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Community Cultural Arts Participation through Sensory Friendly Theatre:
Parent and Organization Experiences and Perspectives

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Abstract

Community Cultural Arts Participation through Sensory Friendly Theatre: Parent and Organization Experiences and Perspectives

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Background: Children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families experience barriers in the built, sensory, and social environments that limit their community cultural arts participation. Occupational therapists have begun using innovative service delivery approaches to dismantle these barriers and provide this population with community participation access. Using organization-level consultation, occupational therapists partner with community cultural arts organizations to develop sensory friendly programs that utilize environmental modifications, preparatory materials, and trained staff to support cultural arts participation for this population of children and families.

Objective: The primary aim of this research was to investigate family and organization experiences and impacts of a sensory friendly theatre program developed with organization-level occupational therapy consultation. A secondary aim was to investigate organization perspectives

on the sensory friendly program development process and partnership with the occupational therapy consultant.

Methods: Qualitative case study methodology was used to investigate parent and organization experiences and perspectives. Primary data were collected through in-person semi-structured interviews with nine parents and four theatre staff. Parent and staff interview data were coded and analyzed separately using an inductive approach to identify themes unique to each stakeholder group.

Results: Sensory friendly theatre as a “Deeply Meaningful Family Participation Experience” was the primary theme emerging from the parent data. Two secondary themes, the “Power of the Social Environment” and “Unique Children Need Unique Supports” informed understanding of the factors behind families’ positive experiences. A final secondary theme, “Inclusive but Safe Participation Experiences” described parents’ visions for future community opportunities. Conceptualization of the sensory friendly program as “Ignited by Organizational Mission and Personal Commitment” was the prominent theme emerging from the organizational data. Additional themes, “Pathfinding with Expert Consultation and Internal Resources” and “Challenges Worth Tackling,” described staff’s perceptions of key program facilitators and challenges. A final theme, “Powerful Personal and Organization Impacts,” described perceived positive outcomes of sensory friendly program development.

Limitations: The scope of this research was limited by the inclusion of only two stakeholder groups and lack of direct data from children with disabilities, actors, and crew members. The primary investigator’s involvement in program development increased potential for bias. Thus, methodological elements including member checks, multiple modes of data collection, peer

review, and collaboration between multiple researchers were incorporated to promote trustworthiness of results.

Conclusions: Research findings support the potential of sensory friendly programming to promote successful cultural arts participation among families with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. Findings also support organization-level consultation as a promising service delivery model to enhance community organizations' capacities to serve diverse populations. More research is needed to broaden understanding of sensory friendly theatre's impacts on stakeholders including children with disabilities, actors, and crew members. Further exploration of the consultative occupational therapy process within cultural arts and other community organizations is also needed to support development of best practices for this innovative service approach.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Study Title: Parent and Theatre Staff Opinions about a Sensory Friendly Theatre Program

Author: Caroline Umeda

Why is community participation research important?

Community activities like going to playgrounds, museums, and theatres can be difficult for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families. These children can have trouble dealing with crowds and noise and following behavior rules, making outings hard for their families. Participation in community activities is important for health and well-being, and access to community spaces is a human right in the U.S. Occupational therapists, health professionals, and community members must find more ways to increase the community participation of children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families.

What was the focus of this research study?

This study focused on a new theatre program designed to provide children with disabilities and their families with a supported opportunity to attend a live performance at a community theatre. The program was developed by an occupational therapy consultant and the theatre staff. The program, described as “sensory friendly,” offered a relaxed atmosphere by offering live shows with: 1) smaller crowds and spaces to rest, 2) story books to prepare children for their trip to the theatre, 3) relaxed rules allowing children to move, talk, and use electronic devices during the show, and 4) staff and volunteers with disability training.

What did the researchers want to know?

The researchers wanted to understand the experiences and opinions of the families who went to a sensory friendly show. The researchers also wanted to learn about the experiences of the theater staff who built and ran the program and their opinions about working with an occupational therapy consultant.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers interviewed: 1) parents who attended a sensory friendly show with their children, and 2) theatre staff who worked with the occupational therapy consultant to build and carry out the sensory friendly program. Researchers used the interview information to find patterns in parent and staff experiences and opinions.

What did researchers find about family experiences?

Parents of children with disabilities described their family’s sensory friendly theatre experience as deeply meaningful. They found meaning in the safe atmosphere, their children’s joy during the show, and positive experiences before and after the show. Some families used the story books or rest areas. But, all parents said their families benefitted from the relaxed rules. Most parents wanted future sensory friendly shows to be open the general public, but still safe and accepting for children with disabilities and their families.

What did researchers find about staff experiences?

Theater staff described developing the sensory friendly program as a mission driven journey. They stated that partnership with the occupational therapy consultant and using existing resources were key program supports. Staff felt that funding, staffing, and marketing challenges still needed to be addressed for the program to last long term. They reported that building the sensory friendly program made them more confident in working with children with disabilities. Staff also reported that theatre was more capable of serving a diverse population as the result of building the sensory friendly program.

What are the key takeaways from these research results?

This study shows that sensory friendly programs can support meaningful community participation for children with disabilities and their families. This study also supports the usefulness of partnerships between occupational therapy consultants and community organizations. Study results can be used to guide future sensory friendly programs. Results also support the value of more research on sensory friendly programs and partnerships between occupational therapy consultants and community organizations

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Chapter 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 ORGANIZATION-LEVEL OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY CONSULTATION FOR CULTURAL ARTS PARTICIPATION: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Increasing cultural arts access for children with disabilities and their families is an issue gaining public attention and research and policy support. The arts have historically played key roles in recreation, learning, and creative expression in individuals, families, and communities, yet a growing evidence base documents that children with disabilities and their families face a wide range of barriers to the arts (Becker & Dusing, 2010; Majnemer et al., 2008) and to community participation as a whole (Bedell et al., 2013, 2013; Law, Petrenchik, King, & Hurley, 2007; Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Rauworth, & Jurkowski, 2004) .

Children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families face unique participation challenges. Sensory processing and developmental disabilities can be associated with sensitivities and behavioral challenges that make environments with intense sensory qualities or strict behavioral guidelines difficult to navigate (Bedell et al., 2013; Kempe, 2014; Law et al., 2007). For example, the background noise, movement, and crowds affiliated with a busy children's museum may be overstimulating for children who are hypersensitive to sound and unexpected touch. Behavioral requirements to remain seated and quiet may make going to a movie or theatre performance inaccessible for children with short attention spans or seeking movement for self-regulation. Some parents of children with these disabilities report avoiding community events due to negative public attitudes, lack of support, and lack of understanding among staff in community settings (Anaby et al., 2013; Bedell et al., 2013; Law et al., 2007). Lack of supportive community environments can lead to feelings of isolation and

decreased quality of life (Koenig & Rudney, 2010), and the literature well documents this population's desires for more supported community participation opportunities (Bedell et al., 2013; Law et al., 2007).

This need to expand community access for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families has policy support that includes recent revisions to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADAAA; Pub L. 110-325) and Healthy People 2020 (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Recent revisions to regulatory language in Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act clarify the legislation's inclusion of individuals with a range of diagnoses including mental impairments and intellectual and developmental disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). These revisions make addressing the community access needs of these populations a priority issue and legal necessity. Community participation for individuals with disabilities is further supported by Healthy People 2020, a national health promotion initiative (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Healthy People 2020 acknowledges the link between community participation and health outcomes and specifically aims to address access barriers in the built and social environments to promote participation and health (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

As awareness of children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families' access needs has expanded, so has the number of cultural arts organizations offering programs designed to support their participation. In addition to established access efforts such as ASL-interpretation for people with hearing impairment and audio-description for people with low vision, cultural arts venues including museums, ballets, theatres, and music venues are beginning to offer programs labelled as "sensory friendly." Internet search results for sensory friendly programs across a range of cultural arts settings indicate their growing presence within

many U.S. cities. Sensory friendly programs, also sometimes termed “relaxed,” often incorporate preparatory materials, smaller crowds, and a range of environmental modifications and supports that make participation experiences more predictable and flexible for this population of children and families (Ideishi, 2013; Umeda et al., 2017)

Occupational therapists, along with other rehabilitation and education professionals, have well-suited knowledge and skills for supporting community-based programs for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families (Ideishi, 2013; Ideishi, Willock, & Thach, 2010; Umeda et al., 2017). Occupational therapists with training in sensory and developmental disabilities, sensory processing theory, and activity and environmental analysis, have begun teaming with community organizations in the development, implementation, and evaluation of sensory friendly programs. Utilizing organization-level consultation, a community-based approach to service delivery (Umeda et al., 2017), occupational therapists partner with organizations’ administration and staff to expand organizational capacity to meet the needs of a more diverse segment of the population (Jaffe & Epstein, 2011; Umeda et al., 2017). This practice approach is supported by the explicit identification of organizations as appropriate occupational therapy clients in the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process* (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Growing evidence of occupational therapy engagement in organization-level consultation within cultural arts settings is found in the grey literature. Articles in clinical practice periodicals and professional special interest newsletters describe occupational therapy partnership with organizations such as aquariums and art and science museums to develop accessible programs for children with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities (Fletcher, 2014; Ideishi et al., 2010; Ivey, Shepard, & Pearce, 2014; Leichtman, Palek-Zahn, Tung, Becker, & Jirikowic,

2014; Waite, 2012). Described programs and events collectively incorporated a wide range of supports and modifications to meet the needs of their target populations. Occupational therapy practitioners and students teamed with organizations to identify appropriate environmental modifications, create support materials, make modifications to the physical environment, and provide staff training and in-person support at events. Common program elements included smaller crowds, higher staff to patron ratios, decreased sound, softer lighting, and physically modified exhibits (Fletcher, 2014; Ideishi et al., 2010; Ivey et al., 2014; Leichtman et al., 2014; Waite, 2012). Though none of the articles reported formal research results, some included findings from informal program evaluations including parent-reported utility of support materials and environmental modifications and positive overall family experiences (Ideishi et al., 2010; Leichtman et al., 2014)

Though grey literature supports the potential of occupational therapy consultation to promote community participation and access, research evidence for this approach within cultural arts settings is very limited. A database search of the peer-reviewed literature found only two manuscripts targeting the use of organization-level occupational therapy consultation in community cultural arts settings. Of these, only one was a research study (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017) that examined child and family participation experiences at sensory friendly museum events. The events, termed *Sensory-Friendly Sundays*, were collaboratively developed and implemented by museum staff and occupational therapy practitioners and students using a consultative model (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017). The program incorporated environmental modifications including smaller crowds, turning bright lights and loud noises off in sensory-rich exhibits, and offering a cool-down space for children to rest. Other available support materials included sensory accessibility maps, illustrated story books, sunglasses, headphones and extra

support staff. The researchers collected data from 46 parent participants via phone-based interviews and surveys over a 1.5-year period. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach and inductive data analysis, the researchers found that participating in the sensory friendly programming enhanced families' sense of well-being, characterized by participants as feeling "welcomed," "comfortable," and "safe" (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017). Further, the researchers reported that parents highly valued skilled human help, preparatory materials such as sensory maps, and adjustments to the sensory environment including the modified exhibits, cool-down room, and smaller crowds. These program components were considered key factors underlying families' successful participation experience (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017).

The second manuscript (Umeda et al., 2017) described the evolution of organization-level consultation from early childhood learning center classrooms to community settings and provided examples of implemented programs in museums, theatre, ballet, and an aquarium. Though the manuscript did not report formal research examining these implemented programs, the authors indicated that parents who participated in these supported community opportunities with children with intellectual and developmental disabilities reported increased feelings of safety and satisfaction at these events. Additionally, the authors reported positive impacts for the community organizations implementing these programs including a new audience market and deepened organizational mission and values to reach a more diverse group of people (Umeda et al., 2017).

Given the growing utilization of organization-level consultation and its potential to open doors to meaningful participation for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families, its research base must be developed. The outcomes of programs utilizing an organization-level consultative model must be examined and consider a range of

stakeholders including children with disabilities and their families, the administrators and staff of community cultural arts organizations, and in the performing arts realm, actors and crew members. Identifying program impacts across these key stakeholder groups and understanding organizational perspectives on program development and partnership with occupational therapy consultants are foundational steps in the development of best practices for organizational-level occupational therapy. Through these research efforts, guidelines for partnerships that best support community organizations' access capacities and the participation, quality of life, and rights of individuals with disabilities can be developed and refined.

1.2 RESEARCH RATIONALE AND DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

This two-article dissertation addresses the above described research gap and contributes to the foundational evidence base for organization-level occupational therapy consultation in cultural arts settings. This linked-papers dissertation includes: 1) this introductory chapter, 2) two chapters containing stand-alone research articles in preparation for submission to peer-reviewed journals, 3) a discussion chapter, and 4) a plain language summary for community stakeholder use.

This research involved a qualitative investigation of parent and organization perspectives of a sensory friendly theatre program developed with organization-level occupational therapy consultation. Chapters 2 and 3 are stand-alone research articles that each report unique findings from this qualitative study. The study's qualitative design and inclusion of both parent and organization perspectives were selected to promote depth and breadth of study findings.

The study design included investigation of two steps in the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework's* practice process: intervention and targeting outcomes (AOTA, 2014). According to the *Framework*, the dynamic occupational therapy practice process encompasses

multiple steps: evaluation, intervention, and targeting outcomes (AOTA, 2014). To comprehensively investigate the practice process for specific clients and contexts, all steps must be examined. However, targeting outcomes, the final step, is arguably a primary research focus in examining innovative occupational therapy practice. To maximize depth of study data, this research focused on investigating multifaceted outcomes of organization-level consultation in the context of sensory friendly programming for two stakeholder groups: 1) families with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities, the program's target population and 2) the theatre organization and its staff, the direct occupational therapy clients in the organization-level service model. Participation experiences of family stakeholders are described in Chapter 2. This article's target audience includes occupational therapy and rehabilitation practitioners, researchers, and educators. Organization perspectives on program development, implementation, and outcomes are described in Chapter 3. This article is primarily intended for theatre and cultural arts administrators, educators, and researchers with interests in arts access and inclusion.

This study also investigated a second step in the occupational therapy practice process: intervention. In the organization-level consultative model, the intervention to ultimately support families' cultural arts participation was collaboration between theatre staff and the occupational therapy consultant. Thus, to increase the breadth of data, this study examined the experiences and perspectives of theatre staff related to program development, program implementation, and collaboration with the occupational therapy consultant. These staff perspectives related to program development and occupational therapy partnership are documented in Chapter 3. Though the article is written primarily for a cultural arts audience, findings are also relevant for occupational therapists and rehabilitation professionals interested in organizational processes and perspectives on collaboration with health professionals.

Qualitative research has a growing presence in health research and is used to explore multidimensional constructs, phenomena in context, and meaning attributed to lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative inquiry was deemed a well-suited approach for this study's aims to investigate the multidimensional experiences and perspectives of families and theatre staff. A qualitative case study approach was selected to further structure study design, a decision based on conceptualizing the sensory friendly theatre program as an intrinsically bounded system within which the research was situated (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

1.3 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH EXAMINING PARENT AND ORGANIZATION PERSPECTIVES ON SENSORY FRIENDLY PROGRAMMING

The following conceptual framework situates the qualitative research study described in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation within existing theories, frameworks, and models that ground the study's targeted practice approach and research aims (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Theories, frameworks and models comprising the framework provide links between participation and health, frame participation from a justice perspective, and identify factors underlying successful community participation. This conceptual framework also includes occupational therapy consultation models which further support the emerging service model targeted in this dissertation.

1.3.1 *A Biopsychosocial Model of Health*

The publicly visible movement toward increasing cultural arts participation for children with disabilities is well aligned with contemporary models of health underlying rehabilitation and occupational therapy. Rehabilitation professions have expanded their understanding of

health from the traditional medical model to a more contemporary biopsychosocial model, articulated within the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF; World Health Organization, 2002). This framework directly links activity and participation to human health and thus provides strong support for rehabilitation practice approaches like organization-level occupational therapy consultation that target community participation. Further, because the ICF model acknowledges the influence of both personal and environmental factors on participation, the model is aligned with practice approaches that incorporate both person and environment-focused supports to promote successful participation and ultimately health.

1.3.2 *Framework of Occupational Justice*

Organization-level occupational therapy consultation can be viewed as a medium through which the rights of individuals with disabilities are supported. The emerging occupational justice framework (Stadnyk, Townsend, & Wilcock, 2010) conceptualizes an occupationally just world as one “that would be governed in a way that enables individuals to flourish by doing what they decide is most meaningful and useful to themselves and to their families, communities, and nations” (p. 330). The framework presents four occupational rights: “to experience meaning, participation, balance, and choice in necessary or desired occupations” (Townsend, 2012). Further, the framework asserts that a range of structural and contextual factors either support or restrict these rights. The participation barriers to desired community experiences reported by individuals with disabilities and their families can be viewed through this theoretical lens as occupational injustices and occupational deprivation. Thus, organization-level consultation is supported by the occupational justice framework through its potential to combat occupational

injustice and promote the rights of this population to meaningful community activity participation.

1.3.3 *Ecological Frames of Reference*

Though characterized as an emerging practice realm, organization-level consultation in community settings is strongly rooted by established frameworks that emphasize the value of embedding intervention in real world contexts. The ecology of human performance model (EHP) serves as a particularly strong foundation for intervention embedded within community organizations. According to this ecological model, human performance can only be understood within context (Dunn, Brown, & McGuigan, 1994) and thus, “occupational therapy is most effective when embedded in real life” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 602). In the EHP model, occupational performance is influenced by the interplay between skills, tasks, and contexts. Optimal performance is achieved when tasks fall within an individual’s performance range, which is determined by skills and contextual support (Dunn et al., 1994; Reitz, Scaffa, & Merryman, 2014). Thus, based on this EHP framework, practice approaches that enhance provision of contextual supports have great potential to promote optimal performance and participation.

A contemporary ecological model, the Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance model (PEOP), provides further support for organization-level occupational therapy consultation (Baum, Christiansen, & Bass, 2015). The PEOP model asserts that participation is an interplay between person factors and environmental factors, and that individuals utilize enablers and overcome barriers to achieve desired levels of participation in meaningful roles and activities (Baum et al., 2015). The PEOP model directs occupational therapists to utilize a top down approach to intervention beginning with identifying clients’ participation goals, then addressing

participation enablers and barriers in both personal and environmental realms. In addition to providing a framework for individual intervention, the PEOP model is a well-suited framework for organization-level practice. The PEOP model explicitly outlines an occupational therapy process to support organizational performance and goals including enhancing organizations' abilities to serve target populations (Baum, Bass-Haugen, & Christiansen, 2005). In this process, the occupational therapist identifies the ultimate goals of the organization and its stakeholders and uncovers internal and extrinsic factors that enable and constrain organizational performance. Through utilization of prevention, promotion, education, or consultative strategies, the occupational therapist implements an organization-centered plan aimed to support achievement of identified goals and maximize the organization's performance (Baum et al., 2005)

1.3.4 *Consultation Models in Occupation Therapy*

Organization-level practice drives practitioners out of traditional direct service delivery and into the realm of consultation. Consultation, a prominent theme in the American Occupational Therapy Association's Centennial Vision (Scaffa, Doll, Estes, & Holmes, 2011) and the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework* (AOTA, 2014) is defined as the "interactive process of helping others, including individuals, organizations, or populations, solve existing or potential problems by identifying and analyzing issues, developing strategies to address problems, and preventing future problems from occurring" (Jaffe & Epstein, 2011, p. 522). As evident in this definition, occupational therapy consultation is well suited to address the capacity building and population health focuses of organization-level practice.

Jaffe and Epstein (2011) identify two theoretical models of consultation with particular relevance to organization-level practice. The first, the educational model, involves the consultant assuming a training role to enhance client knowledge and skill to reach client goals.

At the organizational level, occupational therapy consultants can provide training to internally equip the organization with capacity-building skills and resources to reach target organizational goals and meet client needs. The second model of consultation, program development, is also applicable to an organization-level approach. This multi-step model includes needs assessment, program design, implementation, and evaluation (Jaffe & Epstein, 2011). Characterized by close collaboration between the consultant and organization, this model provides a structured process through which practitioners can partner with organizations to create powerful new programs, including those designed to support the participation and inclusion of new and diverse populations.

Chapter 2. PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION IN A SENSORY FRIENDLY THEATRE PROGRAM

2.1 ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigated family experiences of participation in a sensory friendly program designed with occupational therapy consultation to provide theatre access for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with nine parents. Using an inductive approach to data coding and analysis, final themes were identified.

The sensory friendly program as a “Deeply Meaningful Family Participation Experience” emerged as the primary theme, with subthemes of “Safety and Belonging,” “Engagement and Joy,” and “Significance of the Before and After” describing components of meaningfulness. The secondary themes, “The Power of the Social Environment” and “Unique Children Need Unique Supports” described factors underlying families’ experiences, and “Inclusive but Safe Participation Experiences” described parents’ vision for future opportunities.

Findings support the potential of sensory friendly programs designed and implemented with occupational therapy consultation to promote successful cultural arts participation among families with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. More research is needed to explore the relative value of sensory friendly program components and examine the impacts of sensory friendly programming across a range of community cultural arts settings.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Today’s dynamic health care landscape and evolving understanding of the social determinants of health challenge the field of occupational therapy to vision and implement

innovative service delivery approaches that support the health and quality of life of a diverse population (Braveman, 2015; Pitonyak, Mroz, & Fogelberg, 2015). The American Occupational Therapy Association's *Vision 2025* directs leaders in the field toward practices that not only effect individual but systems change and promote the well-being of entire communities and populations (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017). Organization-level occupational therapy consultation (Umeda et al., 2017) is one example of an innovative service delivery approach targeting systems change at community and population levels. Organization-level occupational therapy consultation aims to grow community organizations' capacities to serve a broad population of people with diverse needs. Occupational therapists using this consultative approach partner with target community organizations to increase accessibility of organizations' programs and services via program development, program modification, and/or staff education and training (O'Neil, Fragala-Pinkham, Ideishi, & Ideishi, 2012; Umeda et al., 2017)

Organization-level occupational therapy consultation has the potential to make a powerful population health impact by opening doors to successful community participation experiences for people who currently face access barriers. Children with disabilities and their families represent a population whose social participation in community settings is significantly restricted by a range of access barriers (Anaby et al., 2013; Bedell et al., 2013; Law et al., 2007). With a growing theoretical and research base linking community social participation to health outcomes throughout the life course (Law, 2002; World Health Organization, 2002), the importance of providing these families access to social participation opportunities in the community is illuminated and considered a population health priority in recent health initiatives (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

Organization-level occupational therapy consultation is being used with increased frequency to promote community social participation of children with disabilities and their families in a range of community settings including museums, community centers, restaurants, playgrounds, and cultural arts venues. Occupational therapy practitioners have started partnering with administrators and staff in these community settings to develop “sensory friendly” programs that incorporate environmental modifications, preparatory materials, and trained staff to support the participation of children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities (Ideishi, 2013). However, organization-level occupational therapy consultation and programs developed using this service approach lack an established evidence base.

A recent search of the peer-reviewed literature uncovered only one research study examining the outcomes of a sensory friendly program developed with this occupational therapy consultation (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017). The qualitative study examined a museum-based *Sensory Friendly Sundays* program designed to support the museum’s ability to reach patrons with neurodevelopmental disabilities and their families. The program included modifications to the museum exhibits and a range of support materials including sensory maps of the museum space. The investigators reported positive outcomes for families of children with sensory processing difference who participated in the program, including enhanced quality and increased duration of museum visits (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017).

Similar positive outcomes of community programs developed with organization-level consultation have been documented in grey literature including clinical practice publications and professional association newsletters (Fletcher, 2014; Ideishi et al., 2010; Ivey et al., 2014; Leichtman et al., 2014) . However, a formal research base is vital to a deep understanding of organization-level consultation’s effects and impacts and the development of best practices. A

key step in building this evidence base is studying sensory friendly and similar access programs developed with organization-level consultation across a range of social community settings.

This study examined a sensory friendly program developed with organization-level occupational therapy consultation in a cultural arts setting. The researchers aimed to investigate parents' perspectives on participation experiences and impacts related to a sensory friendly theatre performance program developed and implemented with occupational therapy consultation. This qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do parents describe their family's sensory friendly theatre-going experience?
2. How do parents use or perceive different program components?
3. How do parents describe their desires for future sensory friendly theatre opportunities?

2.3 METHODS

2.3.1 *Program*

This study targeted a sensory friendly theater performance program at a professional children's theater. The program, just over 1 year old at the time of the study, was developed through partnership between the theatre and a local occupational therapy consultant. General program structure was inspired by similar sensory friendly programs developed through occupational therapy consultation (Ideishi, 2013), but final program components were highly customized and identified via a collaborative program development process between theatre leadership and the occupational therapy consultant. Live theatre performances comprising the sensory friendly program incorporated environmental modifications, preparatory materials, and specially trained staff to support the participation experience of an audience with diverse sensory processing and developmental profiles.

2.3.1.1 Environmental modifications.

Modifications to the sensory and physical environments included softer lighting during the performance, decreased house capacity, designated movement and tablet-friendly zones, visual signage including arrow paths and stop signs, and “chill-out” areas in the lobby and rear of the house. Modifications to the social environment centered on abandoning the traditional subcultural expectation of audience members to be seated, still, and quiet. An onstage announcement immediately before the performance emphasized that standing, movement, vocalization, and moving in and out of the theatre as needed were completely acceptable. A higher staff/patron ratio at sensory friendly performances also allowed theater staff and volunteers to provide individual assistance to families as needed.

2.3.1.2 Preparatory materials.

Preparatory materials were created and available online and in print to support children before and during the theater event. A pictorial guide, called the “Story Book” structured after the evidence-based Social Stories™ (Gray & Garand, 1993), provided an overview of what to expect at a trip to the theater. A visual schedule with photos from the production served as a visual guide for the sequence of on-stage events. The “Parent Guide,” a sequential list of sensory-rich events during the performance provided parents and caregivers the opportunity to prepare their children for potentially challenging on-stage events.

2.3.1.3 Specialized training.

Staff and volunteers involved in preparing for and working during the performance itself received specialized training developed by the occupational therapy consultant consisting of tips for working with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. A staff member who served as the liaison between theatre administration and the cast and crew used

information provided by the occupational therapy consultant to inform performers and crew members about what to expect at the sensory friendly performances.

2.3.2 *Study Design*

Qualitative case study methodology was utilized to structure study design, a selection based on the intrinsically bounded system in which this study was situated (Glesne, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were selected as primary data sources to capture participants' rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A confirmatory online survey served as a secondary data source to triangulate interview data and promote trustworthiness of study results (Glesne, 2014).

2.3.3 *Participants*

Study participants were parents recruited from the audience of a sensory friendly performance of *The Cat in the Hat* at a professional children's theatre in May 2016. All audience members were informed of the study via an onstage pre-performance announcement and study fliers distributed post performance. All adult audience members who attended the performance with their child qualified for study participation. Parents were offered a \$25 gift card for interview participation and given a prepaid \$5 gift card incentive for survey participation.

2.3.4 *Data Collection*

Qualitative data were collected via two sets of semi-structured individual interviews that ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes. The initial set of interviews took place within 6 weeks of the performance and focused on family experience at the performance itself. Follow-up interviews took place 6 months following the performance, serving primarily as member checks of preliminary data analysis and opportunities to capture longer-term impacts of sensory friendly

program participation. Each follow-up interview began with member checking a preliminary summary of initial interview data. The researcher provided a verbal summary of the participant's perspectives described in the initial interview, and the participant was given an opportunity to offer clarification and modifications or confirm the summary's accuracy. In-person interviews were audio-recorded and all were transcribed for coding and analysis.

The online survey was sent electronically to fifteen parent volunteers by Survey Monkey two days following the sensory friendly performance, with an additional email reminder sent five days after initial survey distribution. The 21-item survey was developed jointly by research team members and parent stakeholder input, and utilized guidelines presented by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) to maximize response rate and minimize measurement error. The survey included multiple choice and short answer items as well as 5-point rating scales.

2.3.5 *Data Analysis*

2.3.5.1 Qualitative data.

An inductive thematic approach guided data analysis. Lack of existing literature on this practice approach and the research team's desire to allow codes to emerge naturally from the data informed the researchers' analysis strategy. Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for the study's objectives around identifying commonalities and differences among parents' participation experiences of the sensory friendly program (Glesne, 2014). Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and imported into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative research application, for analysis. Open coding of the transcripts was used to develop the primary coding scheme, a process conducted jointly by two study investigators to minimize bias. Once the coding scheme was finalized, transcripts were coded independently by the primary investigator then checked by a second investigator to promote coding reliability. Themes were

identified using an axial coding process and were finalized jointly by multiple members of the research team. Case comparison (Glesne, 2014) was utilized to identify patterns and differences within themes.

2.3.5.2 Survey data.

For the purposes of this study, survey data were used solely for confirmatory purposes and served as a further check for result trustworthiness. After final themes were established using interview data, parent responses to relevant survey items were reviewed and compared against the thematic structure that emerged from the interview data.

2.4 RESULTS

Nine parent volunteers completed the initial interview and of those, seven completed the follow-up interview. Five follow-up interviews were completed in-person, two were completed via email, and two parents were lost to follow up. Of the 15 parents who volunteered to participate in the survey, 14 completed and submitted their responses.

Demographic characteristics of the parent interview participants and their children are listed in Table 2.1. As illustrated, children who attended the performance ranged in age and diagnosis and included those with and without disabilities and those with and without previous theatre experience. Two interview participants disclosed that they were season ticket holders who had unintentionally attended the sensory friendly performance. All other interview participants purposely sought out the sensory friendly opportunity. During the member check portion of the follow-up interviews, all seven parents reported the preliminary analysis of their initial interview data as accurate.

One primary and three secondary themes emerged from the interview data and were supported by review of relevant survey items. The relationship between these themes is illustrated in a concept map (Figure 2.1) and themes are described in detail below.

2.4.1 *Deeply Meaningful Family Participation Experience*

Participation in the sensory friendly performance program as a deeply meaningful experience for families with children with disabilities was the primary theme emerging from interview data. All parents of children with disabilities described aspects of their participation experience as holding personal meaning and value either for themselves as parents, their children, or for the family unit. Meaningful aspects of family participation experience were captured by three categories: 1) Safety and Belonging, 2) Engagement and Joy, and 3) Significance of the Before and After.

2.4.1.1 Safety and belonging.

Many parents of children with disabilities emphasized that the sensory friendly performance provided them a rare and valuable opportunity to venture into a community setting that felt safe, accepting, and characterized by a sense of belonging. One mother stated: “If we cause a scene, if I need to leave if, you know, it’s just calming for me. Just knowing like, this is not a high-pressure situation. Everyone here is in the same boat.” Another parent reflected, “But it’s the knowing that everybody else there understands, they get it, is the best part about it.” One father described getting a disapproving look from an audience member who he assumed was there with typically developing children. Despite this incident, the father described feeling empowered by the overarching sense of belonging at the event: “Well, like, I’m supposed to be here – she’s supposed to be here doing this – so it’s like you can give me looks all you want but this is *our* performance.”

2.4.1.2 Engagement and joy.

Regarding the performance itself, many parents described being powerfully struck by the engagement and joy their children and entire family experienced. They also spoke about their own personal enjoyment and the uniqueness of the experience as one that was enjoyed by the family as a whole. One mother stated, “But we were amazed after it because we were just like, oh my gosh, look, she is smiling! She is smiling! Oh, oh, oh, she said, ‘lollypops.’ So it was awesome. We are so happy after.” Another reflected, “I mean, I knew he would probably like it, but he really just loved it. I mean, he was just beside himself with joy. I mean, it was so fun to see that...it was sort of off the charts.” A season ticket holder who unintentionally attended the sensory friendly performance with her three children, two of whom were typically developing, stated, “I was constantly looking over and they were very engaged. Like laughing and very peaceful faces. They just had so much fun and they all three said that it was their favorite over the other one.” Though the majority of parents reported high levels of child engagement, one father expressed disappointment in his son’s engagement at *The Cat in the Hat*, and felt that show content was perhaps a poor match for his son’s interests and developmental level. This father reported his son demonstrated higher levels of engagement at previous sensory friendly shows.

Four parents specifically described the sensory friendly experience as one their entire family enjoyed. One mother mentioned, “I think that’s what’s so beautiful about the way the performance is everyone enjoys them. They’re so well done and enjoyable. You know? Whoever has taken her as come home and loved it.” Another mother remarked,

So, the relaxed atmosphere really helped us because we could enjoy the theater production with her, which is something that we both love doing. And it’s so important to

us...I thought they were adorable and clever and whatever...But my husband had a blast, too.

2.4.1.3 Significance of the before and after.

For many parents of children with disabilities, meaningful aspects of their family's participation experience extended beyond the bounds of the performance itself. Parents spoke of the exciting build up to the performance day itself and the joy around having something fun to look forward to. One parent reflected:

And for us it's like the big event because we don't go anywhere, so it's really important for us. We have a monthly calendar for her and it's theater, and she is very excited to go, and she prepare her stuff and everything.

Another parent stated, "Well, she likes to get dressed up. We always let her wear something kind of special. And she gets to bring a friend. That's fun." Meaningful aspects of the experience also extended past the performance day. Parents happily recalled their children talking to others about their trip to theater and some using it as the foundation for pretend play at home. One mother stated, "He's still talking about it. We went Friday to see his OT and I heard him telling her, 'We went to see *The Cat in the Hat!* I saw the cat in the hat.' Another parent said:

It was awesome. And they still talk about it all the time. And we put a poster up in their little play area. Just so they had it...and had it framed...And she definitely attended better because she played it and acted it out after—which she hasn't done.

2.4.2 *The Power of the Social Environment*

The power of social environment modifications emerged as one of three secondary themes and the most influential contributor to families' positive participation experience. All parents of children with disabilities spoke about the positive impact of social environment

modifications on their feeling comfortable, relaxed and able to be fully present and engaged with their children during the performance. Many parents mentioned the value of the on-stage announcement during which acceptable behaviors were explicitly stated. They felt the verbal, real-time announcement was more powerful than having social and behavioral modifications described solely in online or print materials.

Multiple parents also distinguished these social modifications as supports for themselves more so than for their children. One mother described, “And for [daughter], the lights don’t matter, the louder the better. She doesn’t need any changes with that. But for me – this is for *me* to feel safe bringing her.” The father who described disappointment about his son’s level of engagement also spoke about the benefit he reaped from the social modifications. “I think that’s some of the biggest benefits of the sensory show – we don’t have to worry about him not being happy...It’s less burden to the parents...” Though one mother reported becoming used to the social challenges of taking her daughter into the community, she acknowledged the value of safe social environments for parents who were still learning to navigate the harsh public attitudes towards their children’s differences.

2.4.3 *Unique Children Need Unique Supports*

Another secondary theme was the idea that an individualized constellation of preparatory materials and sensory/physical environmental supports was needed to address children’s unique profiles. Unlike the universal benefit of social modifications, benefit of sensory/physical supports and preparatory materials was dependent upon children’s specific needs. Each of the sensory/physical environment modifications and preparatory materials was reported as highly beneficial by at least one parent, but none were universally utilized. Parents, experts on their children’s needs and challenges, utilized supports they deemed appropriate and disregarded the

others. For example, one mother reported heavily utilizing the online preparatory materials for her daughter with autism. “So I printed everything and I showed to her the social story – what’s going to happen.” This same parent commented on the photo-based guide: “Especially for her because her language is so impaired. It helps her to know the story before and what’s going to happen and then she can enjoy the show in her own way.” Another mother remarked, “I saw them [referring to stop signs and arrow paths]. I didn’t need them. I mean, for the most part, she’s pretty high functioning in that respect. So she doesn’t need those directional cues, and that kind of stuff.” However, a universal sentiment among all parents, even those with typically developing children, was that the presence of unutilized supports did not detract from their family’s participation experience. One mother who unintentionally attended the sensory friendly performance with her typically developing daughter reflected:

I guess the things that I would say I noticed were that it was much, much less crowded than any time we’ve ever been before...And then the lights being up was noticeable to me. And honestly, those were the only two things that felt any different from being at a normal show. And neither one was a problem. It didn’t bother me that the lights were up, and it didn’t seem to bother her that the lights were up. And she didn’t mind that there not a lot of people there. She’s like, I get the choice of seats.

2.4.4 *Inclusive but Safe Participation Opportunities*

This secondary theme emerged prominently from parent advice related to future sensory friendly and community participation opportunities. Parents universally favored experiences that were open to the general public, many describing a belief in inclusion and a dislike for experiences exclusively for people with disabilities that make them feel ostracized and isolated. However, many parents of children with disabilities also emphasized the need for careful

marketing and honest communication to potential ticket buyers about what to expect at a sensory friendly performance. Parents were concerned about preserving the safety of the sensory friendly space. One mother stated:

I certainly think anybody who wants to buy a ticket should be able to buy a ticket. But it needs to be made really clear that this is a special performance. This is a special audience. Don't try to sugar coat it. Make it clear. These are kids with intellectual disabilities, autism. This will not be your typical audience. Because the parents that are bringing kids like mine need to know that everybody there is going to be accepting, or we won't come.

2.5 DISCUSSION

Findings from this qualitative study provide strong foundational support for sensory friendly theatre as a deeply meaningful and valuable participation experience for families with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. Further, study findings highlight specific program components that were positively impactful for all parents and those with variable utility based on children's unique needs. Comparing these findings with the existing literature further supports sensory friendly programs' promise as community access initiatives. However, differences between this and existing studies' findings suggest the possibility that families may need different supports in different community contexts. Parent desires for inclusive but safe sensory friendly community opportunities also emerged from this study and serve as a starting point for the development of future programming.

The prominent theme of deeply meaningful family experiences that emerged from this study is consistent with existing literature. Silverman and Tyszka (2017) found that participation in sensory friendly museum programming promoted a sense of well-being among parents with children with disabilities. Parents reported feeling relaxed, safe, and welcome during designated

sensory friendly hours at an interactive museum (Silverman & Tyszka, 2017). These sentiments of safety and welcome parallel those expressed by many of the parents in the present study. The meaningful family experiences reported by parents in both studies support the value and potential of sensory friendly initiatives. They also suggest a connection between feelings of safety and belonging and meaningful participation in community settings.

Another key finding from this study was the power of modifications to the social environment and their universal positive impact upon all parents' participation experiences. Parents viewed the relaxed behavioral expectations for children during the performance and explicit communication thereof as supports for themselves more so than for their children. Making a wide range of child behaviors acceptable gave parents reprieve from the anxiety and fear experienced in typical settings with strict behavioral expectations. The powerful impact of these perceived parent-centered modifications illustrates the importance of addressing whole family needs in accessible community programming.

In addition to highlighting parent needs, this study also illuminated children's diversity and the individualized constellation of supports that best met their unique needs. In contrast to Silverman and Tyszka's (2017) findings that emphasized the value of sensory modifications including smaller crowds, modified exhibits, and a cool down space, modifications to the sensory environment were not universally helpful in the present study. Smaller crowds and softer lighting were cited by some parents as valuable supports, but not by all. In fact, one parent emphasized that these types of supports were not relevant for her daughter who craved more sensory input than most children. Perhaps differences between theatre and museum environments impacted the types of supports needed by families in each setting. In a museum setting where people move and navigate a dynamic physical environment, modifications like a

smaller crowd may play a more substantial role than in a theatre environment that requires little movement. Instead, the theatre environment, unlike an interactive museum, has a traditional behavioral expectation to be still and seated. This theatre-specific behavioral expectation may have been influential in the emphasis parents in this study placed on social modifications, which were not emphasized in the museum study. These findings and distinctions may be helpful to future occupational therapy consultants and organizations partnering to develop accessible programming across a range of community settings. These findings also reveal the need for more research examining and comparing the utility of supports across diverse contexts.

The finding that families utilized unique combinations of supports based on their child's unique needs suggests potential benefit in offering as many supports as possible in sensory friendly programming. Because extra supports were not detrimental to any family's experience in this study, offering as many supports as resources allow may be an appropriate principle when developing new sensory friendly programming. However, due to the reality of funding and resource limitations, more research to identify key program components and maximize program efficiency should be conducted.

Parent-reported desire for inclusive performances also helps to inform future sensory friendly program development and marketing. It may be beneficial for occupational therapy consultants and parent stakeholders to partner with theater staff to develop marketing strategies that make the sensory friendly program appealing and welcoming to a broad audience. However, because maintaining a sense of safety was emphasized parents with children with disabilities, a marketing priority may be to provide all potential audience members with a clear sense of the program's purpose and detailed information on what to expect at a sensory friendly show.

2.6 LIMITATIONS

The primary investigator's multiple roles in the sensory friendly performance program including substantial involvement in program development and implementation introduced potential for bias in this study. Further, parents' awareness of her involvement in program development may have impacted their responses to interview questions. However, the research team incorporated multiple methodological elements to address this bias risk and maximize trustworthiness of results. Though the study relied on interview data as the primary data source, the use of a confirmatory online survey triangulated results and strengthened study trustworthiness. Further, all follow-up interviews, both in-person and email based, included member checks to promote trustworthiness of data analysis. Coding checks were conducted for all initial parent interviews and the study codebook and the final thematic structure was developed jointly by the research team, methodological elements all designed to minimize researcher bias.

2.7 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTICE

This study found that participation in a sensory friendly theatre program developed with occupational therapy consultation was a meaningful, engaging, and impactful community experience for families with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. Findings emphasized the value of a safe social environment for parents of children with disabilities and a range of supports to meet the unique needs of a diverse population. The study also illuminated parents' desire for inclusive opportunities that retained a strong sense of safety and welcome. The benefits of participation in the sensory friendly program as well as desires for

future participation opportunities described by the parents in this study have the following implications for occupational therapy practice:

- Successful community cultural arts participation is a valued outcome for parents of children with disabilities. Occupational therapy practitioners can and should continue to promote cultural arts and community social participation through a range of therapeutic interventions.
- Parents in this study reported that meaningfulness of their theatre experiences extended beyond the performance itself. Meaning was found in preparing for and anticipating the performance as well as reflecting upon it afterwards and engaging in conversation and play related to what had been experienced. In promoting successful cultural arts participation, occupational therapy practitioners should consider ways to support participation in these significant pre and post events.
- Utilizing organization-level occupational therapy consultation to support access initiatives and build capacity within cultural arts organizations is a promising new approach in occupational therapy service delivery. This study's findings support further utilization and evaluation of this practice approach in a range of community settings within and beyond the cultural arts.

Table 2.1

Characteristics of Parent Interview Participants and their Children

Participant	Participant relationship to child	Child age	Child sex	Child diagnosis	Previous theatre experience (child)
1	Mother	7	F	Autism spectrum disorder	No
2	Mother	5	M	Cortical visual impairment	No
3*	Father	4	F	Developmental delay	Yes
4	Father	6	M	Epilepsy/ Developmental delay	Yes
5	Mother	10	F	Autism spectrum disorder	No
6	Mother	5	F	Autism spectrum disorder	Yes
7*	Mother	4	M	Developmental delay	Yes
8	Mother	9	F	Severe anxiety	Yes
9	Mother	7	F	None/Typically Developing	Yes

**Participants represent the mother and father of a 4-year-old daughter with whom they attended the performance*

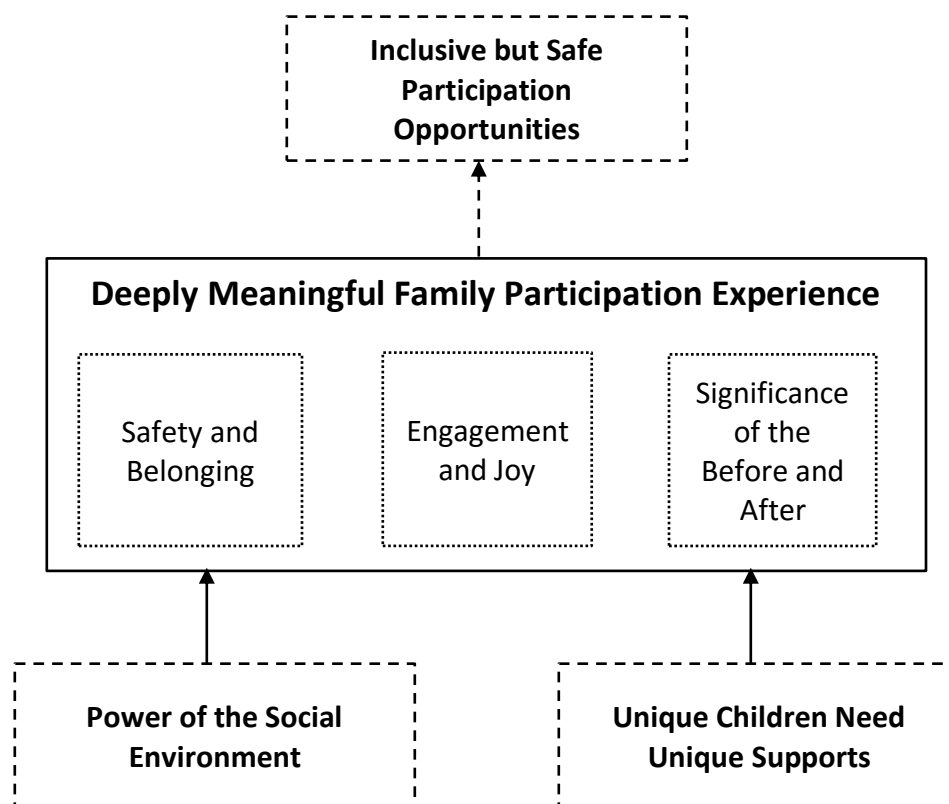


Figure 2.1. Concept Map of Primary and Secondary Themes. Model represents relationships between all themes. Primary theme displayed within solid box and categories within the primary theme within dotted boxes. Secondary themes displayed within dashed boxes. Solid arrows connect secondary themes of factors underlying family experiences to the primary theme. Dashed arrow connects the primary theme to the theme representing parents' vision for future participation opportunities.

Chapter 3. EXPANDING ACCESS FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES THROUGH SENSORY FRIENDLY THEATRE: PERSPECTIVES OF THEATRE STAFF

3.1 ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigated organization perspectives and experiences related to the development and implementation of a sensory friendly access program for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families. Data were collected through in-person semi-structured interviews with four theatre staff involved in program development or implementation. Final themes were identified using an inductive approach to data analysis.

Staff conceptualization of the sensory friendly program as “Ignited by Organizational Mission and Personal Commitment” emerged as the prominent theme. The theme, “Pathfinding with Expert Consultation and Internal Resources,” described staff’s perceptions that partnership with an occupational therapy consultant and utilization of existing internal resources were key program facilitators. The theme, “Challenges Worth Tackling,” included staff’s perceptions of funding and resource limitations as threats to program sustainability. “Powerful Personal and Organization Impacts” described positive staff-reported outcomes of program development and implementation including gains in personal knowledge and confidence as well as organizational capacity growth.

Research findings shed light on positive organizational impacts associated with sensory friendly program development and implementation, as well as program facilitators and challenges. More research is needed to explore identified funding and resource-related

challenges to program sustainability and to broaden understanding of organization perspectives to include those of performers and crew members. Further investigation into the relationship between occupational therapy consultants and theatre organizations is also needed to support efficiency and effectiveness of future sensory friendly theatre efforts.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

The performing arts has a well-established commitment to access for diverse audiences including people with disabilities (Bailey, 1993). For many decades, theatre organizations have offered a range of supports for audience members with hearing impairment, low vision, and limited physical mobility. American sign language (ASL) interpretation, audio-described performances, and wheelchair accessible viewing areas are common offerings in many theatre venues. However, providing accommodations for people with sensory processing and developmental disabilities is a less established realm of theatre accessibility. People with these disabilities can demonstrate behaviors and responses to the environment that make it difficult to attend a theatre production without support (Ideishi, 2013). Behavioral expectations to be seated and still, intensity of sensory stimuli such as lighting and sound effects, and unpredictability of the experience may be barriers to a successful theatre-going experience for this population (Ideishi, 2013; Kempe, 2014; Umeda et al., 2017b). As a growing body of research literature, revisions to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADAAA; Pub. L. 110–325), and growing public awareness illuminate the need to enhance community access for people with sensory processing and developmental disabilities, the theatre community has responded by implementing supports and programs aimed at dismantling existing barriers and making successful theatre-going possible for this population.

Sensory friendly programming is one approach to theatre access for people with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families internationally and in the U.S. (Ideishi, 2013; Kempe, 2014; Silverman & Tyszk, 2017; Umeda et al., 2017b). Theatres in many major U.S. cities now advertise and offer performances labelled as sensory friendly. And though these programs and their components vary by setting, they collectively aim to support the diversification of theatre audiences and the accessibility of cultural arts participation for people with disabilities and their families. In recent years, interest in sensory friendly theatre development has grown, and a guidebook published by the Kennedy Center (Ideishi, 2013) offers performing arts organizations interested in sensory friendly programming with a general program definition, framework, and options for specific program components. The suggested components include preparatory materials, environmental modifications, staff training, and collaboration with consultants with expertise in sensory processing and developmental disabilities and environmental and activity analysis.

Occupational therapists, along with other health care and education professionals, are specifically identified by the Kennedy Center's guidebook as appropriate consultants for sensory friendly programs. Occupational therapists are professionals committed to supporting people's participation in the meaningful daily activities that contribute to well-being and quality of life. They bring knowledge of sensory processing and developmental disabilities and expertise in analyzing the goodness of fit between environments, activities, and people themselves (Baum et al., 2005; Dunn et al., 1994). Though many occupational therapists work in traditional health care settings, occupational therapy has a growing presence in the community, and occupational therapy practitioners have become increasingly involved in developing accessible programming within recreational, informal learning, and cultural arts settings (O'Neil et al., 2012; Silverman &

Tyszka, 2017; Umeda et al., 2017). Occupational therapy's presence in sensory friendly theatre illustrates innovative collaboration between health professionals and theatre organizations with rich potential to enhance community participation among people with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and thereby promote their well-being and rights.

However, as a relatively new form of cultural arts accessibility, sensory friendly programming is still developing its evidence base. There is little published research examining the experiences and perspectives of key sensory friendly theatre stakeholders such as individuals with disabilities, their families, and the theatre companies offering these performances.

Anecdotal data and grey literature document positive experiences of individuals with disabilities and their families participating in sensory friendly programming (Fletcher, 2014; Ideishi et al., 2010; Ivey et al., 2014; Leichtman et al., 2014). Informal case reports have explored specific organizations' existing sensory friendly programs and documented staff perspectives on program development and implementation (Arthur-Kelly, Sigafos, Green, Mathisen, & Arthur-Kelly, 2009; Cohen & Sloan, 2007; Karkhaneh et al., 2010; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001). Though this documentation provides important preliminary support for sensory friendly programming and its potential impacts, a formal research base is needed to deepen our understanding of program impact on key stakeholders and provide theatre organizations with the research evidence needed to guide development and implementation of new sensory friendly programs and maximize the impact and sustainability of those currently offered.

The purpose of the current study was to explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of two key stakeholder groups: families of children with disabilities and theatre staff and administrators involved in a sensory friendly performance program at a professional children's theatre. Study objectives and results related to the family stakeholder group are

documented in Chapter 2, while this paper documents the perspectives of theatre administrators and staff involved in development and/or execution of the sensory friendly program. The study aimed to explore the following research questions pertaining specifically to organizational perspectives and experiences:

1. How do theatre staff describe the sensory friendly program and their perspectives on program development and implementation?
2. How do theatre staff describe organizational supports and challenges related to sensory friendly program development and implementation?
3. How do theatre staff describe their experience of collaboration with an occupational therapy consultant to develop and implement the sensory friendly program?

3.3 METHODS

3.3.1 *Program*

This study is based on a sensory friendly theater performance program at a professional children's theater. At the time of this study, the theatre had recently completed its fourth sensory friendly performance and its first full season of program implementation. General program structure was based upon the recommendations outlined in the Kennedy Center's guide (Ideishi, 2013), but final program components were developed through a highly collaborative process involving parents of children with disabilities, theatre administration, and an occupational therapy consultant. Program components are described below.

3.3.1.1 Occupational therapy consultation.

An occupational therapy consultant affiliated with a local university was involved throughout the entire process of sensory friendly program design and implementation. She

contributed content expertise in sensory processing and developmental disabilities as well as expertise in analyzing and promoting goodness of fit between people, environments, and activities. After the first program was piloted, three occupational therapy students, supervised by the occupational therapy consultant, provided additional program development support for a series of three sensory friendly performances. The occupational therapy consultant and students collaborated with theatre administration and staff to develop environmental modifications and preparatory materials. They also conducted staff and volunteer training and compiled a sensory friendly program resource toolkit for theatre staff.

3.3.1.2 Environmental modifications.

Modifications to the sensory and physical environments included softer lighting and sound effects, decreased house capacity, designated movement and tablet-friendly zones, visual signage including arrow paths and stop signs, and “chill-out” areas for rest in the lobby and rear of the house. Modifications to the social environment involved abandoning the traditional expectation of audience members to be seated, still, and quiet. An onstage announcement immediately before the performance emphasized that standing, vocalizing, and moving as needed throughout the performance were completely acceptable. A higher staff/patron ratio at sensory friendly performances also allowed theater staff and volunteers to provide individual assistance to families as needed.

3.3.1.3 Preparatory materials.

Preparatory materials were developed to support children before and during the theater event. A pictorial guide, called the “Story Book,” structured after the evidence-based strategy formally named Social Stories™ (Gray & Garand, 1993), provided an overview of what to expect at a trip to the theater. A visual schedule with photos from the production served as a visual

guide for the sequence of on-stage events. The “Parent Guide,” a sequential list of sensory-rich events during the performance provided parents and caregivers the opportunity to prepare their children for on-stage events that may be overwhelming. These customized preparatory materials were based upon a solid evidence base demonstrating the effectiveness of visual supports and sequential activity schedules to support social function among children with autism and other developmental disabilities (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2009; Cohen & Sloan, 2007; Gray & Garand, 1993; Karkhaneh et al., 2010; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001)

3.3.1.4 Staff training.

The occupational therapy consultant provided both formal and informal training to theatre staff and volunteers to increase internal knowledge and skills related to serving children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. Providing education and training is considered a key component of community-based occupational therapy consultation (Jaffe & Epstein, 2011). Formal training during the sensory friendly program’s pilot season included an in-person in-service for all theatre staff and volunteers involved in program implementation and day of show interaction with audience members. The training provided an overview of sensory processing and developmental disabilities and focused on general strategies for interacting and supporting children with these diagnoses. Informal trainings occurred during program development meetings, with the occupational therapy consultant providing theatre administration and staff with information about the impact of various sensory stimuli and the rationale behind her recommendations for environmental modifications. Informal training also occurred throughout the collaborative process of designing program specific preparatory materials and visual supports.

Following the pilot season, occupational therapy students created a brief training module to guide theatre staff in briefing volunteers prior to sensory friendly performances. The 10-minute module, conducted immediately before the sensory friendly show, provided volunteers with an overview of sensory friendly program components and tips for communicating and interacting with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities.

3.3.1.5 Resource toolkit.

Occupational therapy students compiled a resource toolkit to support efficient execution of sensory friendly performance procedures. A needs assessment conducted by the occupational therapy students illuminated theatre staff's need for a time-efficient system for environmental set-up and volunteer training on sensory friendly performance days. The toolkit included visual support materials including laminated arrows, stop signs, and duct tape for arrow paths, electronic templates for preparatory materials, electronic and paper versions of the volunteer training module, and maps indicating layout of movement and electronic-friendly zones in the theatre itself.

3.3.2 *Study Design*

This study utilized qualitative case study methodology (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to explore staff perspectives and experiences related to the sensory friendly program. Semi-structured interviews ranging from 40 to 60 minutes were used to capture theatre staff's rich descriptions of their experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

3.3.3 *Participants*

Four theatre staff who participated substantially in sensory friendly program development and implementation were identified by the theatre administration and recruited for study

participation. Though additional staff and theatre volunteers were involved in day of show activities, the researchers in this study focused on understanding the perspectives of staff with heavy involvement in program development and implementation. Recruitment was conducted via electronic communication.

3.3.4 *Data Collection*

Qualitative data were collected via semi-structured individual interviews that ranged in length from 40 to 60 minutes and took place within six weeks of the final sensory friendly performance of the season. Interviews were conducted in person, audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, then uploaded into Dedoose for coding and analysis.

3.3.5 *Data Analysis*

An inductive thematic approach guided data analysis. Scarcity of existing literature examining organizational perspectives on sensory friendly programs and the researchers' desire to allow codes to emerge naturally from the data informed this analysis strategy. Open coding of interview transcripts was used to develop the primary coding scheme, a process conducted jointly by two study investigators. Once the coding scheme was finalized, transcripts were coded independently by the primary investigator then checked by a second investigator to promote coding reliability. Two members of the research team worked collaboratively to identify themes using a multistep axial coding process. Case comparison was utilized to identify patterns and differences within themes (Glesne, 2014). The researchers utilized Dedoose, a web-based application for qualitative and mixed methods research, during axial coding and theme development stages of the data analysis process.

3.4 RESULTS

All four individuals receiving the recruitment email volunteered to participate in the study. Roles and backgrounds of the four participants are provided in Table 3.1. Though participants are referred to in this study as theatre staff, all held management or administrative positions.

Four themes emerged from the staff data. The overarching theme was staff's conceptualization of the sensory friendly program as a highly worthwhile mission-driven journey, anchored and propelled by alignment with the both the organization's arts access goals and current administrators' personal commitments to inclusion. Three additional themes illuminating perceived program facilitators, challenges, and organizational and personal impacts at various points along the ongoing journey also emerged from the data and are visually displayed in Figure 3.1.

3.4.1 *Ignited by Organizational Mission and Personal Commitment*

Program alignment with the theatre's arts access mission and deep personal investment of current theatre leadership were emphasized by all four participants as powerful catalysts behind the organization's decision to embark upon its sensory friendly program journey. One staff member expressed, "And you know, and access is front and center of our mission, and I feel like access means a lot of things including serving children of all – all types of children. And so, this is a mission-driven project." Another stated, "Well it's a big part of the mission here – just to be able to have access for all types of children and families. And that just fits right in the alley. And this company has a long history of doing programs to outreach for folks who need a little different set of support". In addition to alignment with the organization's values and access focus, all four participants also emphasized that the deep personal investment of the current

administration and staff was key to getting the program off the ground, as well as sustaining it over time. One participant emphasized, “But also we have a unique leadership team. And not to say that other leadership teams are not equally as wonderful, it just happens to be their own personal mission to make sure that this inclusion piece is part of what we do...” Another stated, “Everyone was just excited to do it. It’s a cause that everyone wants to see succeed. And I think that makes a huge difference...So everyone comes into it with a really great attitude, really open hearts. Which is beautiful.”

Three of the four participants also spoke of having direct personal connections to people with disabilities, a connection that fueled their personal investment in the program’s success. One staff member stated,

When it was mentioned to me, I instantly put my name in the hat to be part of this project...My brother’s on the autism spectrum, and so I have a vested interest in a program like this. So, back in the day, there wasn’t anything like this. You know? And it was very difficult to do things like that...Making a safe place for families, not only for the kids, but so that the parents feel safe and feel like they can take their kids places. You know, even with my brother...Having the goal of being able to bring something as joyous as theater, oh, to those families! Is just so wonderful.

3.4.2 *Pathfinding with Expert Consultation and Internal Resources*

In addition to the sensory friendly program’s mission-driven nature that provided ongoing support, all four participants described additional facilitators they perceived as key to the program’s development and successful implementation to date. Facilitators emphasized by all four participants were: 1) partnership with an occupational therapy consultant, and 2) utilization of valuable existing internal resources.

Access to expert consultation was highlighted by all four participants as a vital support for both program development and implementation. Staff described occupational therapy consultation as integral to “doing it right,” assuring that program components were well matched for the unique needs of the sensory friendly program’s target audience. One staff member stated:

I think knowing that we had [the OT consultant] and other professionals in the field helping us facilitate this, it made it very comfortable to embark on this process. If we didn’t have [OT consultant’s] help, it would have been a very been a very different story.

All staff members expressed lack of prior formal training related to serving people with sensory processing and developmental disabilities, though had varying degrees of on the job experience with diverse populations. Staff members expressed awareness about their knowledge limitations and relief for support to fill that gap to construct a quality program. One staff member reflected:

But it is great to have that...professional voice to bounce it off of. Because the last thing we want to do is have a family come and not have a good experience, and then we don’t have any way to help that family...Because I just don’t have enough knowledge about the community in order to respond appropriately.

Another commented:

Oh, I mean, [OT consultant and students] being able to give us the amount of information of the different areas that people want in the house, and [their] opinions about what needed to change in the show. That stuff was huge – being able to have that.

Despite their lack of formal education related to serving people with disabilities, theatre staff all referred to a variety of valuable internal resources utilized to execute the sensory friendly program including prior work experience and the organization’s existing educational resources. Many staff described prior involvement with special programs such as ASL

interpreted shows for people with hearing impairment and theatre touch tours for patrons with vision impairments. One staff member also talked about drawing upon the theatre's established educational skill set to conceptualize and execute the sensory friendly performances: "And I think it helps that we have such an emphasis here on education, so, you know. Setting up the art station – that's in our wheelhouse. We know how to do that."

3.4.3 *Challenges Worth Tackling*

All staff conceptualized the sensory friendly program as a work in progress, a program in an early developmental stage needing to overcome encountered challenges and continue to grow. The most prominent and foundational challenge described by all staff related, both directly and indirectly, was funding. Three staff members spoke about the theatre's budget and that attendance numbers for sensory friendly performances, though increasing, had been low, affecting incoming revenue. One stated, "...It's all about funding. We're giving up, basically, like a *Goodnight, Moon* or a *Cat in the Hat*, which was selling, you know at 90% capacity, and suddenly you have a show that's down to 25% capacity. I'm not sure that's an accurate number, but you know a very small group. So that means we've eliminated an opportunity to have that earned income." Another staff member, also describing challenges related to revenue loss, expressed concern that tickets to sensory friendly shows, marketed primarily to families with children with disabilities, might be offered in quantity to the general public. She expressed worry that shifting sensory friendly audience demographics in this way might negatively impact the program's target audience.

Another challenge described by three of the four staff was the program's high human resource demand, and "finding the resources to make sure we can adequately staff." Especially in the early stages, program development and implementation required staff members to complete

time-consuming sensory friendly program tasks in addition to other responsibilities.

Administrative staff expressed concern about this added burden to employees and the reality that alternative staffing options were limited by budget. One staff member also expressed how limited staff and time resources impacted the theatre's ability to market the program and explore ways to reach a new population of potential theatregoers. However, all staff who reported these challenges also expressed a deep sense of worthwhileness in finding solutions to ensure sustainability of this mission-driven endeavor: "...We say it's still worth it."

Only one staff member explicitly mentioned staff turnover as a challenge to smooth and efficient program function. She stated:

And then, the other thing is in the arts world... We'll have a turnover. It's not huge, you know. Turnover is very small compared to other arts organizations, but you know, we still will... Like losing [former staff member] from that first year – she was amazing... And [new staff member] cares about it greatly, but she's a different person.

Though no other staff members spoke of turnover as a program challenge, they all mentioned being new to their current roles in the organization, as illustrated in Table 3.1. Three of the four staff members had previously worked at the theatre, but due to turnover and shifting organizational structure, had recently taken on new positions.

3.4.4 *Powerful Personal and Organizational Impacts*

Through the development and refinement of the sensory friendly program, all staff members described powerful growth processes that occurred as the result of these new experiences. Emerging themes pertaining to program impacts on staff and the organization were: 1) increased personal knowledge and confidence, and 2) increased organizational capacity and progress toward access goals.

All staff described their own personal growth journeys through participation in the sensory friendly program. Descriptions of empowerment, increased confidence, and enhanced comfortability serving this population of families were provided by different staff members.

One stated:

Just more comfortable. Being able to be like, just treat them like a human being. Just treat them like a human being, and make sure you're making direct communication with them. So it has made me less scared...it has made me less scared of doing the wrong thing, of saying the wrong thing for this population.

Another reflected:

I would say it's hugely impacted it [referring to confidence level]. It's been a very educating experience for me to know how to interact with this population because it's not a group I had experience with before. So it's educated me a lot on that and opened my eyes to how to make it more accessible.

Many staff members expressed a sense of wonder and relief upon realizing how little change to the shows themselves were necessary to create an accessible performance for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities. One staff member explained:

So the goal is to make this as close to a – I hate to use the word – normal – but the normal show, the goal is to keep it as close to it as possible so those families feel like they are having the same experience. It's not something that's different for them because they're different. They get to go to the theater just like everyone else and see the same show.

And hearing that made – it was very impactful on me, 'cause I meet with the cast and the crew, and I prep them for these performances...I added that into my toolbox to tell them, like don't change your performance. This is why we're doing this.

Staff members also described organizational capacity growth as a powerful outcome of embarking on the sensory friendly journey. One reflected:

So I think the experiences are getting really fine-tuned...And again, balancing the resources...But you can't do that until you actually have your hands in the project and you know what you can let go of, and what is really vital that you can't let go, and what you should add. So I think that is going very, very well. And, I wish we were serving more kids. But I think on a whole, the project is starting to run, like almost like a machine. Just plug in the show.

Another stated, "And I think what this program does for us is goes, oh yeah, so it's not that hard and it's actually not that expensive. It's time intensive, and we have to put resources to it, and all of us are way too busy, and we're always understaffed, but it's doable." She went on to say that the program was also empowering the organization to potentially take on even more new access initiatives:

But I think what it has done for us as an institution is when we say, hey, what about fill in the blank of access points that we could be targeting -- it no longer seems insurmountable because this particular program requires so much planning and so much preparation that when we say, hey, what if we added X, it's like, oh we could totally do that. Let's talk about how we could facilitate that, because it seems so easy now, which I think is great.

Staff's day of show experiences and feedback from parents reinforced a sense of organizational growth and progress toward the mission of bringing theatre and its inherent learning and community-building opportunities to all children and families. One staff member exclaimed, "They are just, oh my gosh, they are so excited. And some of the kids that came in

here not talking are then like, oh my gosh, ‘You’re the cat in the hat.’ ...And that’s magical. That’s like Disneyland magical.” Another reflected:

Like there was one boy who just kept wanting to dance with his arms, and his mom would do it with him, and it was just like – they can do that. It’s so great. They can come to the show, they are enjoying it together, and neither of them has to feel like there’s any judgement. They can just be free to be themselves.

3.5 DISCUSSION

Findings from this qualitative case study provide valuable insights into a professional theatre’s journey toward accessibility for children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities and their families. Findings diversify and strengthen the emerging body of literature on sensory friendly performances, as most existing studies have focused audience experiences versus organization perspectives and impacts. These audience-focused studies have reported positive child and family participation experiences at sensory friendly performances (Kempe, 2014; Umeda et al., 2017), and parents have described sensory friendly performances as providing rare and valuable opportunities to participate in a community activity within a safe and supportive context (Kempe, 2014; Umeda et al., 2017). These documented parent experiences in combination with this study’s findings of program feasibility with appropriate resources support continued implementation of sensory friendly theatre programs and more research examining these efforts.

Staff experiences reported in this study illustrate the potential of innovative, collaborative partnerships with occupational therapy consultants to support cultural arts access endeavors. Jaffe and Epstein (2011) offer best practices and theoretical models for occupational therapy consultation. They assert that building strong collaborative relationships with client

organizations, understanding the system within which an organization exists, and incorporating the organization's unique mission and resources, best promote organizational function and consultative success. They also describe educational and program development consultation models and emphasize the importance of expanding clients' knowledge, skills, and capacity (Jaffe & Epstein, 2011). Though this study did not include an in-depth examination of the consultant-theatre relationship, reflections by theatre staff suggest successful occupational therapy consultation throughout the program development and implementation process. Staff members appeared to attribute personal and organizational growth to skills developed and lessons learned directly and indirectly through occupational therapy consultation. Closer examination of the occupational therapy consultant-client relationship in promoting arts accessibility is a valuable target of future research.

Findings from this study highlight challenges to the sustainability of access initiatives such as sensory friendly programming. The fundamental challenges of funding and securing sustainable financial resources to support a resource-heavy program are formidable. As described by staff members in this study, streamlining processes and protocols to maximize efficiency is a good start. More research to support organizations' development of efficient and sustainable sensory friendly programming and protocols around resource allocation would be beneficial. Exploring collaboration between marketing departments and occupational therapy consultants and families with children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities might also be considered for increasing program visibility within target communities to maximize ticket sales and earned income.

The issue of widely marketing sensory friendly performances to the general public and families with typically developing children should also be further explored for a number of

reasons including program sustainability. Though one staff member expressed concern about compromising the safe space sensory friendly performances, findings from Chapter 2 suggest that many families with children with disabilities favor and inclusive theatre performances, as long as all audience members understand and embrace the modifications inherent to a sensory friendly program. Engaging consultants and community stakeholders to explore marketing strategies that promote inclusivity of sensory friendly performances and increase attendance is another valuable future endeavor.

3.6 LIMITATIONS

The findings from this study represent the perspectives of four theatre staff who played substantial roles in developing and/or implementing the sensory friendly program and who collaborated directly with the occupational therapy consultant. Though selection of these participants was an appropriate starting point for understanding organizational perspectives on program development and implementation, all organizational stakeholder perspectives were not obtained in this study. Actors and crew members, vital organizational stakeholders, were, for logistical reasons, not recruited for study participation. Further, volunteers who assisted during sensory friendly performances were not included due to their lack of direct involvement in program development. Exploring these stakeholders' perspectives and experiences is an important next step in this line of research.

The primary investigator played multiple roles in the sensory friendly performance program including serving as the primary occupational therapy consultant and a mentor for the occupational therapy students who were involved in the program. Through her consultative role, the primary investigator had previously worked with all staff and administrators who volunteered for study participation. Her involvement in the program and established relationships with staff

may have limited her objectivity during the study and may have impacted participant responses during interviews.

To address the potential for researcher bias, the research team incorporated methodological elements to maximize trustworthiness of results. Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was developed with input by multiple members of the research team, with the final protocol receiving approval by all team members. The study codebook was developed jointly by two team members, and coding checks were conducted to ensure interrater reliability, with all coding discrepancies resolved via discussion between raters before further data analysis commenced. All stages of data analysis involved collaboration between at least two members of the research team, with the final thematic structure also undergoing peer review and debriefing with a qualitative researcher outside the research team to further promote trustworthiness of results (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2014).

3.7 CONCLUSION

The journey described by staff and administrators in this study illustrated the feasibility of designing and implementing a sensory friendly performance program at a professional children's theatre. Findings supported the value of missional alignment and administrative investment, strong internal resources, and access to professional consultation in successfully implementing access initiatives. The study also illuminated powerful program impacts at both personal and organizational levels, including internal capacity growth to support future ventures into uncharted access realms. However, to maximize sustainability of access initiatives, funding challenges must be addressed and long-term solutions identified. The voices of all organizational stakeholders including actors, performers, crew members, volunteers, and a wide range of theatre employees must be explored in future research to deepen and diversify

understanding of organization perspectives and needs related to sensory friendly and access initiatives. A strengthened evidence base for sensory friendly theatre can support and guide development of cost-effective and efficient programming that will open doors for more children and families to experience the unique magic of theatre and the arts.

Table 3.1

Roles and Backgrounds of Theatre Staff Participants

Participant Code	Current Role	Time in Current Role in Years	Time Employed by Theatre in Years	Previous Access-Related Work Experience
S1	Managing Director	<1	17	Previous role as Education Director at theatre. Experience with educational and school-based programming for children with diverse needs
S2	Patron Services Manager	<1	3	None stated
S3	Director of Sales & Marketing	<1	8	Experience with ASL interpreted shows
S4	Stage Production Manager	<1	<1	Experience with ASL interpreted shows, theatre touch tours

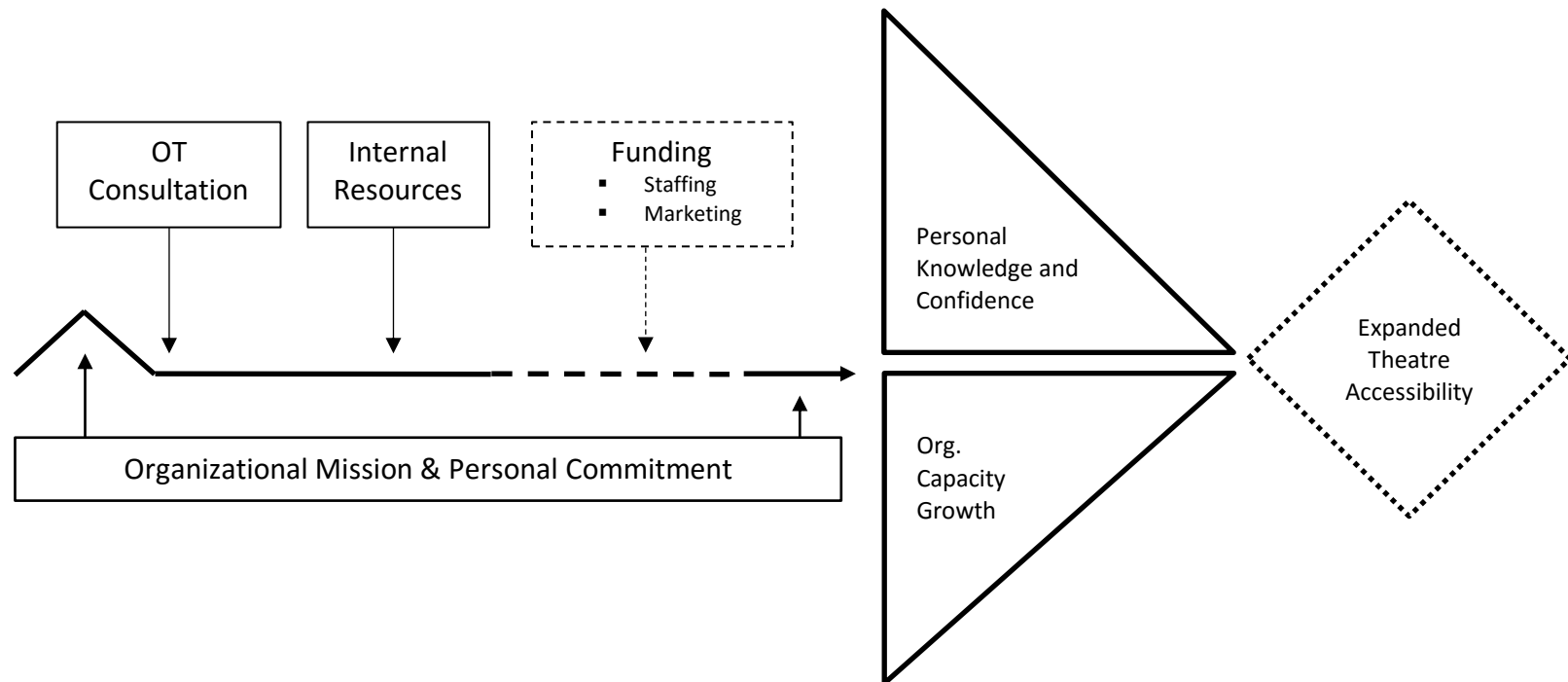


Figure 3.1. Themes Related to Sensory Friendly Program Development and Outcomes. Themes related to program facilitators are represented in solid boxes. The theme related to program challenges is represented in the dashed box. Solid triangles contain themes related to program outcomes. The dotted diamond represents the theatre's overarching objective for the sensory friendly program

Chapter 4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This dissertation adds qualitative research data to the emerging evidence base for organization-level occupational therapy consultation within community cultural arts settings. The qualitative study described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 was based upon a sensory friendly theatre program that was designed, implemented, and evaluated with organization-level occupational therapy consultation. The study explored the experiences and perspectives of two key stakeholder groups: families who participated in the sensory friendly program and theatre staff who were directly involved in program development and/or implementation. Study limitations included a small convenience sample, absence of key organizational stakeholders such as actors and children with disabilities, and potential for investigator bias. However, methodological elements to address limitations and maximize result trustworthiness were incorporated into the study design. These included interviews across two time points, member checks, triangulation via a confirmatory survey, and utilization of multiple researchers in data analysis and theme development (Glesne, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015)

The study uncovered impacts of program participation on its target audience through a thematic analysis of parents' descriptions and reflections related to their family's theatre-going experience. The study also illuminated organizational perspectives on the sensory friendly program including program facilitators and challenges, partnership with occupational therapy consultants, and personal and organizational impacts of program development and implementation.

The sensory friendly performance as a deeply meaningful family participation experience was the most prominent finding emerging from parent data. Parents described meaningfulness in

relation to feelings of safety and belonging, experiences of engagement and joy, and significance that extended beyond the bounds of the theatre performance itself. Regarding specific program components, the value of social modifications rose above all other environmental modifications and supports. For example, all parents reported that explicitly relaxing traditional behavioral expectations associated with theatre-going had a powerful impact, allowing them to feel at ease and more fully present and engaged with their child and family during the performance. Though other environmental modifications such as smaller crowds and softer lighting and availability of preparatory materials were valuable for certain parents, utility of these supports varied greatly depending upon children's unique development profiles and needs. Regarding future sensory friendly programming, families of children with disabilities overwhelmingly favored inclusive experiences, expressing that protected experiences, though safe, can feel isolating and ostracizing. However, along with inclusivity, parents also desired clear, honest communication about the sensory friendly program's purpose and unique qualities to all potential ticket buyers in order to preserve it as a safe space for families with children with disabilities.

Organizational data illuminated staff perceptions of the process through which the sensory friendly program was developed, implemented, and modified over time. Themes emerging from these data related to perceived program facilitators and challenges and personal and organizational impacts of program development and implementation. The program's strong alignment with the theatre's mission and staff members' personal commitments emerged as the most prominent theme and was considered the most powerful facilitator throughout all phases of program development and implementation. Additionally, staff cited their collaborative relationship with the occupational therapy consultant and occupational therapy students as another major program support. Access to professional guidance and expert content knowledge

supported staff member's confidence in the program's structure and overall quality.

Collaboration with the occupational therapy consultant allowed for informed programmatic decision making based on knowledge of the target audience's needs and appropriate support strategies.

In addition to strong themes related to program supports, themes illuminating programmatic challenges also emerged from staff data. At the core, challenges were rooted in funding, as staff described income loss related to low ticket sales, high staff resource demands, and challenges marketing effectively to a new segment of the population. However, because of strong underlying investment in this mission-driven project, these challenges were universally described by staff members as worth tackling. Ultimately, all staff described powerful personal and organizational impacts of the sensory friendly program. The theme of growth journeys emerged from data, with staff describing increases in their own knowledge and confidence to serve a diverse population as well as increases in the organization's internal capacity to carry out effective access programming. Staff expressed that the sensory friendly program, in its current state, was running smoothly and illustrated the feasibility of successfully taking on access initiatives. Staff cited day of show observations and parent feedback as validating the program's success in providing children with disabilities and their families a meaningful theatre-going experience.

Collectively, these findings from both stakeholder groups contribute to understanding the process of developing a sensory friendly performance program and the program's impacts upon audience members, theatre staff, and the theatre organization. Further, the collective data provide valuable direction for the continued development of sensory friendly programs and similar access initiatives to maximize their positive impact, efficient implementation, and

sustainability. Though the findings of this study should not be viewed as generalizable to all sensory friendly programs across a range of theatre settings, results do provide key insights that may inform decision-making related to developing new sensory friendly theatre programs and modifying existing ones.

Themes from the parent data related to the value of various program components can inform organizational decision making around allocation of precious staff and financial resources. Modification to the social environment emerged clearly as the most universally impactful program component, contributing powerfully to the positive participation experience of all parent participants. The day of show human resource requirement for this modification is strikingly minimal, involving the recitation of a pre-written onstage announcement prior to the performance describing the range of behaviors acceptable at the sensory friendly show. The suggested power of this simple modification is promising for theatre and other cultural arts organizations with limited budgets and staff resources. The highly variable reported utility of other program components including smaller crowds, softer lighting, visual supports, and preparatory guides suggest a more complex relationship between these supports and families' participation experiences. More investigation is needed to better understand the utility of these program components, some of which require substantial staff and time resources. Results of this current study suggest that theatres may have some flexibility around the constellation of preparatory materials and sensory/physical environment modifications offered. For example, theatre administrators might consider eliminating time-intensive set up of visual supports if inclusion of this program element threatens program sustainability. Further, flexibility to sell the house to a greater capacity than originally thought for sensory friendly performances provides the potential for increased revenue through ticket sales and decreased financial burden.

Parents' desire for inclusive but safe family participation experiences also provides valuable guidance for future program development. Organizational perspectives in this study illuminated financial challenges associated with low sensory friendly attendance, an issue that could be addressed via marketing the program more widely to the general public. Allotting resources to develop a marketing strategy that attracts a bigger and more inclusive sensory friendly audience, yet preserves safety for families with children with disabilities, could be a powerful organizational investment. Bringing more members of the general public to the sensory friendly audience would also move the program closer toward the desired ideal community participation experience described by parents in this study.

The qualitative study described in this dissertation represents a starting point and important contribution to the limited foundational evidence base for sensory friendly programming and organization-level occupational therapy consultation in cultural arts settings. Much more research is needed to expand and deepen understanding of sensory friendly programming's impacts on diverse stakeholders and to build best practices for organization-level consultation within the cultural arts.

First, research efforts must address the experiences and perspectives of all stakeholders in sensory friendly programming. The perspectives of children with disabilities who participate in sensory friendly programming must be investigated. The current evidence base for sensory friendly programming, including the study described in this dissertation, captures children's experiences through the lens of their parents (Kempe, 2014; Silverman & Tyszk, 2017). Though parent perceptions of their children's experiences are important and valid, they are not substitutes for children's own perspectives. Research literature documents inconsistencies between parent proxy report and children's self-report (Davis et al., 2007; Eiser & Morse, 2001),

findings that must be considered when interpreting parent-reported data about children's lived experiences. Finding creative strategies to capture the perspectives of children themselves, including children who may have communication challenges, is key to understanding the impacts of sensory friendly participation experiences and developing related best practices.

Actors and performers represent another group of stakeholders whose voices must be included in the evidence base for sensory friendly programming within the cultural arts. Research on sensory friendly theatre programming has yet to systematically examine performer experiences and perspectives. Thus, little is known about performers' experiences and conceptualizations of sensory friendly performances, their preparation strategies, their needs and desired supports, and the impact of environmental modifications on their own occupational performance and satisfaction. This stakeholder perspective, like that of children with disabilities, is key to comprehensively understanding sensory friendly theatre's impacts and uncovering ways to utilize occupational therapy consultation to support actors' needs and occupational performance.

Uncovering the complexities that underlie successful collaboration between occupational therapy consultants and cultural arts organizations is another important target of future research. General frameworks for occupational therapy consultation exist in the current literature (Jaffe & Epstein, 2011). However, little is known about the factors supporting unique, innovative partnerships between health care practitioners and cultural arts organizations that, according to findings reported in this dissertation, are critical to successful sensory friendly theatre programming. Future research should explore the characteristics of successful consultative collaborations between occupational therapy consultants and organization staff, administrators, and performers. Understanding how effective partnerships are established and maintained and

how therapeutic use of self is utilized to best support organizations' staff and stakeholders are vital to the development of best practices for organization-level consultation.

Finally, parents' desire for inclusive but safe participation opportunities for their families must be further explored in future research. Exploring the concept of "inclusive but safe" across a range of community settings and stakeholders is an important starting point. Stakeholders including individuals with disabilities and their families, policy makers, rehabilitation and education professionals, the general public, and community organizations should be engaged in exploring this construct. Through identifying and exploring key components of safe and functional community spaces for people with diverse abilities and their families, next steps toward creating and sustaining these community spaces can be explored. Through engagement in this research process, rehabilitation professionals, in collaboration with an array of stakeholders, will continue the journey toward meaningful community participation, optimal health, and protected rights for all.

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VITA

Caroline Umeda earned a doctoral degree in rehabilitation science from the University of Washington in 2017. Caroline's research interests focus on rehabilitation interventions supporting the community participation of individuals, families, and populations. Caroline is particularly interested in the potential of organization-level occupational therapy consultation to support the development and implementation of community access and inclusion initiatives. Caroline has extensive clinical experience in pediatric occupational therapy and has worked in early intervention, public and private school settings, and outpatient rehabilitation. She currently provides organization-level services to community cultural arts and recreational facilities through her private consultative practice. Caroline has taught extensively in academic, clinical, and community settings on topics including early intervention, child development, autism, sensory processing, and therapeutic communication. She hopes to pursue her research, teaching, and practice interests within a future academic position and through continued community-based consultative service provision. Caroline also holds a master of science degree in rehabilitation science from the University of Washington and a bachelor of science degree in occupational therapy from the University of Puget Sound.