

Post-COVID-19 Impact on Social Skills of Students in Occupational Therapy Internship of Professional Technical Level

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social skills of fifth-year Occupational Therapy students at an institute professional Chilean, a context marked by the transition to virtual mode and then the return to face-to-face. The critical issue lies in the deterioration of essential skills such as communication and empathy due to confinement, with consequences on their professional performance during internships. The main thematic axes are mental health post-pandemic, the development of social skills in occupational therapy, and institutional responses to the crisis. To address this, an exploratory and cross-sectional quantitative methodology was used. Data collection included dichotomous surveys of students and evaluative surveys of clinical tutors, administered digitally. The data were analyzed descriptively to identify trends. The main result was the finding of insecurity and difficulties in interacting with users and colleagues, as well as a decrease in proactivity. The main conclusion is the need to implement strategies for psychoemotional support and reinforcement of social skills in professional training post-pandemic to ensure quality care in the health area.

Keywords: Social skills; occupational therapy: covid-19; higher education

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global emergency by the WHO in March of 2020 profoundly disrupted daily life, especially in the educational field. The forced transition to remote teaching modalities represented an unprecedented challenge for institutions, both in technological and pedagogical terms. Particularly affected were careers in the health area, whose formative essence lies in practical experience, human contact, and collaborative work in clinical settings. This context drives the need to analyze post-pandemic mental health post-pandemic and the impact on the development of social skills, central themes in this study.

In Chile, the confinement policies, the prolonged closure of educational centers, and the rapid implementation of virtual platforms left a significant mark on the student community. At the psychological level, an increase in anxious and depressive symptoms, stress, and emotional exhaustion was observed. In this context, social skills, understood as the ability to communicate effectively, empathy, cooperation, and establishment of interpersonal bonds, were compromised, especially in students who were going through crucial stages of their training in isolation. These elements will be explored from a theoretical perspective that considers the biopsychosocial approach and social learning theory.

This study focuses its object on the discipline of occupational therapy, but it is necessary to clarify that its approach connotes a character exploratory considering that as a career in Chile they do not have greater emphasis. That is, the current situation in Chile shows an evident predominance of the kinesiology career, while the formal and validated presence of the physiotherapy career is practically non-existent. Although both professions share similar areas of intervention, such as rehabilitation and the treatment of musculoskeletal disorders, in practice and in official recognition, only kinesiology maintains a clear and consolidated position in the educational system and in the labor market.

Faced with this problem, the possibility arises of considering alternatives that can replace traditional functions, in particular, the career of massage therapy, which, although it is a technical training, is closer to the needs of body and therapeutic care. Massage therapy could be a valid option to fill the gaps in manual care, especially in contexts where the academic offer of physiotherapy is not yet consolidated or does not exist in certain regions. This could facilitate the training of professionals specialized in manual and complementary therapies, aligned with the demands of the market and the characteristics of the health system in sectors where there are no formal physiotherapy programs.

In this scenario, Occupational Therapy students faced specific challenges. This discipline, focused on direct intervention with people, groups and communities, requires the development of solid relational skills, including empathy, assertive communication and the ability to establish therapeutic bonds. However, a large part of these students completed key formative years in virtual mode, limiting opportunities for social interaction, emotional training and face-to-face feedback. Added to this is the importance of social skills in the context of Occupational Therapy, a fundamental thematic axis to understand the impact of confinement.

With the gradual return to face-to-face classes in 2022, the academic community showed a notable decline in students' social skills, manifested in insecurity when interacting with users, difficulty establishing trusting relationships and low participation in work teams. This problem transcends academic performance, putting at risk the integral formation of the future health professional. Finally, the institutional responses to the pandemic and their effectiveness in mitigating the negative effects on student training will be analyzed.

Faced with this reality, the present study proposed to describe and analyze the impact of the context post-pandemic on the social skills of fifth-year Occupational Therapy students of a Chilean Professional Institute, specifically during their professional internship. The research seeks to provide evidence on this current and little explored problem, as well as to propose lines of action that strengthen institutional support and enhance the development of interpersonal skills within the framework of a more resilient and human higher education.

Therefore, the work is based on three thematic axes that give foundation and place the problem in a vital theoretical context, which are: (a) impact of confinement on the mental health of university students that explores the prevalence of mental health problems in university students, examining how confinement and the restrictions associated with the pandemic exacerbated these problems; (b) relevance of social skills in the training of the occupational therapist that analyzes the importance of social skills in the practice of occupational therapy, highlighting its role in the construction of the therapeutic bond and collaborative work and (c) adaptations institutional to remote teaching and its impact on practical training that evaluates the strategies implemented by educational institutions to maintain the continuity of training during the pandemic, analyzing their effectiveness in the development of practical skills and the preparation of students for the clinical field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in this research is crucial to contextualize the problem of the impact of the pandemic on the social skills of Occupational Therapy students, understand the theoretical bases that support the study, and analyze the responses that other institutions and authors have proposed to similar challenges. By examining previous research on mental health in university students and the relevance of social skills in occupational therapy practice, a comparative framework is established that allows us to evaluate the magnitude of the problem and propose informed solutions. As Okoli and Schabram (2010) point out: "A literature review provides a solid base to advance knowledge. It identifies what is already known about a topic, what is not yet known, and what needs to be investigated."

Impact of confinement on the mental health of university students

Various studies have shown that the university era is where the most mental problems are presented by young people, mostly women, such as depression, anxiety and stress are some of the pathologies triggered by university life, due to the level of demand that is required in student residences and the competition itself to finish the degree in the time stipulated by various factors, among them the economic one being the most relevant.

Mental health, as mentioned above, was already a concern in the university student population before of the COVID-19 Pandemic, well, during the pandemic each one of these pathologies increased due to media exposure about the pandemic and its catastrophic results worldwide, which caused anxiety and depression disorders to increase in said population. Subsequently, the confinement made physical and social contact with their peers impossible, beyond the virtuality and social networks that were their only means of communication and socialization that unfortunately was not the same for everyone due to family dysfunction, poor access to the internet either due to geographical points of little coverage or because there were not the necessary economic means to have an internet network, and even overcrowding in their homes helped the problem increase psychologically.

Now well, several national and international studies have shown that university students present higher rates of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress post-pandemic. That is to say, that we already had students with mental problems in the university era, the confinement increased the deterioration or cases of disorders in the cases of young people and the gradual return to “reality”, to the classrooms was, to say the least, majority. These alterations are directly linked to the deterioration of essential social skills in educational and clinical contexts.

Various investigations have shown that the effects of prolonged confinement and the sudden change to virtual education negatively impacted the social and emotional interaction of university students. According to Mac-Ginty, Jiménez-Molina and Martínez (2021) “about 75% of Chilean students reported a deterioration in their emotional state during the pandemic, with women being the most affected by depressive and anxious symptoms”.

According to Bandura's social learning theory (1986), social behavior is acquired through the observation and imitation of models. The drastic reduction of face-to-face interactions in formative contexts limited exposure to these social models, which may have contributed to the deterioration in the development of key social skills for academic and professional performance.

Despite the growing attention to educational challenges during and after the pandemic, a gap persists in the literature regarding specific interventions to strengthen social skills in Occupational Therapy students. While there are studies on the general impact of confinement on mental health and learning, few focus on effective pedagogical strategies to mitigate the deterioration of interpersonal skills in this discipline, which requires close and empathetic contact with the users. This lack of research limits the ability of institutions to implement evidence-based support programs tailored to the particular needs of Occupational Therapy students.

In addition, the existing literature tends to focus on evaluating the negative impact of the pandemic, neglecting the analysis of possible resilient factors or coping strategies that may have emerged during this period. There is a need to investigate how Occupational Therapy students have developed alternative communication and connection skills with the users in the virtual environment, and how these skills can be transferred and adapted to face-to-face clinical practice. Exploring these strategies could provide valuable information for designing training programs that promote adaptability and innovation in the practice of Occupational Therapy.

Relevance of social skills in the training of the occupational therapist

Beyond technique and knowledge, occupational therapy is revealed as a subtle art, a dance between the healer and the user, where empathy and human connection are the invisible threads that weave recovery. In this scenario, social skills are not mere tools, but the very soul of the profession, the key that opens the doors of trust and collaboration, allowing the therapist to understand the essence of the individual and guide them towards the reconquest of their well-being.

In this regard, Caballo (1998) defines social skills as “the set of behaviors necessary to interact adequately with others, expressing emotions, opinions and needs effectively”. Social skills are essential for personal and also professional development, as they are fundamental for teamwork, establishing healthy relationships and conflict resolution. In the case of Occupational Therapy students, these skills are fundamental for the construction of the therapeutic bond and collaborative work with users and health teams, since they need to demonstrate empathy, resolve conflicts and carry out a positive, harmonious and trusting therapist-user relationship with tolerance and respect.

The confinement affected remarkably the frequency and the quality of social interactions, which decreased the opportunity to practice these skills in real environments. This has created a gap in the practical training of future

professionals, who must face complex clinical scenarios with less interpersonal experience.

The biopsychosocial approach, the basis of the formative model in health, highlights that social and psychological factors directly influence the functioning of the individual. Isolation, fear of contagion, and prolonged exposure to screens have altered the emotional balance of students, reducing their ability to adapt and their performance in significant social situations (Libano, 2020).

Also, we must see the counterpart on the user side, well, you have to keep in mind that in the context of occupational therapy these occupational therapy are people with different pathologies, from injuries and diseases such as trauma, cerebral palsy, amputations, strokes among others, to developmental disorders such as delays in learning autism spectrum disorders, and mental illnesses such as conduct disorders. We can name a series of situations in which the occupational therapist plays a role extremely important in the treatment, recovery and help to users with degenerative diseases, post-surgical recoveries, etc. Each of these diseases, injuries, disorders or pathologies already carry a strong mental and psychological burden that to be treated requires a fully developed social skill on the part of the therapist to be able to generate the bond and trust necessary for their respective treatment. Adding to this that these people also experienced confinement and many of them had to interrupt their treatments producing a setback in their recovery and even a noticeable increase in their pathology.

Therefore, the physical and social contact experienced by students de fourth and fifth grade of the occupational therapy career occupational with its users back to normal and in their internship, was quite a challenge both for themselves for having to fight their own fears as with their users to be able to generate the appropriate link to carry out the respective therapy.

From a technical perspective, this thematic axis provides the fundamental foundation for understanding the uniqueness of Occupational Therapy in the context of health. By breaking down the essential interpersonal skills, such as active listening, assertive communication, and the ability to establish therapeutic bonds, the intricate relationship between the professional and the user, where social skills transcend mere formality, becoming indispensable instruments for effective intervention. Poetically, this axis illuminates the human dimension of the profession, where empathy and understanding intertwine, allowing the therapist not only to treat the physical ailment, but also to touch the soul of the user, offering comfort, hope and the possibility of rediscovering meaning in the midst of adversity. Ultimately, this thematic axis not only informs, but also sensitizes, inviting reflection on the essence of Occupational Therapy as an art of healing with the heart and mind.

Institutional adaptations to remote teaching and its impact on practical training

Faced with the unexpected onslaught of the pandemic, educational institutions were compelled to navigate uncharted waters, transforming physical classrooms into virtual spaces and challenging the limits of traditional pedagogy. In this uncertain journey, remote teaching emerged as a beacon of hope, illuminating the path to continued learning. However, the transition was not without its challenges, and adapting to this new reality raised questions about its impact on practical training, especially in those disciplines where human contact and direct experience are fundamental pillars. This thematic axis delves into this unexplored territory, seeking to unravel the lights and shadows of institutional adaptations, and their influence on the preparation of future professionals to face the challenges of the real world.

More, during the confinement, many if not all the institutions implemented virtual platforms to give continuity to the educational process. Regarding los institutos profesionales studied, it is evident that adapted its professional practices to a blended modality, incorporating digital tools and supports such as tutorials, social skills workshops and psychological care. Occupational therapy according to the American Occupational Therapy Association Occupational (AOTA) is:

The therapeutic use of activities of care, work and play to increase functional independence, increase development and prevent disability; may include adapting tasks or the environment to achieve maximum independence and to increase quality of life.

Therefore, for to be able to implement a therapy of this type of online manner, a specific platform is needed that specific that is reliable and allows interaction user-therapist visually and auditorily as noted by the University of St. Augustine. This should go hand in hand with precise occupational therapy activities and techniques that goes to the virtual modality. Platform that clearly Universities and Professional Institutes such as IP Chile did not have at that time and had to improvise.

Based on this same, the measures were more usual in the first years of training and did not necessarily reach the students in professional practice with the same intensity. Leaving a void in the emotional and social preparation of the interns who, upon returning to face-to-face classes, showed difficulties in interacting with their peers, teachers and users.

For this reason, the need to implement help software such as rehametrics, a software for professionals both Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapists and cognitive rehabilitation and not lose communication and interaction with the user, since although it is true that the software already brings the exercises integrated, it is the therapist who must set the exercises corresponding to the pathology of the user, the advantage is that well, being a software can be done virtually where the user and therapist can be connected online, without the need for physical contact, but without losing the interaction, which makes the therapy be entertaining and fruitful for both the professional and the user, also this software generates clinical reports that can be reviewed and evaluated by the teacher or tutor in charge from the comfort of your home and thus evaluate remotely professional progress in the practice professional of the student in question.

With software focused on Occupational Therapy, you can work the hands and upper limbs with activities of life daily and exercises of coordination and tweezers, praxias y motricity fine and gross through virtual glasses, plus the therapist can see the same thing the user sees who can guide you and make the necessary adjustments according to your needs, it also serves for users with neurological problems and cognitive activities with memory exercises.

This software would give the student house a plus and a huge benefit to its Occupational Therapy students, especially in situations like those faced in the Pandemic years, since students would continue with their practices remotely without feeling insecure and distrustful, as they would maintain interaction with the user, stimulating social and empathetic skills by being able to perform remote therapies.

On the other hand, dictating workshops, talks in order to emotional containment to be able to cope the confinement and not leave their practice professional due to lack of means due to the very situation of confinement and zero physical social contact that left students in debt and that many locked themselves in yes themselves showing a gigantic mental problem that while it is true already existed, the confinement evidenced it in a incredible way, especially in those students who were forced to postpone their practice professional in a face-to-face and who did not have the necessary containment from educational entities.

That is why these types of solutions are advised for this specific group of fourth and fifth grade students so that they can continue with their professional career without being undermined by situations external to them and that in some way the student entity should to solve, first with emotional psychological containment and second with software of practices virtual in its specific branch, That with this it is not this saying that it is specifically this software, which is only taken as an example so that each institution takes charge either by buying or executing one according to their needs.

Recent literature emphasizes that, although distance education managed to maintain academic continuity, it did not adequately replace the formative dimension that occurs in human interaction. Therefore, it is key that institutions evaluate their strategies post-pandemic and generate specific spaces for the recovery of social skills in advanced students.

Theoretical synthesis of contribution to the new state of knowledge

The theoretical synthesis that emerges from the confluence of these three axes reveals an intricate network of interdependence. The impact of confinement on the mental health of students not only exacerbated pre-existing problems, but also directly affected their ability to develop the social skills necessary for the practice of Occupational Therapy. In turn, institutional adaptations to remote teaching, although valuable for maintaining academic continuity, failed to fully supplant the formative dimension that arises from human interaction and practical experience. This tension between the need to protect the physical and mental health of students and the importance of ensuring comprehensive training poses a complex challenge that requires an innovative and holistic approach, combining technological tools with pedagogical strategies that foster the development of social skills and human connection in the context of Occupational Therapy. The new state of knowledge therefore demands a revision of traditional training models, incorporating elements that promote resilience, adaptability and the ability to establish meaningful therapeutic bonds, even in virtual or hybrid environments.

This theoretical framework invites us to contemplate the training of the occupational therapist as a garden that, devastated by the pandemic storm, saw some of its most delicate flowers wither: social skills, essential to nurture the bond with the user. Institutions, like diligent gardeners, sought refuge in digital greenhouses, protecting their offspring from the scourge of the virus, but perhaps neglecting the sunlight and contact with the earth, essential for full flowering. There is, then, an urgent need to reimagine this garden, incorporating new cultivation techniques that allow social skills to be reborn with greater vigor, resisting the inclemencies of the weather and flourishing with the strength of resilience. It is a call to cultivate empathy, communication and human connection in a new formative ecosystem, where technology and tradition intertwine to form occupational therapists capable of healing not only the body, but also the soul.

METHODOLOGY

The present investigation, framed in a quantitative paradigm, adopted a non-experimental design of transversal type and exploratory scope. This methodological choice was based on the need to examine an emerging and complex phenomenon: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social skills of undergraduate students in the area of health. Recognizing the scarcity of robust empirical evidence, particularly in the Chilean context and within the specific field of Occupational Therapy, we opted for a design that would allow us to identify initial patterns and trends, without intending to establish definitive causal relationships. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) point out, "exploratory designs are used when the topic is new and poorly understood" (p. 89). The cross-sectional design made it possible to capture a "snapshot" of the state of social skills at a specific moment, facilitating the comparison between groups and the identification of possible factors associated with the phenomenon under study.

It is important to note that the non-experimental and cross-sectional nature of the design limits the possibility of establishing direct causal relationships and generalizing the results to other populations or contexts. However, this research represents a first exploratory approach to a relevant and little-studied problem, laying the foundations for future research with more rigorous designs that allow us to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms and factors that influence the development of social skills in Occupational Therapy students during and after the pandemic. In the words of Mertens (2015), "all research should be understood as a contribution to a constantly evolving body of knowledge" (p. 27).

With an exploratory design in order to compare different careers in the health area and their post-pandemic performance with the social skills that each of them requires. Furthermore, it is cross-sectional, because the data collection was carried out at a single point in time, specifically during the year 2022, when fifth-year students returned to face-to-face classes to complete their professional internship. The study is characterized as exploratory, since it seeks to identify emerging patterns and trends related to social skills in students who completed a significant stage of their training under pandemic conditions.

The sample consisted of fifth-year students from the Occupational Therapy career of a Professional Institute Chilean based in Rancagua, that, during the pandemic they attended the third and fourth years in virtual mode. The students who were included were only students who were doing their professional internship during 2022 and who had no prior failure in the clinical area. In addition, the participation of practice tutors and teachers in charge of the clinical fields was considered. Specifically 34 students from IP Chile corresponding to 4 Occupational Therapy courses. Of which 25 are women and 14 are men.

Also participated students of the same level of the Health careers of two student houses in the same city of Rancagua, which will be omitted its name because it was a random survey outside the institution, which includes 50 young people where 24 of them are men and 26 are women belonging to the careers: 22 Kinesiology students (14 men and 8 women); 18 Physiotherapy students (8 men and 10 women) and 10 Psychology students (2 men and 8 women). The inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined in order to ensure that the participants had a direct formative experience during confinement, and that their current performance could be influenced by said period.

They worked two main variables for Occupational Therapy students: (a) Independent variable: social skills, defined as the set of interpersonal behaviors necessary to establish adequate relationships in clinical and educational contexts and (b) Dependent variable: performance of professional competences observed during the internship, such as empathy, effective communication, proactivity and adaptation to the environment. For students of the other branches of health, similar questions were included according to their criteria and experience in the practice.

Two instruments of own elaboration were used, validated by a team of occupational therapists with teaching experience: (1) Non-standardized social skills guideline: applied to students. This survey contained 17 items with dichotomous answers (yes/no) that evaluated aspects such as emotional expression, security when speaking in public, relationship with users and interaction with the health team and (2) Competency assessment survey: aimed at clinical tutors. This instrument included 10 multiple choice and development questions, focused on the observation of the social and professional behavior of the interns during their clinical practice. Both surveys were administered in digital format using Google forms (Google Forms), which facilitated data collection in an agile and secure manner, maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. As for the surveys done at random they were done in person with the same evaluation table through dichotomous answers (yes/no).

The data collection procedure included a formal call to students and tutors made through the academic coordination. Through an explanation about the objective of the study, to the participants it was guaranteed anonymity, asking them in turn for informed consent through their signature. Subsequently, the forms were sent via email. Once the surveys were completed, a forum of feedback was organized through a meeting via Zoom, where participants could express their qualitative perceptions regarding the emotional and social impact experienced during and after confinement.

The quantitative data was consolidated in an Excel spreadsheet for preliminary analysis, using descriptive statistics that allowed us to identify the most representative trends. This entire procedure was only carried out with the students studying Occupational Therapy at the IP Chile Institute, not with the students who were surveyed randomly, since the latter were used only for a comparative model.

Ethical considerations

This research rigorously adhered to the fundamental ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring the protection and well-being of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each individual, guaranteeing their full understanding of the objectives, procedures, and possible risks of the study. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, assuring participants of their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. The confidentiality of personal data was safeguarded by anonymizing the information collected and using secure protocols for its storage and analysis. Given the non-experimental nature of the study, which did not involve clinical interventions or manipulation of variables, any potential physical or psychological risk to participants was minimized.

RESULTS

The data obtained from the applied instruments made it clear that the fifth-year Occupational Therapy students of the different studied scenario presented various difficulties in the area of social skills during their professional internship. In the checklist applied to the students, it can be concluded that 78% of the participants reported experiencing insecurity when interacting with users in the clinical context, while 65% recognized difficulties when communicating with their peers or teachers. Likewise, 72% stated feeling anxiety or fear when faced with situations that involved verbal exposure, such as presentations or clinical interviews. Only 15% reported feeling completely prepared to establish a therapeutic bond with users.

Regarding the survey applied to clinical tutors, it can be concluded that 80% indicated having detected a decrease in the proactivity and initiative of the students when joining the work teams. A decrease in the empathy shown during care was also reported, and 70% of the tutors commented that the students took several weeks to adapt to the face-to-face dynamics of the clinical field.

Another relevant fact was that 60% of the tutors revealed that the students' difficulties were not cognitive, but social and emotional, which supports the hypothesis that confinement directly affected their soft skills. Several teachers pointed out that, although some students managed to adapt over time, others required emotional support and more personalized tutoring.

Regarding the comparative results in the same Occupational Therapy career, the highest percentage of problems were presented by female students more than the male students, 68% of women as opposed to 32% of men.

For the comparison of health area careers:

	Occupational Therapy	KKinesiology	Physiotherapy	Psychology
Insecurity when interacting with users	78%	66%	72%	82%
Difficulties in communication with their peers and teachers	65%	41%	66%	49%
Anxiety or fear before verbal or presentation situations	62%	57%	32%	67%
They felt completely prepared	15%	22%	12%	14%

Note: Research database.

These results confirm that, although theoretical training was maintained during the pandemic, the practical and experiential component—key in health area careers—was severely weakened. The lack of continuous interaction, prolonged isolation, and lack of training in real contexts generated a delay significant in the development of social and emotional skills in this cohort of students.

Likewise, we can show that no student residence had the necessary or prudent tools to be able to face online preparation for fourth and fifth grade students in the health area, such as the aforementioned careers that have a high level of social interaction with their users.

A comparative study of sex was not carried out, since the majority of students correspond to the female sex

and according to the studies already mentioned above, this is the population with the highest rate of mental pathologies associated with university studies such as depression, anxiety and stress. Therefore, therefore, it was not considered the need to do that type of comparison. Since the relevance of the study goes more for the preparation by the student institutions for their intern students in the health careers.

Although it is true that the career under study is specifically Occupational Therapy, a comparison was made with other careers in the health field, both from the same Institute IP Chile, as well as two more student residences that have the careers of Occupational Therapy, Kinesiology, Physiotherapy and Psicology respectively.

According to what could be evidenced is that the biggest problem regardless of the career or the school that the surveyed students of the IP Chile Institute presented referred to the ability to interact with users, as already mentioned above this is a serious problem, since most of the specialty focuses on interaction with users, whether for rehabilitation, exercises or others is a fundamental part to be able to practice the profession. In comparison with the other careers in this same field it could be said that psychology students are the ones who more problems present despite that they practice assertive listening more with their users, they do not feel prepared to interact directly with users.

Within the second ítopic to evaluate with respect to the ability to interact with their peers and teachers, the Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy students are the ones who present the greatest insecurity in this aspect, to this we can carry out a future study to measure the age and the family environment in which they lived the confinement, to understand a little more that could have affected the ability to interact with their peers, since in the same way the Kinesiology and Psychology students present a level that is not so high but is relevant to their profession.

Similarly, to present in public the percentage of Occupational Therapy students was high in relation to physiotherapy students, as well even psychology students with kinesiology being one of the more low. Also, in a later study, this point could be explored further since there are students who have never been able to let go and speak in public in a safe and confident manner, so this may have influenced them even more with the confinement, increasing their doubts and insecurities to do so, and that is obviously something that profoundly influences the presentations, not necessarily in person-to-person interaction, unless it goes hand in hand with the previous item.

Finally, students feel prepared to go out into the professional world and interact confidently with their users, their peers, their teachers, and there is no distrust in themselves nor in what they learned during the pandemic, what could be evidenced in this group of students from all the surveyed careers is that they dedicated themselves to reading a lot about their area professional during confinement, most came from a family that presented different health problems, siblings with ASD, Mothers with depression, Family members with COVID even and other types of ailments such as fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, anxiety, personality disorders among other pathologies that in some way helped them to study the condition in more depth, even treat (although it should not) their family member with pathology; but just as it was indicated previously many users left aside their treatments due to confinement, and these students took on the role of therapists, psychologists, kinesiologists, physiotherapists with their sick family member or with some pathology to help them cope with their problem, whether mental, physical or disorder, depending on the particular case of each one. Being a support for their family and a professional progress for him/herself.

What does this indicate to us, that direct interaction with the user, continuous learning and preparation are the key for any of these health careers and it is what student residences should work on since according to subsequent statistics on what both the tutors and the teachers of said students evidenced, exclusively from Occupational Therapy is what it took them cost to adapt to the environment to resume the pace of the race, to return to integrate and be empathetic since according to what the tutors themselves evidenced is a problem psychoemotional more than cognitive, that is, the knowledge was there, the ability to reason, think and make decisions was there, but they were far from feeling connected with themselves, with their emotions and with those of others, others, on the other hand, unable to manage their emotions and feel more vulnerable to events such as children with hydrocephalus, for example.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained are aligned with the international and national literature on the effects of confinement and virtual education on university students. Studies such as that of Carvacho et al. (2021) already warned about the deterioration of mental health and the increase in anxious and depressive symptoms in this population, conditions that directly affect the development of social skills.

Particularly in careers such as Occupational Therapy, where the bond with the user is a therapeutic tool in itself, these skills are essential. The decrease in empathy, assertive communication, tolerance to frustration and the ability to establish interpersonal relationships represents a serious challenge for the professional and ethical

performance of future therapists.

This study confirms what teachers and academic coordinators have pointed out: students not only faced academic barriers, but also emotional and social ones when returning to face-to-face classes. The loss of practice in interpersonal skills, added to the stress of the abrupt return, resulted in a generalized feeling of insecurity, disconnection and poor performance in real clinical contexts.

In addition, a gap in the institutional response is evident. A despite that professional institutes implement they implemented workshops and support strategies, these focused mainly on initial levels of the career, leaving internship students with limited follow-up. In this sense, it is essential that universities redesign their intervention plans post-pandemic, considering not only academic performance, but also the emotional health and integral development of the student. For this, the implementation of tools such as those that have the software “rehametrics” that is a software of exercises of rehabilitation virtual that facilitates the work of professionals since this helps the interaction between therapist and user not to be boring, monotonous since this software helps to encourage and motivate the user and in turn helps the therapist not to lose the way to socialize with the user and be able to work together with him virtually, carrying out their knowledge in virtual exercises according to the needs of each user.

Although it is true that this is a software Spanish, it is not is furthermore that student houses work on something similar to give their internship students the facility to do their therapies from home with this system that will help them maintain their confidence, security in yes himself, empathy when being able to exercise remotely and therefore feel professional and not frustrated as in many cases it was seen when seeing that they could not do something or did not feel prepared. And in parallel provide support and containment to the future professional with talks and workshops focused on emotional health, empathy, trust as if they were in person.

It is worth noting that, although some students managed to adapt gradually, this required a significant personal effort and, in some cases, external support such as individual tutorials or psychological assistance. This reinforces the need to have structured academic-emotional support programs during clinical practices.

Finally, although this research focused on a specific site and cohort, the results may be representative of a broader reality in higher education relative to health. Consequently, it is recommended to replicate the study in other institutions and regions of the country, with the aim of building a systemic and sustained response to the residual effects of the pandemic. Since the population surveyed for comparison purposes of other health careers is only a very low percentage compared to the reality of students in this area who were affected during the years 2020 to 2022.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research allow us to conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the development of social skills of fifth-year Occupational Therapy students at the Professional Institute of Chile. This impact was reflected mainly during his professional internship, being this a crucial stage in their training as future occupational therapists, where human contact, empathy, and effective communication are fundamental to the quality of care.

Through the data collected, it was found that soft skills—particularly emotional expression, interaction with multidisciplinary teams, the ability to establish therapeutic bonds, and proactivity—were impaired after a long period of confinement and virtual training. This deterioration was not due to a lack of theoretical knowledge, but to the lack of real interpersonal experiences that would allow these skills to be developed and strengthened.

On the other hand, the results showed that the institutional response, although well-intentioned, was not enough to emotionally and socially prepare the students who were about to graduate. The efforts were more focused on the early years of the program, while those who were doing their professional practice faced these challenges with less support.

From this perspective, it is essential that higher education institutions implement specific psychoeducational monitoring and support policies for the terminal levels of careers in the health area. Similarly, it is recommended to incorporate permanent social skills and therapeutic communication training programs, which allow these competencies to be reinforced continuously, even more so in health or educational crisis scenarios.

In fact, this research highlights the need to continue deepening the study of post-pandemic effects on professional training. Future research could expand the sample to other locations, health careers, and geographical contexts, as well as incorporate qualitative methods that allow for a deeper exploration of the subjective experience of students.

Finally, this situation should be seen as an opportunity to rethink training models, integrating technological tools with experiential learning spaces, to ensure comprehensive training that not only considers technical knowledge, but also the human skills that define the role of the health professional in society.

In relation to the objective of the study, significant deterioration is evident in key competencies such as

emotional expression and interpersonal interaction, particularly during the crucial stage of the professional internship. This finding, although limited to a specific context, underscores the need to rethink the training of health professionals, recognizing that the lack of real interpersonal experiences, beyond technical knowledge, limits their comprehensive preparation. The study also reveals an opportunity to strengthen institutional responses, implementing support and social skills training programs that cover all training levels. In this sense, the research contributes to the literature of opportunity by providing empirical evidence on an emerging problem, paving the way for future research that explores the effectiveness of various pedagogical strategies and the subjective impact of the pandemic on the training of occupational therapists and other related disciplines, promoting more resilient and person-centered training models.

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