

Original Article

Occupational therapy education in the context of Brazilian northeast: reflections to advocate for a generalist professional and the social function of universities

Formação em terapia ocupacional nas universidades públicas do nordeste do Brasil: reflexões em defesa do profissional generalista e da função social das universidades

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze the graduate profile and course objectives as presented in the Political Pedagogical Projects of undergraduate occupational therapy courses located in public higher education institutions in Northeast Brazil, and to make observations about the direction of training, professional practice, and the job market. **Method:** This is a documentary study that analyzed the Political Pedagogical Projects (PPPs) of undergraduate occupational therapy courses located in public institutions in the Northeast region of Brazil. Data collection took place from March to September 2023, and the categories “course objective” and “graduate profile” were specifically selected for analysis. After the analysis, reflective topics were constructed. **Results:** It was identified that most courses mention work in health and training for public policies/the public sector, citing health knowledge and a generalist graduate profile. To a lesser extent, the documents indicate: training geared towards the social assistance and education sectors, the use of knowledge from the humanities, and the explicit mention of local specificities. **Conclusion:** It is pointed out that the results reflect the historical context of the profession’s development in the country, and it is recommended that: the social function of public institutions be preserved; that the actors involved promote the aforementioned generalist and reflective training, without succumbing to market logic; that possible regional specificities of training/performance be studied; and that institutions and teachers work towards integrating the theory presented in the project texts with practice.

Keywords: Education, Occupational Therapy, Work.

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Resumo

Objetivo: Analisar o perfil do egresso e o objetivo do curso expostos nos Projetos Políticos Pedagógicos de cursos de graduação em terapia ocupacional, localizados em instituições de ensino superior públicas do Nordeste, e realizar apontamentos sobre o direcionamento da formação, da atuação profissional e do mercado de trabalho.

Método: Trata-se de um estudo documental que analisou Projetos Políticos Pedagógicos (PPPs) dos cursos de graduação em terapia ocupacional localizados em instituições públicas da região Nordeste. A coleta de dados ocorreu de março a setembro de 2023 e foram elencadas para análise especificamente as categorias “objetivo do curso” e “perfil do egresso”. Após a análise, construíram-se tópicos reflexivos. **Resultados:** Identificou-se que a maior parte dos cursos menciona a atuação em saúde e uma formação para as políticas públicas/setor público citando conhecimentos da saúde e um perfil generalista de egressos. Em menor parte, os documentos informam: a formação voltada para o setor da assistência social e educação, a utilização de conhecimentos das ciências humanas e a explicitação das especificidades locais. **Conclusão:** Aponta-se que os resultados são reflexo do contexto histórico de desenvolvimento da profissão no país e recomenda-se que: a função social das instituições públicas seja preservada; que os atores envolvidos fomentem a formação generalista e reflexiva citadas, sem sucumbir à lógica de mercado; que sejam estudadas possíveis especificidades regionais de formação/atuação; e que as instituições e docentes trabalhem em prol da integração entre a teoria exposta nos textos do projeto e a prática.

Palavras-chave: Educação, Terapia Ocupacional, Trabalho.

Introduction

The institutionalization of undergraduate occupational therapy programs in public universities in the Northeast occurred in different periods, across the various states of that region. Their characteristics are related to historical and temporal contexts that are not homogeneous, even though they are Northeastern.

It is understood that, in order to conduct an analysis of the pedagogical political projects (PPPs) of these programs, it is necessary to minimally describe some points, which are presented in this introduction as subtopics, namely: the different historical contexts of implementation of the analyzed programs, the importance of the PPPs, the relevance of the National Curriculum Guidelines (NCGs) in the debate on the topic, and some initial issues for reflecting on education from the perspective of Northeast Brazil.

Timeline: historical context of implementation of the different occupational therapy programs located in public universities

The first occupational therapy program in Pernambuco was technical/vocational (following the national trend of the pioneers), was created in 1962, and later, in 1973, was recognized as a higher education program and is currently located on the premises of the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE - Universidade Federal de Pernambuco).

The first professional training programs were inspired by occupational therapy practice from the United States of America and, consequently, were centered on the biomedical and rehabilitative model (Folha, 2019; Reis, 2017). It is mentioned that, still in the 1960s, the recognition and regulation of occupational therapy as a profession occurred, in accordance with Decree-Law 938/1969 (Brasil, 1969).

The first expansion in terms of undergraduate occupational therapy programs in Brazil occurred from 1970 onwards (Folha, 2019). After the implementation of the Occupational Therapy Program at UFPE in 1973, the second occupational therapy program in a public higher education institution, implemented in the Northeast of the country, was that of the University of Health Sciences of Alagoas (UNCISAL). The program was created in 1997 and is currently in operation.

Considering the Brazilian scenario, authors such as Malfitano & Ferreira (2011) report the influence of the creation of the Unified Health System (SUS) on the expansion of areas and places of practice for occupational therapists. They highlight that professional training in occupational therapy, in the mid-2000s, was influenced by the expansion of Brazilian public policies, resulting in an increase in undergraduate occupational therapy programs in the country.

However, although the implementation of a new health system influenced the insertion of occupational therapists into the labor market in different states of the Northeast, it cannot be stated that this fact immediately drove an increase in the number of undergraduate occupational therapy programs in public higher education institutions in this region.

This is because, during this period, there is no record of the implementation of any new program. The later dissemination of public undergraduate training programs in a given region may highlight regional inequalities in terms of investment and opportunities in science and education. This reality may negatively impact professional training and regional development, as it may lead to a shortage of qualified professionals and difficulty in meeting social demands related to the profession.

Such problems can be mitigated through educational policies and the expansion/diversification of the offer of undergraduate programs (Conceição, 2020). More than 10 years passed before a new public occupational therapy program was offered in the Northeast region after the UNCISAL program, and it was necessary to implement educational policies aimed at mitigating both regional and state-level asymmetries.

As an example of what has been stated, it is mentioned that the Program to Support Plans for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (REUNI), approved in 2007, provided subsidies for the implementation of programs at the Federal University of Paraíba, in João Pessoa (UFPB), and at the Federal University of Sergipe, in Lagarto (UFS). These programs were created in 2010 and 2011, respectively.

It is also pointed out that more recently, considering the growth of the profession and market demand for professionals in the Northeast, three new public programs were created, totaling seven in the region: the Occupational Therapy program at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), created in 2021; at the State University of Ceará (UECE), in 2019; and at the University of Pernambuco (UPE), created in 2023. Table 1 below presents the data previously described.

In July 2025, data from the National Course Registration System of the Ministry of Education (e-MEC) indicated that seven undergraduate occupational therapy courses are operating in public higher education institutions in the Northeast region, corroborating what was mentioned earlier, but also pointed out that there are 36 non-free courses in operation in this region (including all delivery modalities, with 2 in Alagoas, 8 in Bahia, 6 in Ceará, 2 in Maranhão, 4 in Paraíba, 7 in Pernambuco, 2 in Piauí, 2 in Rio Grande do Norte and 3 in Sergipe). It should be noted that, according to Inep/MEC, the disaggregation by federative units, which generated this number, is only possible for undergraduate courses in face-to-face format, as distance learning courses can be offered in different states through face-to-face support centers.

Table 1. General data on undergraduate occupational therapy courses in Northeast Brazil offered by public higher education institutions and currently in operation, 2025.

Year of commencement	Institution	State	Observations
1962	Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE)	Pernambuco	Technical/vocational course
1973	Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE)	Pernambuco	Recognition as a higher education course
1997	Universidade Estadual de Ciências da Saúde de Alagoas (UNCISAL)	Alagoas	Second public course in the region
2010	Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB)	Paraíba	Created with support from REUNI
2011	Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS)	Sergipe	Created with support from REUNI
2019	Universidade Estadual do Ceará (UECE)	Ceará	Recent expansion
2021	Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA)	Bahia	Recent expansion
2023	Universidade de Pernambuco (UPE)	Pernambuco	Most recent public course in the region

Source: Authors' elaboration based on public data.

Regarding this data, the e-MEC System indicated that, with the exception of two courses (started in 2011, one in Bahia and the other in Pernambuco), the remaining non-free occupational therapy undergraduate programs in operation began between 2020 and 2025. This number of programs in the private sector may be even higher in the coming years, as the public consultation revealed that, in addition to the 36 indicated, there are courses already created with the status “not commenced”.

This indicates that, in the future, professionals trained in Occupational Therapy in the Northeast will have been, to a large extent, the result of PPPs (Public-Private Partnerships) of private institutions. It should be noted that the objective of this article was not to characterize, describe, or analyze PPPs of occupational therapy undergraduate programs in the Northeast within private higher education institutions, but rather to present a general overview to mention a contemporary situation of the profession in the country.

The role of the Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP)

Regarding the Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP), a fundamental element for the analysis proposed in this study, it is worth mentioning, for explanatory purposes, that this is a document that aims to “present to the academic community how the course is characterized and organized according to its choices and paths to contribute to the professional training it proposes to offer its students” (Albuquerque et al., 2022).

In other words, it is understood here that through this document it should be possible to obtain elements about the identity of a course and identify clues that indicate whether there is a valorization of certain fields or sectors of activity and theoretical contributions to the detriment of others.

Although it is not a simple academic and/or administrative task for the teams and institutions involved, the PPP can and should be reviewed and reformulated over time.

This process largely takes into account the existence of theoretical, practical, professional, social, or even legal transformations in a given historical context.

Beyond its importance in terms of regulations, identity, and course planning, this document also forms an important part of the analysis process regarding the quality of undergraduate programs in Brazil. This analysis is carried out by professionals in the field who are part of the evaluation committees linked to the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC).

In this case, the theoretical and practical relevance between the Pedagogical Project and the regulatory and legal issues of the profession is highlighted, as well as the coherence of this document with the National Curriculum Guidelines. Thus, it is understood that the project must be developed considering the importance of envisioning the future. Furthermore, it must articulate social demands in order to present coherence between the proposal and reality (Puccinelli, 2008).

According to the new curriculum guidelines for health-related courses, these PPPs should not be developed solely for the reality of job openings offered by the market. Its development must also be guided by the resolution of contemporary challenges that demand the formation of reflective subjects (Nóbrega-Therrien et al., 2010).

Pinto & Rangel (2004) have already indicated that it is impossible to dissociate the concepts of “political” and “pedagogical” in the construction of a PPP. This is because politics comes from understanding science as a public good and, therefore, universities have the role of understanding themselves as goods and services by and for the people, having social and political commitments.

In this sense, the pedagogical is associated with the field of education studies and, therefore, refers to university goods and services, making it clear that educational issues related to teaching and learning should be incorporated into the document, in addition to issues of curriculum, research and extension.

The political-pedagogical project is a document that presents the basic definitions of the courses according to their context, origin, motives and purpose (...) The (re)construction of these purposes is the task of the collective of teachers, to be updated according to advances in scientific and technological knowledge, and the needs of the job market and the social context (Pinto & Rangel, 2004, p. 252-255).

Considering occupational therapy education nationally, as well as its local, regional, and temporal specificities, it is important to mention the curricular propositions that supported the different historical periods in terms of curricula and projects.

Minimum curriculum and National Curriculum Guidelines (DCNs)

At the beginning of occupational therapy education, when it was understood as a technical-level program, the Federal Council of Education (CFE), in 1963, established the so-called minimum curriculum for the training of occupational therapy professionals (Lopes, 1990).

Haddad et al. (2009) highlighted that between 1965 and 1975 professional education in the health field began to be widely discussed. Occupational therapy was one of the professions incorporated into the health sector at the time when the focus of discussions regarding education was the importance of interdisciplinarity and integration between teaching and care.

From 1970 onwards, occupational therapy was legalized as a higher education program, which occurred amid tensions related to gaining space in the labor market. From 1963 to 1983, the minimum curriculum for occupational therapy was in force, which was characterized by the training of rehabilitation technicians, a model that was questioned by groups of professionals who pointed out the problems of this type of education.

The criticisms referred to professional identity, since there was no consensus that this identity would be linked to theoretical approaches and methods in rehabilitation. These issues fostered discussion about the professional profile of the occupational therapist and about education based on the minimum curriculum in occupational therapy (Lopes, 1990).

After a long debate among professionals linked to representative entities of the professions of physical therapy and occupational therapy, between the late 1970s and 1980s, a document was produced, approved in December 1982 by the CFE and ratified in 1983 by the Ministry of Education (MEC). From this point on, curricular reformulation and restructuring work was initiated in Brazil by higher education institutions (Lopes, 1990; Palhares, 2008).

Thus, based on discussions that took place at the meeting of coordinators of physical therapy and occupational therapy programs, held in São Paulo in 1993, the second minimum curriculum for occupational therapy emerged. This curriculum presented a strong articulation with the health situation of the Brazilian population at that time and aimed to articulate technical, social, and political education (Costa et al., 2023).

At the end of the 1990s, a broad discussion began regarding proposals to change the minimum curriculum. The implementation of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996) determined that the Higher Education Chamber of the National Education Council would be responsible for deliberating on the Curriculum Guidelines for undergraduate programs (Brasil, 1996).

Thus, in 1997, the Brazilian Secretariat for Higher Education (SESu), aiming to meet the professional and educational demands of that historical period, replaced the concept of a minimum curriculum with a competency-based curriculum model, which called upon Higher Education Institutions to present proposals for National Curriculum Guidelines for undergraduate programs (NCGs) (Brasil, 1997; Bregalda & Mângia, 2020).

The NCGs are documents that establish the principles, foundations, content understood as essential, competencies, and skills that undergraduate programs in Brazil must ensure in the education of their students. The NCGs do not propose specific courses or subjects, but are official guidelines that value the pedagogical autonomy of programs. The guidelines for the undergraduate occupational therapy program were approved in 2002 (CNE/CES Resolution No. 6, of February 19, 2002), establishing a milestone for the curricular development of the profession in Brazil (Brasil, 2002).

Article 3 of the NCGs describes the profile of the graduate/professional as "...with a generalist, humanistic, critical, and reflective education. Qualified for professional practice in all its dimensions, guided by ethical principles, in the clinical-therapeutic and preventive fields of occupational therapy practice. Possesses knowledge of the historical, philosophical, and methodological foundations of occupational therapy and its different models of intervention and acts based on scientific and intellectual rigor" (Brasil, 2002).

These guidelines make it clear that occupational therapist education should be oriented toward practice within public policies in areas such as health, social assistance, and education. The document even cites the SUS and SUAS as strategic and fundamental public systems for professional practice (Brasil, 2002).

The curriculum guidelines are guided by the pillars of education, as described in the report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and aim at education that responds to social and health demands (Koetz et al., 2017).

In programs allocated within health centers of public higher education institutions, these principles must be minimally aligned with Brazilian public health, considering the existence of the Unified Health System (SUS), supported by a pedagogical model of comprehensive education, capable of training critical-reflective and ethical-political professionals who are committed to population health, equity of care, and the guarantee of citizens' rights. For occupational therapy, which operates in different sectors, practice within the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), as well as in the Education, Justice, and Labor sectors, should also be prioritized.

Regarding the importance of ethical and politically committed insertion within the public sector, and also considering the critical-reflective education mentioned, it is important to once again highlight the significant increase in the opening of private occupational therapy programs over the past five years and to make brief considerations that may point to future contradictions and tensions in the education process.

Private higher education institutions, as they are business organizations, are also driven by a market logic that may favor the development of technicist education projects. There is also concern about the fact that many of these private programs offer education entirely through distance learning. Koetz et al. (2017) had already highlighted that the growing demand for distance education (EaD) programs, while it may expand access to higher education – especially in regions such as the Northeast, which has fewer on-site programs than other regions – may lead to significant challenges, particularly those related to professional education.

This concern becomes even more evident because, in May of this year, the Federal Government enacted a Decree (Decree No. 12,456, of May 19, 2025) establishing a new regulatory framework for Distance Education. This Decree maintains occupational therapy in two teaching modalities, on-site and hybrid, the latter with a requirement of only 30% of its total workload being on-site (Brasil, 2025).

Furthermore, in light of the neoliberal and market-driven logic, there is a risk that these programs may be more oriented toward meeting commercial demands, which should alert us to the existence of possible distancing from the premises of public programs, which are defended in the present study. That said, it is pointed out that ethical and political responsibility is necessary so that the aspirations of the professional field do not drive education tied to a technicist, market-based logic strictly focused on profit.

On the other hand, it is understood that private institutions currently contribute to expanding the supply of occupational therapy professionals. However, according to Durham (2012), these programs must be monitored and analyzed in order to verify whether the focus on the profit aspect distances them from the model of university that inspired the legislation and that is defended by higher education reform movements.

Regarding the necessary updating of the guidelines, a new proposal for occupational therapy programs is currently circulating. In 2020, the National Health Council (CNS) approved Resolution No. 650, recommending the new proposal for the National Curriculum Guidelines for the undergraduate bachelor's degree in occupational therapy (Brasil, 2020). In July 2025, the new occupational therapy DCNs were awaiting ratification by the Ministry of Education (MEC).

In light of this, the relevance of this study is highlighted, as it is situated at a moment when new political-pedagogical projects are being developed in public institutions in the Northeast, as well as when the new DCNs are moving toward ratification and new market configurations are being established. These issues place the development of this manuscript in a historically opportune position for reflections on the education of occupational therapy professionals.

Education and the labor market in occupational therapy from the Northeast of the country

Souza & Duque (2024a) have already mentioned that academic productions on historical aspects, academic institutionalization, or even on education and job opportunities in occupational therapy predominantly use a Southeastern perspective to situate the debate, and that there is a need for analyses from other regions, such as the Northeast, which consider specificities from other locations and intra-regional differences.

It is pointed out that when studies are conducted in the Northeast, they are carried out locally, referring specifically to states and/or municipalities, and that although these are important, it is necessary to foster broader reflections that inform differences, similarities, and regional specificities, since these differences are recognized by government science, technology, and education agencies, and since there are programs with specific funding for the Northeast that seek to address regional asymmetries, especially between this region and the Southeast and South regions of the country (Souza & Duque, 2024b).

However, a contemporary movement of discussions on education and the professional labor market of the profession based on regional perspectives outside the Southeast axis has been identified, especially over the past three years. As an example, one may mention the study by Nascimento et al. (2022), which analyzed Northeastern education projects focusing specifically on the social and education fields, and the studies by Lins et al. (2025a) and Lins et al. (2025b), which address, respectively, sociodemographic/academic aspects and the employability of occupational therapists in the Midwest region.

To continue contextualizing education within the reality of the Northeast of the country, it is noted that, to date, there are no postgraduate programs specific to occupational therapy in the region, and that such programs are currently located in the Southeast region. This is also an element that hinders the production of research from/about the profession by students and faculty in the region, since postgraduate programs are an important part of the research funding process in Brazil (Souza & Duque, 2024a).

Given this reality, it is understood as essential to continue developing investigations that reveal regional and intraregional specificities and identify strengths, limits, and challenges of education and the labor market, as these records allow reflection on the topic so that researchers and professionals can outline collective strategies and strengthen occupational therapy education from the Northeast.

Objective

In view of the reflections presented, this article aimed to analyze the graduate profile and the course objectives presented in the Political-Pedagogical Projects of occupational therapy programs located in public higher education institutions in the Northeast, and to make observations regarding the direction of education, professional practice, and the labor market.

Method

With regard to its objective, this study can be methodologically characterized as exploratory with a qualitative approach (Gil, 2002). Regarding data collection, this is a documentary research study (Fonseca, 2002) that used as data sources the PPPs or Course Pedagogical Projects (PPCs) of all occupational therapy programs inserted in Public Universities and located in the Northeast region of Brazil.

The PPPs are official documents, considered primary sources in documentary research because they are data that have not undergone scientific evaluation or analytical treatment. They are both official and public documents, and their preparation is mandatory for undergraduate programs approved by the MEC.

The documents analyzed in this study are available on the official websites of public higher education institutions located in the Northeast that currently offer undergraduate occupational therapy programs in the public sector, namely: UFPE, UNCISAL, UFPB, UFS, UECE, UFBA, and UPE.

Regarding data collection, this took place between March and September 2023. The text of each project was inserted literally, first into a general data table, without treatment. From this general data table, which contained the reference number of the pedagogical project (from 1 to 7), the name of the institution, and the topics present in each document, the texts specifically related to the categories “course objective” and “graduate profile” were extracted for analysis.

Although the importance of the other topics contained in the course projects is acknowledged, this prioritization is justified based on the objectives of the present article. It is understood, however, that analyzing these two categories separately from the rest of the course project constitutes a systematic initiative within the scope of documentary research. It is mentioned that, due to this, what can be concluded from this specific analysis has limitations, but, on the other hand, it enables the development of initial notes on education and the labor market based on two central categories in the PPPs, as explained in the introduction.

The length of these documents allows for the development of future studies that prioritize analyses of other topics, which are part of the research agenda of the authors of this manuscript.

It is clarified, regarding the categories of analysis, that the course objective and the graduate profile are topics that must be directly linked to each other in the PPPs. In these documents, the objective must be consistent with the profile, and both must characterize the education provided. This is precisely why, at certain moments, information is repeated in both categories.

It is noted that local/regional, educational, and professional practice contexts are the basic elements contained in the course objectives. The graduate profile, in turn, is mainly characterized by an exposition of the characteristics related to the professional that the course intends to train (Albuquerque et al., 2022).

Regarding the data analysis procedures carried out, it is mentioned that the content analysis technique in qualitative research was applied, according to the theoretical framework developed by Bardin (2004).

However, it was decided to name the stages of analysis constructed by the author (pre-analysis stages; material exploration and treatment) in a way that would make more sense for the analysis of the present research, facilitating the reader’s understanding, as follows: 1) stage 1 – exhaustive readings of the table containing the literal texts of the analyzed categories (the exhaustive readings were carried out for each institutional document separately, and by two researchers); 2) stage 2 – highlighting excerpts from the analyzed categories (by higher education institution and by category, separately); 3) stage 3 – extraction of excerpts by category and by course. The excerpts generated a new table, which is presented in the results.

It is clarified that there was no standard quantity of highlights per category or per institution, since the documents present different textual productions and may contain topics with more or fewer words. The numbering of each course was carried out to facilitate discussion when it was necessary to refer to a specific project.

It is important to mention that the highlights made here represent a summary and the essence of what each of these categories is in each university. These are the central elements of the course objectives and the main characteristics of graduates that were mentioned in each institutional document, in order to summarize the texts and highlight their main characteristics. Thus, these highlights are a summary of: 1) elements regarding the main idea of education of each course; fields of practice and knowledge bases; mention of local/regional issues (course objective); and 2) characterization of the graduate; fields, sectors, systems, and settings in which the graduate will work; mention of local/regional issues (graduate profile).

The topic of discussion in this article contains the interpretation of the data obtained. It is indicated that these interpretations are based on a political stance in favor of public universities, work in the public sector, and the generalist and critical profile of graduates.

Thus, studies in the field of occupational therapy that advocate for public education for/in favor of professional action in Brazilian public sectors were used, and that advocate for occupational therapy practice in different sectors, namely: health, education, social assistance, justice, and work (Malfitano & Ferreira, 2011; Pereira et al., 2021; Pêgo et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the defense of theoretical reflections centered on the critique of neoliberal rationality is cited, understanding that it impacts all areas, including education and the labor market (Antunes, 2008). It was also assumed that regional asymmetries exist in relation to science, education, and technology, highlighting the consequences of this process, the need for redress through government policies, and studies that analyze regional specificities (Durham, 2012; Koetz et al., 2017; Conceição, 2020; Souza & Duque, 2024b).

Results

The results are presented in this section. Table 2 below contains the highlighted sections, which are the result of an exhaustive reading of all categories and constitute the basic elements of each category analyzed (objective and graduate profile).

In the *course objectives*, the following main ideas of education are observed: training for health care and the emancipation of individuals (course no. 1); training focused on physical, psychological, and social aspects (course no. 2); training for public policies (courses no. 1, 5, and 6); training for the production of comprehensive patient care (course no. 4); training for the health needs of individuals and collectives (course no. 6); training for the different levels of health care and diverse scenarios and contexts (course no. 7).

Considering the *course objectives and the mention of fields of practice*, it is evident that all projects mention objectives linked to education for the health field. However, some mention practice in the education and social assistance sectors (courses no. 3, 5, and 6). In addition, objectives were established that consider the need to provide a generalist education oriented toward practice through current public policies (courses no. 1, 3, 5, and 6).

Regarding the knowledge indicated in education, some projects *describe in their objectives the foundation of education*, including content derived from the biological and human sciences (courses no. 2 and 5). Finally, one course *specifies in its objectives the need to pay attention to regional and local issues in education* (course no. 5).

Table 2. Highlights of the categories “course objective” and “graduate/professional profile” by course at Higher Education Institution.

Nº	Higher Education Institution	Excerpts from the course objectives: (main training idea; field of activity and knowledge base; mention of local/regional issues)	Excerpts from the graduate/professional profile (characterization of the graduate; fields, sectors, systems in which the graduate will work; mention of local/regional issues)
1	Universidade Estadual do Ceará (UECE)	<p>1) To train occupational therapists for the health care and social emancipation of individuals and populations (...)</p> <hr/> <p>2) To understand the health/illness binomial, based on socioeconomic determinants (...)</p> <hr/> <p>3) To contextualize local and regional problems in order to intervene and contribute to the development of social and health policies (...)</p> <hr/> <p>4) (...) intervening in the processes of transformation of social reality and health conditions (...)</p> <hr/> <p>5) To execute Occupational Therapy methods and techniques in order to restore, develop and maintain the physical, mental and social capacity of individuals (...)</p> <hr/> <p>6) (...) analysis of clinical data, solving problems and evaluating the results achieved in individual, group, family, institutional, collective and community care.</p>	<p>1) (...) to train occupational therapy professionals with a generalist, critical-reflective and humanist profile (...)</p> <hr/> <p>2) (...) acting in different fields and areas, from an interdisciplinary, interprofessional and collaborative perspective, centered on the principles of the SUS and the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) and other educational areas (...)</p> <hr/> <p>3) (...) development and recovery of health and social inclusion from a biopsychosocial perspective (...)</p>
2	Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB)	<p>2) It focuses on the physical, psychological, and social aspects of human activity. It aims to provide training with knowledge in the biological and human sciences (...)</p>	<p>1) Occupational Therapy professionals will be trained based on local, regional, and Brazilian social health needs.</p> <hr/> <p>2) The emphasis on the Unified Health System (SUS) ensures the construction of knowledge focused on comprehensive care, quality, and humanization of service (...)</p> <hr/> <p>3) (...) a professional who will have the competence and skills to enable and/or rehabilitate (...)</p>

Source: Data from the research compiled from the Political Pedagogical Projects of occupational therapy courses at Public Universities in Northeast Brazil.

Table 2. Continued...

Nº	Higher Education Institution	Excerpts from the course objectives: (main training idea; field of activity and knowledge base; mention of local/regional issues)	Excerpts from the graduate/professional profile (characterization of the graduate; fields, sectors, systems in which the graduate will work; mention of local/regional issues)
3	Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE)	1) To train occupational therapists (...) with an emphasis on meeting the needs in the fields of health, education and social assistance in the region, in accordance with current public policies.	<p>1) (...) focuses on a generalist profile, encompassing in a balanced way knowledge in the biological, human and specific areas of Occupational Therapy (...)</p> <p>2) (...) a transforming agent of the health and living conditions of the population.</p> <p>3) (...) investigation and evaluation of the problem, elaboration and execution of occupational therapy programs, in diverse contexts and institutions, such as: family health support centers, basic health units, specialty clinics, rehabilitation centers, general and specialized hospitals, long-term care facilities for the elderly, social integration and community centers, schools, daycare centers, companies, as well as programs for people in situations of personal and social risk (...)</p> <p>4) (...) acting as a public manager of health and social promotion services, researcher, teacher and in administrative positions in Universities (...)</p>
4	Universidade de Pernambuco (UPE)	<p>1) To train healthcare professionals capable of working in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams, with an emphasis on comprehensive patient care (...)</p> <p>2) To train professionals with a broad vision of the individual, rehabilitating them holistically and not just focusing on isolated body segments (...)</p>	<p>1) (...) generalist, humanist, critical and reflective training (...)</p> <p>2) (...) to intervene on the most prevalent health-disease problems/situations in the national epidemiological profile, with emphasis on their region of operation, identifying the biopsychosocial dimensions and their determinants.</p> <p>3) (...) social responsibility and commitment to citizenship (...)</p>
5	Universidade Estadual de Ciências da Saúde de Alagoas (UNCISAL)	<p>1) (...) aims to train generalist professionals (...)</p> <p>2) (...) practice of Occupational Therapy in different fields of public policy (Health, Social Assistance, Education, among others), contributing to addressing local and regional demands.</p> <p>3) (...) Aims at training with knowledge in the biological, human and social areas (...)</p> <p>4) (...) work with individuals, groups and communities, using various procedures for: approaching and interpreting social reality (...)</p>	<p>1) (...) in line with the socioeconomic and epidemiological profile of the state, will have a generalist, humanist, critical and reflective education (...)</p> <p>2) (...) intervene on the demands of the Health, Education and Social fields most prevalent in the socioepidemiological profile of Alagoas and Brazil (...)</p> <p>3) Be able to produce technical-scientific knowledge from the fields of professional activity, which will contribute to meeting local, regional and national needs (...)</p>

Source: Data from the research compiled from the Political Pedagogical Projects of occupational therapy courses at Public Universities in Northeast Brazil.

Table 2. Continued...

Nº	Higher Education Institution	Excerpts from the course objectives: (main training idea; field of activity and knowledge base; mention of local/regional issues)	Excerpts from the graduate/professional profile (characterization of the graduate; fields, sectors, systems in which the graduate will work; mention of local/regional issues)
6	Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS)	<p>1) (...) aims for graduates of the Occupational Therapy course to present a competency profile based on interdisciplinary concepts and practices focused on the health needs of individuals and communities (...)</p> <p>2) (...) generalist professional (...)</p> <p>3) (...) working at all levels of health care (...)</p> <p>4) (...) as a self-employed professional linked to institutions, public and private companies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, service institutions, as a researcher, etc.</p> <p>5) (...) To enable the professional to be trained to work at various levels of care in the health area, as well as educational and social, among other public policies (...)</p> <p>6) (...) differentiated care and, in partnership with philanthropic entities (...)</p>	<p>1) He/She must acquire generalist skills (...)</p> <p>2) He/She will be qualified to work in public, philanthropic or private institutions, such as: Support Centers for Basic Health Units, Specialty Clinics, Rehabilitation Centers, General and Specialized Hospitals, Long-Term Care Institutions for the Elderly, Social Integration and Community Centers, Schools, Daycare Centers, Industries, as well as Programs for children and adolescents in situations of personal and social risk, prisons or any other places (...)</p> <p>3) (...) active pedagogical strategies that address this commitment and guarantee mechanisms for integrating the School with Health Services and with society.</p> <p>4) (...) This emphasis on Primary Care and Public Health should not be perceived as opposed to desires and needs for specialized training (...)</p>
7	Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA)	<p>1) The Occupational Therapy undergraduate course aims to train occupational therapists with a generalist, humanist, critical and reflective profile (...)</p> <p>2) To provide supervised professional practice experiences in the main areas of occupational therapy practice, at different levels of health care and in various settings and contexts (...)</p>	<p>1) (...) has a profile of generalist, humanist, critical and reflective training that seeks to qualify professional practice in its various dimensions (...)</p>

Source: Data from the research compiled from the Political Pedagogical Projects of occupational therapy courses at Public Universities in Northeast Brazil.

With regard to the graduate *profile category*, the course projects cited generalist professional profiles (courses no. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7), humanistic profiles (courses no. 1, 4, 5, and 7), and reflective profiles (courses no. 1, 4, 5, and 7). Some possibilities for *graduates' professional practice were mentioned in practice settings, sectors, and facilities* primarily oriented toward health (courses no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6), and to a lesser extent toward the social assistance, education, and/or justice sectors (courses no. 1, 3, 5, and 6). *Local or regional issues* were mentioned in the graduate profile by two courses (courses no. 2 and 5).

Some projects point out, in the objective and/or profile, professional practice in settings that, as they are named, refer directly to the Unified Health System and/or the Unified Social Assistance System (courses no. 1 and 2); however, there are projects in which these systems are mentioned indirectly in one of the analyzed categories, through the names of public facilities and/or terms that suggest discussion about public health or the public sector (courses no. 3, 5, 6, and 7).

Discussion

It is pointed out that the results obtained are relevant for outlining reflections with different directions, which aim to respond to the objectives of this article. To better organize this section, reflections are presented on: i) education for practice in public facilities across the different sectors of professional practice (including health, education, and social assistance), assuming a generalist graduate profile; ii) the existence of a social function of public universities and the proliferation of job positions for occupational therapists in the private sector to the detriment of the public sector; iii) regional and local specificities.

First, it is noted that the existence of a predominant education for practice in the health sector has historical roots, which corroborate the trajectory of occupational therapy education in Brazil, since the first occupational therapy programs were technical in nature and used theoretical frameworks strongly influenced by the biological sciences and physical rehabilitation practices. To exemplify this issue, it is mentioned that the first Brazilian occupational therapy education programs took place in 1950, through the Brazilian Beneficent Association of Rehabilitation (Rio de Janeiro) and the Rehabilitation Institute of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of São Paulo (São Paulo) (Reis & Lopes, 2018).

The expansion of occupational therapy practices, expressed in some projects (such as practice in education and social assistance), can be explained by the fact that, from 1970 onward, at the same time that there were attempts to scientifically ground the profession in Brazil through the demonstration of the benefits of physical rehabilitation practices, there was also, in another scientific community, a reflective process regarding actions in institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and special schools (Nascimento et al., 2022).

Based on the use of knowledge that supported the Psychiatric Reform of the late 1970s, occupational therapy education began to move toward the development of curricula that included discussion of social issues and the unfolding of practices with marginalized populations. This occurred in curricular components based on what was, at that time, referred to as social occupational therapy (Galheigo, 2016; Reis & Lopes, 2018; Nascimento et al., 2022).

The results of the study by Nascimento et al. (2022), which analyzed occupational therapy curricula of Public University programs in the Northeast, focusing on content related to education and social assistance, pointed to low representativeness in the curricula and identified that programs proposing a generalist education should be concerned with balance among areas in curricular proposals. In the present article, although the course objective and graduate profile were analyzed, it was also found that most programs advocate a generalist graduate profile, but do not express, in this profile or in the objective, a balance among occupational therapy areas, with a high predominance of practices, terms, and knowledge from the health field.

However, it must be considered that although the roots of the profession may explain the greater valorization of health education in curricula, the implementation of a public health system in Brazil, SUS, in 1988 transformed occupational therapists' practices in this sector, since SUS public policies are theoretically grounded in collective health frameworks that also underpin social and intellectual movements that are anti-asylum, anti-capitalist, and critical of the disease-centered model.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that although a predominance of education in/for health is assumed, this does not mean that curricula advocate health education based on a biomedical or “pathologizing” model, for example. An example of this is that excerpts were identified in the analyzed curricula that address health care in communities and for collectives, considering both clinical (individual) rehabilitation and rehabilitation in community contexts.

Furthermore, it is possible that the texts of these documents are not dissociated from or free of influence from the trajectories of the faculty members involved in this process. Beyond constructions based on the DCNs, the projects may reflect the influence of the theoretical conceptions of their authors, shaped by their academic training.

In the study by Souza & Duque (2024a), it was identified that only a small percentage of faculty members working in public universities in the Northeast of the country completed their master’s and doctoral academic training in areas other than health. In addition, only a small portion completed master’s and/or doctoral degrees in specific occupational therapy programs. It is believed that the strong influence of the health field in faculty education may also influence the development of pedagogical projects that privilege this area.

Another point of discussion is that, both in the objectives and in the graduate profile, most programs directed the document text toward a perspective of undergraduate education and professional practice oriented toward public policies and/or Brazilian public sectors.

It is noted that these results demonstrate alignment between what is described in these documents and what is presented as the social function of public universities in Brazil, since, in the current proposal of the public university, institutions must be committed through the texts of their documents and their strategic actions to the construction of a State project and to the production of knowledge/professionals aimed at the well-being of the population in general (Rabelo, 2019).

However, it must be emphasized that the lack of resources and working conditions in public sector assistance facilities, when compared to the possibility of professional practice in a “lucrative private sector,” should bring to the forefront some fundamental discussions in Brazil, such as stability versus salary and the possibility of rapid social mobility for graduates of public higher education institutions, as well as formal contracts versus flexibility of labor contracts. These discussions become urgent in light of the different and problematic social demands that the country still faces (Pereira Filho, 1999).

Regarding education in regional and local contexts, in several Northeastern municipalities, especially in capitals with smaller territorial extension and in inland cities of the states in this region, occupational therapy graduates face a scarcity of public service entrance examinations or poorly remunerated public examinations. The reality presented in the public sector, in this case, is the offer of job positions strongly linked to local political interests (political appointment of public employees to assume positions). These job positions are temporary, poorly paid, lacking labor rights, and, above all, lacking professional autonomy (Souza & Duque, 2024b).

In addition, there is also a neoliberal movement regarding labor, based on the social valorization of “liberal” or “autonomous” work and the desire for higher salaries, to the detriment of formally contracted work with labor rights provided by an employer (Antunes, 2008).

This rationality may also be influencing the professional practice of occupational therapists. It is important to emphasize that it is assumed here that different “flexibilizations” of labor contracts, even in well-paid positions, ultimately bring different forms of labor precarization, which are advantageous for those who profit from this logic but risky for workers.

However, it is important to highlight that these reflections are inferences rather than direct findings. Thus, the debate on precarization and the market, although it goes beyond the education data analyzed here, is fundamental for contextualizing the working conditions of both the professors who implement pedagogical projects and the future professional insertion of occupational therapists graduating from the analyzed programs. The need for academic work that can collect data and analyze this situation is also pointed out, in order to complement the findings of the present article.

In light of reflections linked to the project proposals of the analyzed programs, the realities presented in terms of professional insertion, and the possibility of modification of political-pedagogical projects over time, it must be questioned whether, in the future, the objectives and graduate profiles of occupational therapy programs located in public higher education institutions in the Northeast will be directed toward resistance to the private/market labor logic (assuming the social function of the public university in Brazil and pressuring the public sector to improve job opportunities and working conditions), or whether there will be a movement to adapt these documents to the needs of private logic (opting for future formulations of objectives and graduate profiles more valued by the current market).

It is also important to mention that the texts of the analyzed projects, in order to become a reality beyond documents, depend on team planning. Integration must be ensured among the PPPs, the Institutional Development Projects (PDI), course syllabi or Teaching Plans (PE), and faculty practices. Faculty members must be engaged with the current PPP and develop ways to ensure coherence between theory and practice (Marques & Souza, 2017).

Conclusion

This article analyzed the graduate profile and course objectives presented in the Political-Pedagogical Projects of occupational therapy programs located in public higher education institutions in the Northeast. Observations were made regarding the direction of education, professional practice, and the labor market.

The results showed that most objective texts direct education toward practice in public facilities across the different sectors of professional practice, although they still privilege education for practice in health. It was found that this corroborates studies on the topic and has components that can be explained by the history of the profession in the country and its institutionalization. Elements of the trajectories of faculty members at these institutions were also identified, which may help analyze these results.

Regarding the profile category, it was noted that although curricula demonstrate concern for a generalist and reflective profile in the analyzed categories, as well as the intention of practice in the public sector, it is necessary to develop future studies to investigate whether theory (the textual documents of the PPPs) is aligned with practice (institutional planning, course plans, and teaching practice).

Discussions were held regarding the heating up of a labor market in occupational therapy strongly oriented toward the private sector, and the fact that the region experiences both scarcity and precarization of work in the public service. In this context, the future of new curricula was discussed, noting that they may move toward market logic or engage in efforts to resist it by prioritizing the social function of undergraduate programs in public education institutions and consideration of Brazilian public policies.

It was also stated that this manuscript, although it does not reflect in a Manichaean way on “public education” and “education in the private sector,” employed a theoretical framework that values and defends practice in the public sector based on public policies, as well as the generalist professional profile and the social function of public education.

The limitations of the study are related to the analysis of only two categories of the projects and the impossibility of evaluating, based on these data, the real implementation of these documents in pedagogical and professional practice. Working conditions and implementation conditions in general were also not analyzed, which could complement the data. Furthermore, the research focuses exclusively on public universities, which may have limited understanding of occupational therapy education in the region.

On the other hand, this documentary study enabled a systematic analysis of education and the labor market based on public education in the Northeast and on two categories that different authors who discuss the topic have already indicated as central and relevant to the debate on PPPs: the course objective and the graduate profile.

Addressing these limitations in subsequent studies is part of the research agenda of those involved in the authorship of this manuscript, since they belong to an institutionalized group currently dedicated to research projects on the topic. Thus, this study was conducted as an initiative to bring the issue to the forefront so that, subsequently, it will be possible to gather elements that may complement the findings presented here, help identify potentials, and resolve problems in education and/or the labor market from and within the analyzed region.

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Author's Contributions

Marina Batista Chaves Azevedo de Souza and Andreza Marques Duque were responsible for the conception of the text, organization of sources, analysis, writing, and revision. Both authors approved the final version of the article.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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