



# **Building the capacity of Indian occupational therapists, Canadian student occupational therapists and occupational therapy services in rural South India through virtual fieldwork placements: A global partnership**

Franzina Coutinho<sup>1,2</sup>, Caroline Storr-Ordolis<sup>2</sup>, Dinesh Krishna<sup>3,4</sup>, Marie Brien<sup>3</sup>, Ramasubramanian Ponnusamy<sup>1</sup>, Navamani Venkatachalapathy<sup>1</sup>, Janna MacLachlan<sup>4</sup>, Janice Chan<sup>5</sup>, Gauri Saxena<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Amar Seva Sangam, <sup>2</sup>McGill University, <sup>3</sup>Handi-Care International, <sup>4</sup>University of Toronto, <sup>5</sup>University of British Columbia

## **Introduction**

Across Canadian Universities, in-person student fieldwork opportunities have been limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In India, a lack of qualified occupational therapists has led to limited occupational therapy service availability in rural communities. Educational opportunities for therapists are also limited.

## **Objective**

Amar Seva Sangam (ASSA), is an NGO in South India that provides rehabilitation services to 15,000 people with disabilities. They collaborated with six Canadian universities to develop and pilot a model for global virtual student fieldwork that offers valuable learning opportunities for occupational therapy students and builds the service capacity of the host organization.

## **Methods**

Canadian students were matched with Indian occupational therapists. Clients and their families were provided with android smartphones and virtual-care sessions were conducted in clients' homes. Occupational therapists from North America with experience in low resource settings supported bridging the resource and cultural contexts for students, and provided coaching to Indian therapists.

This study employed a mixed methods, cross-sectional research design. Surveys of four stakeholder groups (Canadian students, North American supervisors, Indian rehabilitation therapists and parents) were conducted. These surveys included questions related to comfort with using technology, perception of technology use for rehabilitation and stakeholder experience with the tele-rehabilitation placement. Focus groups were conducted with the parents and Indian therapists about their experiences with the programme.

## Results

The study sample consisted of 46 parents of children with disabilities, 56 Indian rehabilitation workers, 7 North American supervisors and 7 rehabilitation students. Of the children, 30.43% received solely OT services, 10.86% received PT services, 32.60% received speech services, and 2.17% received other services.

- Parents, rehabilitation professionals, supervisors, and students felt that worldwide tele-rehabilitation assignments **should continue** when travel limitations are lifted.
- A majority of the students also indicated that the programme helped them **improve their communication skills, clinical reasoning skills, ability to work in a multidisciplinary setup, confidence in their abilities, and their capacity for self-directed learning.**
  - Most students had chosen this programme to **gain experience in tele-rehabilitation, global rehabilitation, and to gain experience working in a cross cultural set-up.**
- More than 75% of Indian rehabilitation professionals mentioned that the partnership **improved their communication skills and their confidence in providing services virtually.**
  - Only 17.85% had previously provided tele-rehabilitation
  - Only 3.57% had previously worked with North American students or supervisors
- Focus Group Discussion with Parents: Primary themes included **'the positive experience of using technology', 'benefits of child-parent--therapist partnerships', and 'possible improvements to the programme'**.
- Focus Group Discussions with Indian Rehabilitation Professionals: Primary themes included **'positives of the cross-cultural programme', and 'culture related challenges'**. The Indian professionals indicated that the students had different ideas and techniques to what the professionals practiced at present, which helped them pick up new skills.

Table 1: Parents Demographic Data

Duration of rehabilitation	
Under 1 month	-
2-6 months	7
6-12 months	4
Over a year	35
Relationship with child	
Mother	40
Father	4
Grandmother	1
Grandfather	1
Gender of child	
Male	34
Female	11

Table 2: Supervisor Demographic Data

Profession	
OT	85.71% (6)
Speech-language Pathology	14.28% (1)
Previous supervision of students on ASSA placements	
Yes	71.42% (5)
No	28.57% (2)
Previous provision of tele-supervision	
Yes	0
No	100% (7)

Chart 1: Rehab Worker's at ASSA

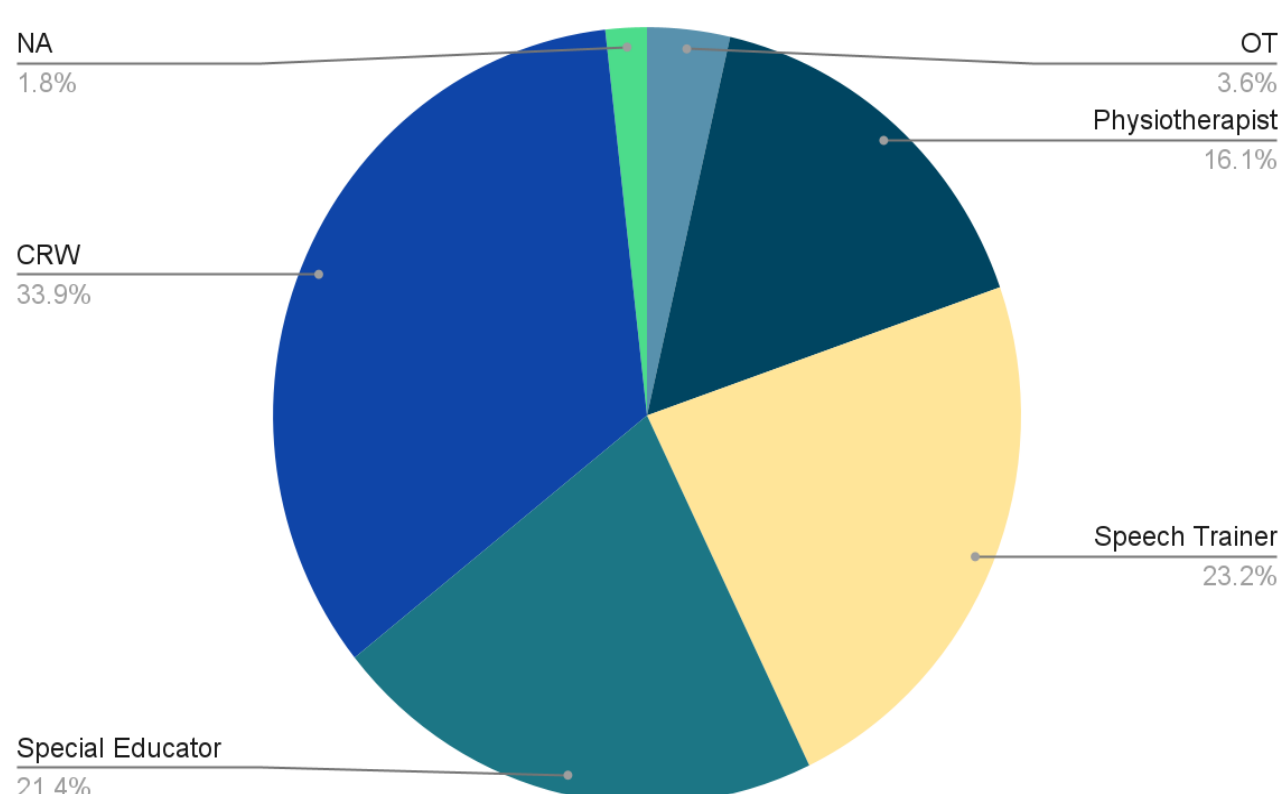
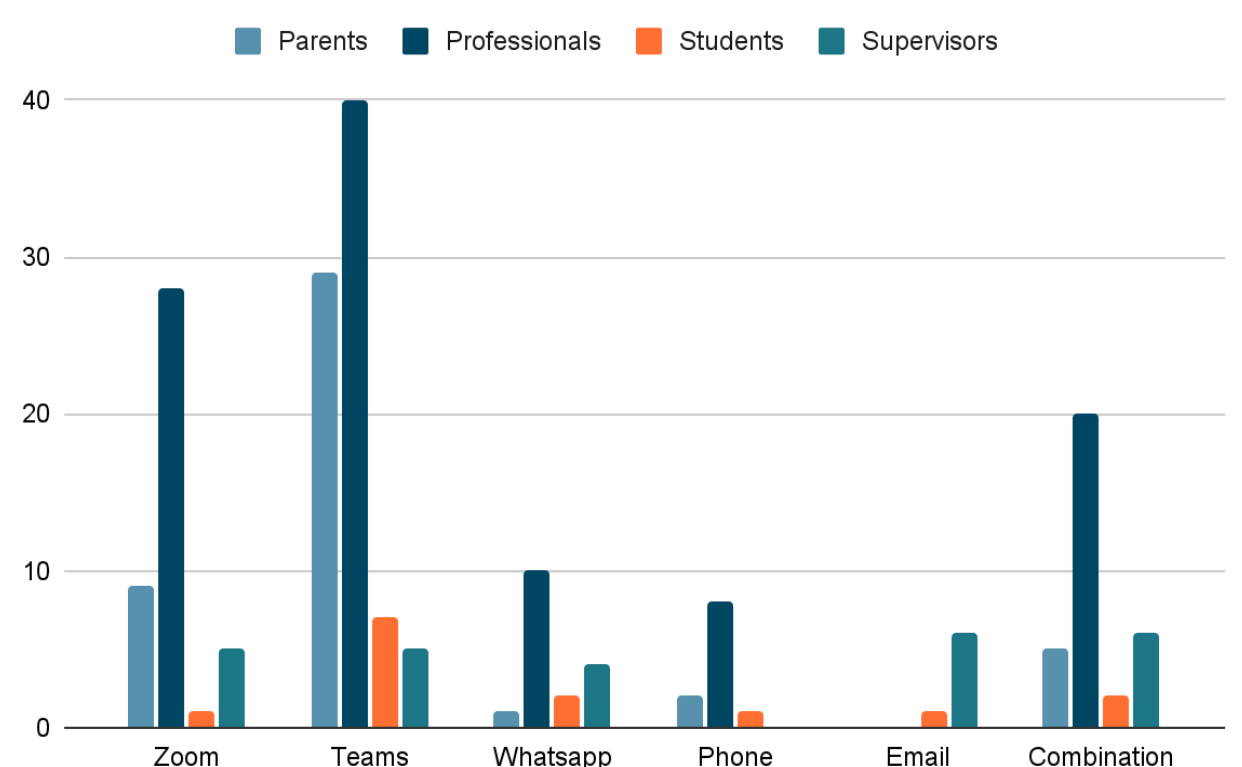


Chart 2: Platforms Used

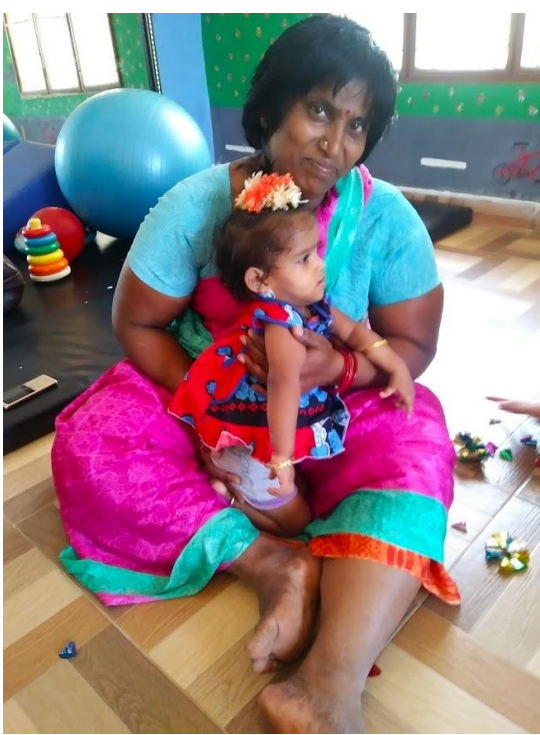


## Discussions

**Improved Access** - all stakeholders agreed that the tele-rehabilitation partnership helped provide services that would otherwise have been unavailable. Parents of children receiving the services mentioned that these services helped their children continue to progress during Covid-19

**Capacity Building** - both the students and the Indian rehabilitation workers improved their communication and clinical skills by working together. Rehabilitation professionals also picked up new treatment techniques from the students.

**Cultural Humility** - the partnership provided the student stakeholder group with the opportunity to understand the culture at ASSA, the strengths within the community and integrate the virtual rehabilitation experience to shape their (student) future practice.



## Conclusion

Virtual fieldwork placements for Canadian occupational therapy students provided **increased access** to occupational therapy services in rural India and was an **impactful educational experience** for Canadian students and Indian therapists.

In a post-pandemic world, nearly 75% of the rehabilitation professionals believe that they would **continue to use tele-rehabilitation**. Similarly, more than half the students indicated that such tele-rehabilitation placements should continue even once the pandemic ends - although a majority of them did not believe these placements should be an essential part of a health professional degree. As for the parents, a majority of them stated that they would **prefer a hybrid of on site and tele-rehabilitation services**.

## References

Caroline Storr, Janna MacLachlan, Dinesh Krishna, Ramasubramanian Ponnusamy, Donna Drynan, Carmen Moliner, Kristina McLaughlin, Susanne Murphy, Megan Edgelow, Margaret Anne Campbell-Rempel, Ann Bossers, Heidi Lauckner & Debra Cameron (2018): Building sustainable fieldwork partnerships between Canada and India: Finding common goals through evaluation, World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin, DOI: 10.1080/14473828.2018.143231