



What are the Experiences of African American Occupational Therapy Students in Team-Based Learning at Predominantly White Institutions in the Southeastern Region of the United States?

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Introduction

•Team-based learning (TBL) is an instructional strategy that is intended to support the development of high performance in learning teams while providing opportunities to engage in important learning tasks (Michaelsen, 2023). In addition to aiding in students’ personal growth due to the skills and knowledge acquired through this strategy (Lexén et al., 2017).

•TBL is built on four principles: forming diverse groups, ensuring accountability, providing timely feedback to enhance learning and retention, and fostering teamwork through collaborative problem-solving assignments (Michaelsen et al., 2008).

•Diversity is vital for equitable learning, yet occupational therapy (OT) education faces challenges with African American representation. In 2022-2023, Black students comprised only 7% of Doctoral and 8% of Master’s program enrollment, compared to 77% and 76% of White students (Harrison, 2024).

•This disparity can influence the dynamics within TBL environments, as TBL relies on collaboration and the exchange of diverse perspectives among students in health profession education (Michaelsen et al., 2008).

Methods

•Quantitative data analysis was performed in Qualtrics using descriptive statistics. Percentages summarized responses to each question, while averages, minimums, and maximums were calculated for numerical data.

•For recruitment, an email was sent to program directors and fieldwork educators to invite participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to identify as African American and attend predominantly white institutions in the Southeastern region. Eligible institutions included accredited, pre-accredited, or candidacy-status programs offering doctorate or master’s degrees.

•Survey participants could opt to provide their email address to join a focus group. A total of 12 participants were divided into two semi-structured focus groups, each lasting 45 minutes.

•Thematic analysis was applied to transcriptions to identify recurring themes and patterns, while narrative analysis explored participants’ experiences, providing deeper insights into the identified themes.

Results

- A total of 68 responses were collected from the survey, with all respondents providing consent. Of these, 35% (n=24) were excluded from the study because they did not identify as African American.
- A survey was conducted with 44 African American OT students to assess their perceptions of TBL using a 5-point Likert scale (Table 1) to measure agreement levels, a 4-point scale (Table 2) to assess likelihood, and close-ended questions (Table 3) to capture specific responses.
- 1 participant bypassed the question focusing on their professor prioritizing diversity in TBL groups making the totaling 43 participants.

Survey Questions	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Does your OT program participate in TBL?	89%	11%			
	N= 39	N= 5			
Are you assigned important roles in school assignments when TBL is required?	25%	39%	23%	11%	2%
	N= 11	N=17	N=10	N=5	N=1
Does TBL activities help improve your relationships with other students?	22%	33%	16%	13%	16%
	N= 10	N=15	N= 7	N= 5	N= 7
Does TBL help you learn course material better vs. lecture-based learning?	29%	33%	20%	9%	9%
	N= 12	N= 15	N= 9	N= 4	N= 4
Does TBL help improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills?	41%	41%	4%	7%	7%
	N= 18	N= 18	N= 2	N= 3	N= 3
Does TBL lectures help you work more effectively on school projects, assignments, and homework?	16%	36%	30%	11%	7%
	N= 7	N= 16	N= 13	N= 5	N= 3

Survey Questions	Yes	Maybe	No
Have you ever been the only African American student in your TBL group?	98%		2%
	N= 43		N= 1
Do you feel confident in addressing conflict in your TBL group?	22%	55%	22%
	N=10	N=24	N= 10
Do you believe using TBL in lectures will be beneficial in OT programs?	73%	25%	2%
	N=32	N= 11	N= 1

The focus group discussion explored participants' experiences in detail through five key questions, addressing professor diversity efforts in TBL, confidence in managing conflict, feelings of exclusion, being the only African American student in a TBL group, and the perceived benefits of TBL in occupational therapy programs.

Theme 1 & Theme 2: Structured Group and Skill-Based Formation
“Professors divvy us up based on skill, if you’re good at research you have this number, if you’re good at providing rationale you have this number until there are 4-5 skills total. Then the professor makes sure each skill is in each group to provide balance.”
“We get grouped based on surveys that we took, which allows us to separate from our friends and encourages us to work with different health professions like physical therapy, medical students, and nursing students.”

Theme 3 & Theme 4: Challenges in Communication/ Different Approaches to Conflict
“When I’m addressing conflict, I find it difficult to express my feelings and it may be taken the wrong way due to group members not understanding my tone or how I communicate.”
“I’m more of a soft-spoken person and a little more reserved so usually when there’s a problem, I’m not the first one to speak up.”
“I have no problem with being confident, I’m going to do what is necessary to get my point across. I believe that conflict can be good and set the foundation within the group.”

Theme 5: Leadership and Team Organization
“In team-based groups I take the leadership role, so when you’re the leader you can’t really be excluded.”
“My group designates assignments so everyone can have a part, and nobody is doing less or more than the other person.”
“Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses and it’s important that you show your strengths in your group to produce the best product. People know what they are good at and that’s why I never really feel excluded.”

Survey Questions	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably Not	Definitely Not
Does your professor show effort in making more diverse TBL groups within your program?	23%	43%	25%	9%
	N= 9	N= 19	N= 11	N= 4
Do you feel excluded when engaging in TBL activities?	25%	30%	25%	20%
	N= 11	N= 13	N= 11	N= 9

Theme 6: Representation in TBL Groups
“It’s only 2 African Americans in my cohort, so when I’m in a group where I’m the only African American I learn from everyone else I’m around and it helps me learn more about myself.”
“I was the only African American in my group and I had to fight for my voice to be heard and make my presence known.”
“Some groups I feel supported and then there are times in groups where I feel like I have to push a little more for my voice to be heard so that makes it difficult, but beneficial because it allowed me to speak up for myself

Theme 7: Collaboration, Teamwork, and Inclusion
“I think it’s very beneficial, we’ll be working with different health professionals. It’ll also be helpful for patients that we see who come from different backgrounds and cultures.”
“We’re getting prepped for what it’s going to be like in the professional world by learning to communicate with other people who might think differently than you. It helps you learn more about yourself and how to handle yourself if I were to be in that situation.”
“I believe we need it in OT programs, we will have to work with other disciplines, and we may have to work with the same client. Interacting with other disciplines will give the best outcome for the client.”
“I think it is beneficial because we will work with other teams and will help us learn how to navigate conflict with other people.”

Discussion

Key Findings

- Overall, the perception TBL effectiveness were positive. Most participants acknowledged that TBL helps increase both critical and problem-solving skills.
- Fifty-five percent of participants expressed uncertainty or discomfort in addressing conflict within their groups, emphasizing the need to implement strategies to encourage confidence and equity in team interactions.
- Many participants expressed that having positive experiences were linked to having structured group dynamics such as delegating roles and assignments.
- Participants also noted that knowing their group members’ strengths and weaknesses allowed them to produce quality work and be a more efficient team.

Limitations

- There are multiple ways that TBL groups can be developed influencing the participant's perspective and personal experience with this instructional method.
- The lack of specific data on the number of African American students enrolled in occupational therapy programs presents a challenge in determining an appropriate participant sample size for research.
- A small sample size may reduce the ability to generalize the findings to a larger population, as it may not appropriately represent the variability of a broader group.

Conclusion

- This project highlights the need that there are barriers that African Americans experience when engaging in TBL in predominantly white spaces.
- The findings highlight the outcomes of African American often being excluded which impacts their confidence in addressing conflict in TBL groups.
- TBL groups where diversity is intentional positively influences well-structured teams showing the need for professors to actively create inclusive group dynamics to enhance the learning experience for all students.

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