

Episode: 8

Title: Community Based OT

Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari

Mahek Bansal

Hi everyone. Welcome back to the New PossibilOTs Podcast. Larissa and I are so excited to have you back with us. Today we are going to be talking about community based OT. So Larissa and I, as we've spoken about in previous episodes, work predominantly in a clinic, however, we've both had experience working in community settings such as schools, preschools and in clients homes. So we thought we'd share a little bit about our experiences - why OTs might work in community settings and the benefits of this, and I guess also share from our experience some strategies and some tips in terms of navigating some of the challenges that might come with working in these settings. So Larissa, maybe you want to just start by sharing some of your experience working in the community.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, sure. And I think I'll start just by saying that by community I think we mean being anywhere where the client is involved in their life. So it could be in their home environment, in the school where they go to, groups that they might go, like leisure groups, play groups, sports groups. So these places that they build their community, they build relationships, they have a meaningful participation or occupations, as we spoke about, just for clarifying for the people that might not know what this means. So my experience as working in community based was a little bit of everything. I used to do home care visits in Brazil when I was practicing as an OT. And we have a little bit of a different public health system in there as well.

So in the public health system, we have the opportunity of working in a practice, but also to do home visits and community visits and have that both settings, if that makes sense. And here in Australia, I also had the opportunity to go into the home environment, school and preschool environment, and some leisure groups as well. Each one of them has its specifications. For example, when we are in the home environment, we can work very closely with the family. We can observe the occupations in their natural environment, we can check and assess the home environment itself, like the facility, what are the barriers in the house, what's the opportunities we have to work with the clients. Whereas at the school, we have the school members perspective. We have the environment that's more related to their academic performance, but also where we see the friendships, because sometimes it's hard to see that at home or in groups when they're like 30, 45 minutes. So I think in each one of them we have different, as you said, great things to work on, but also some barriers. But I think they're all valuable in a sense that you could observe the different occupations put into practice. What about you, Mahek?

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, so I think similar to you, Larissa, early on, when I was starting as an OT, I did a lot of home visits, a lot of intervention in the home environment. And then I've done lots of school based OT as well, working regularly in different schools, but then also going to schools and preschools and shopping centres and workplaces and things like that to support clients in their natural settings. So I think you've sort of started off by listing some of the, I guess, benefits and opportunities that working in natural settings can provide us. And I guess whilst we are predominantly a clinic based service now, we still have a lot of opportunity and make opportunity to work with our clients in their natural settings because it provides us with so much valuable information. Provides us with so much opportunity to support a client and a

Episode: 8**Title: Community Based OT****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

family and support the people who are around this client on a more regular basis than we are. So I think that the benefits of working as part of the child's community is not to be understated.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah, and I always try to think that we are part of a team. So the client is the star of that team and we all have a very important participation in that team. And when you collaborate with your community, so even when you're community based or when you have the opportunity to go to the community, it's a great opportunity for us as a team to build that rapport and work as a team. So, for example, because we work with children, we might see the client in our practice and then we might email parents or teachers or other therapists and then we can have these brief conversations on the background. But it's only when you go to that environment and you meet that person, I think as a team we build a rapport to help to understand the child's strengths and challenges and that's when the collaboration plays a big role on the child's life from my point of view. So when I have the opportunity to go to the school and then when you have the opportunity to go to the home environment or if we can't, just by talking to the parents and trying to understand the child's performance at home and then we work with other therapists, that's when we all, it's like a puzzle where we can all put together and understand how the child's participating in every setting. And I think that helps a lot with our clinical reasoning as therapists. And sometimes there's being this key worker, like trying to get everyone to collaborate and get each other's help because they're quite complex. We've mentioned that before, paediatrics is quite complex in general. So I quite like that possibility of partnerships in the community.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah. And I think building off what you mentioned, Larissa, especially in terms of building those connections and that understanding with the other important people in this child's life, I think brings up a big point around a strategy to support in community appointments or in community OT. And that is to really work closely and communicate, I guess, the scope of what we do and to work in an equal ground with our partners, whether that's educators, whether that's parents, whether it's peers, whoever that is, to, I guess, come from a place of curiosity and from a place of understanding to say, look, this is what I know. What do you know? How can we put this together, as you say, like those puzzle pieces to sort of fill in this picture for this client? So I'm coming in from a sense of curiosity to find out more and then to also explain and communicate, look, this is my role, this is my perspective, this is what I know of this child. But I'm here to find out from you, what's your perspective? What do you know? I guess that sense of an equal playing field can support collaborative relationships, can make, foster the people that you're working with to want to work with you and feel like you're approachable, like you have the best interests of this client and this family in mind. And it's something that sometimes without being there, without meeting in person, you can't truly have this collaborative relationship, because there's this feeling of understanding, even from a teacher's perspective. Once you walk into their classroom and see what their classroom is like, understand the dynamic and the routine, they have this greater sense that you understand what happens in their environment rather than just a few back and forth emails or a 10 or 15 minute phone call. You can't have that level of understanding because you're not there.

Larissa Ferrari

Episode: 8**Title: Community Based OT****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

And I guess from my point of view, from my perspective in my practice, I've tried to be as non-judgmental as possible. And I also try to explain that some minimal changes or at least just expanding our point of view might make a huge difference in the child's life. Because I also feel like when we approach other members of the child's life, like parents, teachers or other instructors of sports and things like that, I sometimes feel like they are afraid that we're going to come and change everything or ask them to do a lot of things or try just to give a lecture on what's the best practice and what to do. And I like to be non-judgmental and understanding and as exactly what you're saying, to work in collaboration so they can rely on us because sometimes they also need that support and they can't trust anyone to actually say I really need help, I really need to know how to do this. And just when you are open to have these beautiful and meaningful collaborative relationships, that's when I feel like we could sometimes come up with amazing strategies to support the client.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, definitely. I guess collaborative relationships and working in partnership with people is one really big, I guess, challenge sometimes, but also a big benefit of working within a community. Larissa, have you experienced any other sort of challenges when you've been working in the community in comparison to in clinic appointments?

Larissa Ferrari

I guess some of the challenges in my point of view, I have actually two main challenges, I would say two main barriers when working in the community. So number one is that sometimes I'm so used to the practice that I'm at and the resources I have available, that just sometimes to limit my amount of resources I have to go to the community, that is a little bit of a challenge for me. I'm used to improvising depending on how the child's engaging with me and with the activity. But when we have limited resources, we need extra improvisation skills. And I guess sometimes depending on where the child is too much comfortable, like for example, in the home environment, that's the comfortable zone, it is where they know their boundaries, which is different from the practice, and sometimes it's a big barrier for me just to try to build that engagement similar to what we have in different environments. Because I understand we're going to their home, they have their own rules, they want way to behave in a sense of participate. And then when we get there, we kind of have to go with that flow and sometimes that can be a challenge as well. But also talking about comfortable zones, sometimes it might take a while for me to warm up, for example, to a school environment because I don't want to feel that I'm invading all this space in terms of staff, school staff. So sometimes it's me then that I need to find that comfort zone and to build that meaningful relationship, so I'm more comfortable in working with a child in that setting. Like being respectful for the other professionals as well. Is there any other challenge you could think of or do you feel the same way as myself?

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, I definitely agree. I think especially with the resources, I guess you get used to a certain set of resources or the equipment and the spaces that you have and your clinical reasoning, the activities that you sort of have in the back of your mind that you can pull out when you need them are based on what you have available. So I think it takes an extra level of creative flexibility when you're working in the community, but it's a great skill set to have as an OT. I guess the other thing as well that I found personally can be challenging

Episode: 8**Title: Community Based OT****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

sometimes is maintaining my level of communication with a parent or a family when I'm in something like a school setting.

So if I'm in a school setting and I'm seeing a client regularly at school, I've got great collaborative relationships with the teachers and the educators and the school environment. But because I don't have regular face to face contact with the parents or the family, sometimes it can be challenging to liaise - it will either be over the phone or over email. It can be timely, it can just be hard, like logistically and practically if you have information that you need right now or you're trying to share strategies and resources to be implemented in the home environment, that sort of communication can be a challenge.

Larissa Ferrari

I agree. I feel the same way, especially, I guess when the kids are a little bit older. So after eight, nine years old, I think when I think they're more settled to school, they're usually going to the same school for a few years. So I think that's when that communication with the parents can be more challenging because I feel like they trust in what we do and the school, they trust the school, but that doesn't mean that we cannot rely on their feedback and still support their children at the home environment, but from a distance in that case. But that can still be valuable. So I find it the same way.

Mahek Bansal

I guess with these barriers in like, what would you suggest, Larissa? What would be your tips and your strategies to, I guess, support you, support others working in these environments?

Larissa Ferrari

I guess my tip number one will be to always seek for that collaboration with the other members of the child's community. So to build that communication with the parents straight away. And then if you're going to the school environment to be open, to build that relationship with the school team, or if you're going to observe a child in a leisure group, just present yourself, say your name with a beautiful smile, try to be as open as possible just to get their trust. Because I think a lot of valuable information will come from these resources. So we are lucky enough, as we mentioned before, to have the opportunity of having a parent meeting first and then to have the opportunity to see the client, the child in the clinic, which is quite engaging and motivating, we have a lot of resources. So I think that if I didn't have all of that, my main means of resources and knowledge would come from the child's community. I think that would be my tip number one. Would you like to have a turn? Maybe we can take turns on tips.

Mahek Bansal

Yes. Tip number two, I think, and it sounds really basic and everyone should be doing this, but I think when you're working in the community, planning and organisation go a really long way. I think that you are trying to build relationships, you're trying to build trust with the clients, community, their educators, whoever you're working with. You want to also look professional, look planned, look organised. Being able to prepare activities and resources that you'll need when you're out in the community, having the background information to feel confident when you're speaking to the people that you're interacting with, just **builds** that sense of trust to know that you are there for the right reason you know what you're talking about. You have done your research in that sense. So then that will I guess when you're

Episode: 8**Title: Community Based OT****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

starting to build relationships, it creates a good first impression but also builds that sense of trust.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah, that's great. That's a great tip and I totally agree. And I think following that tip number two, I would say that tip number three is don't be afraid to observe with confidence. I guess sometimes we might feel the need of coming up with these amazing strategies straight away, but just to not be scared to sit and observe how the child performs in that environment, how the child communicates, how the child showed to make choices, behaviours, sensory preferences, how they perform one specific task. And a lot will come as well from these observations. They're very valuable. And just be confident that this part of the job is important and don't be afraid of saying, I'll observe today just because I want to gather the right information so then I can come up with more appropriate strategies, for example. I guess that would be my tip number three.

Mahek Bansal

Tip number four from me, I think maybe thinking about resources, is take a few staple items with you that you already know how you can use in multiple ways. So whether that's something like TheraPutty for fine motor and having, I guess in the back of your mind a range of activities that you could do with the putty that targets different goals. I guess depending on the types of clients that you're seeing, yeah, think of these sorts of items that are going to be used in multiple ways. A deck of cards is great. You can do matching, you can do turn taking, you can do social. So just one resource that is like multiple ways and then think of a few resources that covers I guess the areas that you're working with so that you just have them in your bag and you can improvise when you need to, but you feel confident with knowing that you've got something that you can be flexible with.

Larissa Ferrari

And adding to tip number four would be, be creative. Like sometimes Pop the pirate. Sometimes the sword can become a pretend play. It's okay if it's not a take-turning game yet. Or I don't know, the card sometimes can become a house and it's fine if we still not yet with the cognitive skills needed to play the card game as we should. So just to be, like I said, as creative as possible with a few resources you've got because sometimes one game you can use in five different ways with five different clients. And then just maybe how you can change the postural control needed to play that game. So how you can explore that game even if your body is in different ways to support the client's goals.

Mahek Bansal

And adding to tip number four as well is use what the opportunities that you have in the natural environments. So if you're at school, use the school playground, use the resources in the classroom. If you're at home, have a look at what the child usually plays with, what do they have access to, see what their engagement is like. So I guess being in the community, it's a great opportunity for you to use those natural activities that the child is already engaged in or has around them every day. So, yeah, use what you've got in the environment that you're in.

Larissa Ferrari

And I guess tip number five, it will also be if you're going to a lot of different places, check,

Episode: 8**Title: Community Based OT****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari**

for example, how long is it going to take you in terms of transport? Like your case load - is it too much, like less clients. Will you have enough energy after going around to a lot of places? Are you going by car? Are you going by bus? Is there any place to park? Like, these things might take up half of your day and it can be quite exhausting as well. So to consider these things and check if they're doable or if you need to rethink these things just in terms of taking care of yourself as a therapist.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, that's a great tip. Tip number six would be, be really clear and transparent when you set out starting a community based intervention with a client, what the expectation is for your level of communication across the parties. So speak to the parent about how frequently will you be sending your notes, or if you'll be setting up phone calls or emails and chat to the educators if you're at the school, I guess be clear going into it what your expectation is or what is reasonable for the situation that you're in, so that there isn't any miscommunication down the track, or you don't feel the need to be going much further than what you've agreed on, which will then take out from your own time and energy. So I guess being clear and setting, I guess the expectation for communication can help, especially being in the community where you are working sometimes that more key worker role, trying to put all the pieces of the different people involved together.

Larissa Ferrari

That's a great one as well. And adding to that, I'll go back to the beginning of our episode today by saying just show the community the importance of community. So show the parents the importance of these partnerships with other professionals, with the school. So if you all are very clear in your goals and your strategies, this could be really beneficial for the child. You can share your strategy with another therapist and it might make a huge difference. Another therapist might share their strategy with you and that could make a big difference. And also you might help on each other's goals, but working on different things, if that makes sense. So it's more beneficial for the child.

I'm happy one day to have someone that works in community based OT to come join us and maybe try to share even more benefits and strategies as well. Because I think that we still have the benefit of being in a practice and just going out like a busy bee. We go out, we observe, we exchange, we meet people, but then we can come back to our practice with all of the resources and everything. So, I think we're a little bit privileged in that sense of experience both worlds. So maybe someone can come and share more with us, which I would love to hear as well.

Mahek Bansal

Yes, we would love that. So maybe we'll leave this discussion open for people to share their thoughts, their experiences, if they've got any tips and strategies to share with the community and maybe hopefully, someone might want to join us. But until then, Larissa and I are really looking forward to joining you on our next episode and connecting with you in the meantime. Thank you. Bye.