates interventions and other themes that highlight the social relevance of the profession and boost the publication of articles in widely respected and internationally recognized journals.

Although the clinical role of occupational therapists in addressing various health conditions of the population legitimizes the interventions of occupational therapists in a broad field of practice, the theme of intervention was less frequently addressed (10.3%) in the dissertations, and it mostly pertained to the child and adolescent population. Among the research conducted, one study discussed the effects of a home intervention program on the satisfaction, quality of life, and occupations of caregivers of adolescents with cerebral palsy. Another study focused on discussing the care practices developed in the Child and Adolescent Psychosocial Care Centers (CAPSij) for children and adolescents experiencing severe psychological distress.

This finding aligns with the observation that production on the clinical practice of Occupational Therapy, that is, what occupational therapists do, how they do it, and why they intervene, is still infrequent at the national level. Unlike the research by Folha et al. (2019), which characterized Occupational Therapy publications in non-profession-specific journals where the origin of the texts was mainly from North American countries (70%), it was identified that 66.67% of the productions focused primarily on discussing intervention strategies in occupational therapy.

As emphasized by the United States Research Agenda in Occupational Therapy (Occupational [...], 2011), priority is given to research on interventions due to the imperative that the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions be verified to meet client demands. According to this source, the practice of science in Occupational Therapy is in its infancy, and the defined priority is to include work that leads to efficacy through research under firmly controlled conditions or efficacy trials with research under real-world conditions. In this context, only one experimental and controlled randomized study was identified, which aimed to compare the effects of modified constraint-induced therapy on functionality and occupational performance after chronic stroke. It

is considered that research of this nature and rigor, such as clinical studies, might be more likely to be developed in doctoral projects due to the need for more time.

The research method used for the development of this study was predominantly qualitative, of a descriptive and exploratory nature, which aligns with the findings of Borell et al. (2012), who noted that most qualitative studies describe and categorize data, unlike interpretative studies, which can lead to the development of new knowledge that contributes to the profession. It should be noted that the data from the research in question deal with the production of master's dissertations, whose scope differs from doctoral theses, which are characterized by their novelty and have a longer timeline for research development, which may result in explanatory studies.

Although the program already has a larger collection of dissertations, including the last three years (2020 to 2022), and also includes theses defended since 2017 – which this research did not focus on –, the discussion developed here is important to guide future studies and advance in deepening the production of research in Occupational Therapy and its application in training and practice scenarios. Aware of this production, it is appropriate to reflect on what strategies can be implemented to enhance the program and achieve results that consolidate its importance in the field.

5 Final considerations

The mapping and discussion of the dissertations defended until 2019 in the specific stricto sensu postgraduate course in Occupational Therapy endorsed that the trajectory of knowledge production is underway, measuring a significant volume of work conducted with funding and that resulted in publications.

The results highlighted in this research, acknowledging the efforts made by faculty and students to foster scientific production in Occupational Therapy, indicate that the profession is beginning to acquire a new shape towards the expansion and consolidation of its academic and social relevance. In this sense, accessing the dissertations revealed a horizon of knowledge that can be utilized in both educational and clinical resources.

To the challenge of applying the knowledge produced in postgraduate programs to training and professional practice scenarios, there are also the maintenance and enhancement of ongoing programs, the offering of new programs beyond the Southeast region, the practice of publishing research results, including on an international level, and the investment in improving local journals.

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Author contribution

Simone Costa de Almeida – responsible for preparing the research, analyzing the results and writing the text.

Kátia Maria Penido Bueno – responsible for analyzing results and reviewing the text.

Marcella Guimarães Assis – responsible for analyzing results and reviewing the text.

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E-mail: lesyeditorial@gmail.com