

# Perceptions of Occupational Therapy Practice in Saudi Schools

*by* Jana Publication & Research

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## Perceptions of Occupational Therapy Practice in Saudi Schools

### ABSTRACT

#### Introduction and Aim

This study explores the perceptions of occupational therapy (OT) practices in Saudi Arabian schools, aiming to understand how occupational therapists view their roles, challenges, and opportunities within educational settings, as well as the impact of their interventions on student development and well-being.

#### Methodology<sup>19</sup>

The research employed a descriptive cross-sectional design using an online survey distributed to 272 licensed occupational therapists practicing<sup>16</sup> in Saudi Arabia. Participants were selected via convenience sampling. The survey comprised both open- and closed-ended questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data, which were analyzed using JMP software and thematic analysis.

#### Results

The findings revealed that OT interventions are highly effective in promoting academic achievement (50.5%), social-emotional development (26.2%), and physical-functional skills (23.3%). However, significant challenges persist, including a lack of awareness (40.2%), resource limitations (33%), and administrative barriers (22.9%). Despite these obstacles, occupational therapists emphasized the critical role of OT in enhancing learning, addressing sensory and motor skill deficits, and fostering inclusive environments. Misconceptions about OT's scope and purpose were also identified, highlighting the need for awareness campaigns and stakeholder education.

#### Conclusion

The study concludes that occupational therapy has immense potential for improving student outcomes in Saudi schools. To realize this potential, it is essential to address systemic challenges through targeted awareness initiatives, resource allocation, policy reforms, and interdisciplinary collaboration. These efforts will not only optimize the implementation of OT services but also contribute to building a more inclusive and supportive educational framework in Saudi Arabia.

#### Keywords:

Occupational Therapy, Perceptions, School-based occupational therapists, Students, Challenges, Resources, Awareness

### 1. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

The definition of occupation is daily activities that are defined, categorized, and assigned importance and purpose by people and culture [1]. At its core, the concept is simple: what people do to engage in to fill our time [2]. Occupational therapy is a subset of rehabilitation services that helps individuals to participate in daily activities, such as pleasure, productivity, and self-care, in order to enhance their overall health and well-being [3].

Not everyone knows the possibility of practicing occupational therapy in schools. School-based occupational therapists often use practice models, such as motor learning or sensory integration, to guide their interventions toward specific client groups [2]. The Saudi public has a lack of awareness about the specific services offered by occupational therapists. There seems to be a general lack of understanding about the implications and roles associated with occupational therapy. Within this population, knowledge about the valuable contributions that occupational therapists make is at a low level [4].

School-based occupational therapy (SBOT) has gained significant global recognition, as evidenced by the inaugural publication on this subject by the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT) in 2016 [5]. This document served as a pivotal point for WFOT in defining the occupational therapist's role within school-based practice. It emphasized the importance of an occupation-based and educationally relevant approach, with a primary focus on supporting student well-being and enhancing their participation. The publication aimed to promote and optimize the involvement of occupational therapists in school settings [6].

The guidance provided by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) regarding SBOT is further elaborated upon in this context. AOTA emphasizes the utilization of occupational therapy expertise to facilitate children's readiness for and active engagement in meaningful learning and developmental activities within the school setting. As a result, SBOT is now more explicitly associated with enabling active participation in various school-based occupations as a whole [7].

The main purpose of SBOT is to allow students to engage in school-related activities like writing in class, dressing for physical education, or playing during recess [8, 9]. Occupational therapists play a crucial role in the school setting since engaging in daily tasks is thought to be good for children's growth, health, and well-being [6, 10, 11].

There is a study that asked occupational therapists about the role of occupation during intervention with school students. The participants in the study said the primary focus of school-based intervention was to address the child's occupational needs within the educational setting, with particular emphasis on supporting performance components for successful engagement in occupations. The participants consistently emphasized the importance of involving the child within the context of the classroom, highlighting the significance of working within the structure of the curriculum as the basis for intervention [2].

There is not enough research in Saudi Arabia to meet the specific needs and practices of SBOT. Although there is no research examining the perspectives and experiences of occupational therapists about SBOT, the purpose of this study was to explain the current state and perceptions of occupational therapists about school-based practices in Saudi Arabia.

The researchers aimed to identify the perspectives and experiences of occupational therapists about working in educational settings to promote their understanding of the prevailing practices in this specific context. The primary objectives of this study aim to thoroughly investigate the perspectives, understanding, and experiences of occupational therapists in Saudi schools, concentrating on their professional roles, the implementation and benefits of occupational

therapy services, and the challenges they face. Additionally, the secondary objectives focus on assessing stakeholder awareness and evaluating the adequacy of resources and support provided to occupational therapists.

By examining the perceptions of professionals in the field, this study sought to contribute valuable knowledge that could inform future developments and improvements in SBOT in Saudi Arabia.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study set out to explore the perceptions of occupational therapy practices in Saudi Arabia using an online survey platform. This method was chosen for its practicality and efficiency in collecting a large number of responses, even though it doesn't provide the same depth as on-site studies. It allowed us to delve into various aspects of occupational therapy, including perceptions, challenges, resources, collaboration efforts, and opportunities for improvement.

The focus was on licensed occupational therapists working in Saudi Arabia. Participants needed to have a valid occupational therapy license and be actively practicing in the country. We excluded occupational therapy students, retired therapists, those on long-term leave, and anyone who did not consent to participate.

We employed a descriptive cross-sectional design to gather qualitative data, concentrating on current practices and perspectives of the therapists regarding SBOT. The sample size, determined using the Raosoft calculator, aimed for a 5% margin of error, 95% confidence level, and a population size of 888, as reported by the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties. This resulted in a target of 269 occupational therapists.

Participants were selected through convenience sampling based on their accessibility and availability. Data was collected using a self-administered internet survey with both open-ended and closed-ended questions, which enabled comprehensive qualitative data collection. The survey link was distributed via the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties and online platforms, accompanied by a cover letter explaining the study's purpose and ensuring confidentiality.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Prior to commencing data collection, approval was obtained from both the King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (KAIMRC) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Additionally, before distributing the questionnaire, informed consent was secured from each participant, as detailed in Appendix A. Throughout the research process, stringent measures were taken to maintain participant confidentiality. No personal identifying information, such as names or IDs, was collected. Access to the data was restricted exclusively to the investigators involved in the study, with all collected data securely stored in a password-protected file.

The data were entered and organized using Excel. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, with a total of 272 participants responding to the survey. The closed-ended questions were analyzed using JMP18 software to generate statistical insights, while the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. Irrelevant answers were excluded to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the qualitative analysis.

## RESULTS

Looking at the responses from 272 participants, we got some detailed insights into how occupational therapist perspectives on occupational therapy in schools. The gender split was right down the middle with males (n = 136, 50%) and females (n = 136, 50%). Most participants were young adults between 18–25 years old (n = 167, 61%), followed by those aged 25–40 (n = 90, 33%), and a small group over 40 (n = 15, 5%).

In terms of experience, the largest group had 0–2 years (n = 166, 61%). Next were those with 3–6 years (n = 65, 24%), then 7–15 years (n = 36, 13%), and finally, a small fraction with more than 15 years of experience (n = 5, 2%). Geographically, most participants came from the central region (n = 107, 39.33%), followed by the eastern region (n = 76, 27.94%), and the western region (n = 62, 22.79%). Very few were from the northern (n = 2, 0.73%) and southern regions (n = 3, 0.11%), with some participants not disclosing their region (n = 22, 8.08%).

Table 1

### Demographic Information of Study Participants (N = 272)

Demographic Information	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	136	50%
	Male	136	50%
Age in Years	18–25	167	61%
	25–40	90	33%
	More than 40	15	5%
Years of Experience	0–2	166	61%
	3–6	65	24%
	7–15	36	13%
	More than 15	5	2%
Regions	Center	107	39.33%
	Eastern	76	27.94%
	West	62	22.79%
	North	2	0.73%
	South	3	0.11%
	Did not answer	22	8.08%

The first table shows the demographic information of the study participants including gender, years of experience, and the region.

Regarding the perceived role of occupational therapy (**Table 2**), a substantial majority strongly agreed (n = 187, 69%) or agreed (n = 73, 27%) that it promotes student development and well-being. However, only a minority strongly agreed (n = 25, 9%) and agreed (n = 33, 12%) that students and parents have a good understanding of occupational therapy, while a significant portion disagreed (n = 103, 38%) or strongly disagreed (n = 58, 21%).

Similarly, resources and support for occupational therapy in schools were considered insufficient by many, with (n = 112, 41%) disagreeing and (n = 53, 19%) strongly disagreeing, compared to only (n = 33, 12%) who strongly agreed and (n = 21, 8%) who agreed.

Collaboration with school staff was moderately well-rated, with 34.1% (n = 93) strongly agreeing and 33.9% (n = 91) agreeing on its effectiveness, while 10% (n = 27) disagreed and 7% (n = 18) strongly disagreed.

Occupational therapy interventions were seen as highly effective in addressing diverse needs, with 56% (n = 152) strongly agreeing. They were particularly effective in:

- Improving communication skills (58%, n = 157)
- Enhancing physical and sensory skills (68%, n = 184)
- Supporting students with learning disabilities (73%, n = 198)

However, significant resource-related challenges were identified, with (n = 174, 64%) strongly agreeing and (n = 201, 22%) agreeing that difficulties and lack of resources hinder the implementation of occupational therapy in Saudi schools.

Table 2

#### Perceptions of Occupational Therapy in Schools (N = 272)

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
<b>1. Occupational therapy promotes student development</b>	Strongly agree	187	69%
	Agree	73	27%
	Neutral	11	3.99%
	Disagree	1	0.01%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
<b>2. Students and parents understand occupational therapy</b>	Strongly agree	25	9%
	Agree	33	12%
	Neutral	53	19%
	Disagree	103	38%
	Strongly	58	21%

	disagree		
<b>3. Resources and support are sufficient</b>	Strongly agree	33	12%
	Agree	21	8%
	Neutral	53	19%
	Disagree	112	41%
	Strongly disagree	53	19%
<b>4. Collaboration with school staff is effective</b>	Strongly agree	93	34.1%
	Agree	91	33.9%
	Neutral	41	15%
	Disagree	27	10%
	Strongly disagree	18	7%
<b>5. OT addresses diverse needs</b>	Strongly agree	152	56%
	Agree	90	33%
	Neutral	18	7%
	Disagree	5	2%
	Strongly disagree	7	3%
<b>6. OT improves communication skills</b>	Strongly agree	157	58%
	Agree	92	34%
	Neutral	17	6%
	Disagree	6	2%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
<b>7. OT improves physical and sensory skills</b>	Strongly agree	184	68%
	Agree	77	25%
	Neutral	7	3%
	Disagree	4	1%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
<b>8. OT helps students with learning disabilities</b>	Strongly agree	198	73%
	Agree	57	28%
	Neutral	12	4%
	Disagree	5	2%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
<b>9. Lack of resources hinders OT implementation</b>	Strongly agree	174	64%
	Agree	61	22%
	Neutral	27	10%
	Disagree	6	2%
	Strongly disagree	4	1%

*The second table shows the closed-ended questions that were asked to the study participants, with frequency and percentage responses.*

Many respondents (n = 219) highlighted lack of awareness, limited services, and a shortage of therapists as key barriers. Key themes identified include *Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing OT Services in Saudi Schools* (n = 67, 30.58%), *Raising Community Awareness* (n = 55, 25.11%), *The Role of OT in Schools and Services provided* (n = 51, 23.28%), and *Importance of OT in Schools* (n = 46, 21.00%).

Among participants (n = 122), the positive impacts of occupational therapy were categorized into several themes: *General Success Stories* (n = 32, 26%), *Social and Emotional Improvements* (n = 31, 25%), *Environmental and Physical Changes* (n = 21, 17%), and *Specialized Cases* (n = 18, 15%), while 20 responses (16.9%) did not provide a clear answer.

Perceived benefits (n = 202) of occupational therapy included *Academic Achievement* (n = 102, 50.5%), *Social and Emotional Development* (n = 53, 26.2%), and *Physical and Functional Skills* (n = 47, 23.3%).

Regarding common interventions (n = 257), the most reported were *Fine Motor and Sensory Integration* (n = 90, 35.0%), followed by *Cognitive and Academic Skills Training* (n = 42, 16.3%), *Social Skills and Emotional Well-being* (n = 43, 16.3%), and *Environmental Modifications* (n = 29, 11.3%).

Misconceptions about occupational therapy (n = 155) were centered around *Lack of Awareness* (n = 62, 40%), *Incorrect Beliefs about OT's Role* (n = 48, 30.97%), *Confusion with Other Professions* (n = 36, 22.23%), and *No Knowledge* (n = 9, 5.81%).

Challenges in implementation (n = 179) included *Lack of Awareness and Education* (n = 72, 40.22%), *Limited Resources and Tools* (n = 59, 32.97%), *Lack of Administrative Support and Coordination* (n = 41, 22.91%), and *Uncertainty* (n = 7, 3.91%).

Further issues related to implementation (n = 205) were categorized as *Awareness and Comprehensive Improvement* (n = 70, 34.14%), *Challenges in Assessment and Planning* (n = 51, 24.80%), *Environmental Adjustments* (n = 31, 15.10%), *Collaboration with Teachers and Parents* (n = 20, 9.75%), and *Uncertainty* (n = 33, 16.00%).

Regarding service frequency, most participants expected therapy to be provided *Several times a week* (n = 185, 43.85%), followed by *Once a week* (n = 77, 18.25%), *Daily* (n = 65, 15.41%), *Less than once a week* (n = 12, 2.84%), and on *Rare occasions* (n = 10, 2.37%).

The referral process typically occurred *By teachers/parents after assessment* (n = 177, 38.44%), followed by referrals from the *Special Education Department* (n = 111, 24.11%), and according to *School-specific Policies* (n = 107, 23.23%), although services were reported to be *Rarely Accessible* (n = 85, 18.45%).



Common student challenges in receiving occupational therapy services included *Limited Therapy Session Availability* (n = 188, 44.55%), *Difficulty Applying Skills in Real Life* (n = 163, 38.65%), *Lack of Motivation/Engagement* (n = 150, 35.48%), and *Resistance from Parents/Guardians* (n = 135, 31.96%).

## Discussion

This study offers a comprehensive overview of the benefits and challenges of implementing occupational therapy (OT) services in Saudi Arabian schools, along with practical recommendations for improvement.

### Key Benefits of Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy has proven highly effective in meeting the academic, social-emotional, and physical needs of students. One of the most significant areas of improvement is academic performance, with 50.5% (n = 102) of participants noting improvements in handwriting, reading, attention span, and cognitive abilities. These outcomes are in line with research by Case-Smith et al. (2015), which found that OT interventions focusing on fine motor and cognitive skills enhance academic performance and participation in school settings (12).

For students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sensory integration strategies have shown great effectiveness. According to Ashburner et al. (2010), these strategies significantly improve focus, sensory regulation, and engagement in the classroom (13).

The second major benefit identified is social and emotional development (n = 53, 26.2%), where OT interventions led to improvements in emotional regulation, peer interactions, and self-confidence. Participants reported that therapy helped students develop coping mechanisms for managing stress and interacting positively with their peers, thus fostering inclusive and supportive classroom environments. These findings are supported by Bazyk et al. (2015), who emphasized the role of OT in enhancing mental health and promoting emotional resilience among school-aged children (14).

Additionally, physical and functional skills (n = 47, 23.3%) were notably improved through OT interventions targeting motor development, sensory processing, and activities of daily living. Students with physical disabilities benefited from tailored strategies and environmental adaptations, enabling them to develop greater independence and navigate school settings more effectively. This finding aligns with Villeneuve and Hutchinson's (2012) research, which highlights the importance of accessible environments and individualized interventions for promoting inclusion and functional participation (15).

### Challenges in Implementing Occupational Therapy

Despite the proven benefits of occupational therapy, the study reveals significant challenges impeding its effective implementation. The foremost challenge is a lack of awareness (n = 72, 40.22%) among key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and administrators, regarding the

role and scope of OT. Many participants reported that occupational therapy is often misunderstood or conflated with other support services, such as physical therapy or special education, which reduces its perceived value. This challenge is consistent with Missiuna et al. (2012), who emphasized that limited awareness contributes to the underutilization of OT services in school systems, hindering student outcomes (16).

A second critical issue is resource constraints ( $n = 59$ , 32.97%), including a shortage of occupational therapists, insufficient funding, and a lack of tools and materials necessary for therapy implementation. Schools, particularly public institutions, often struggle to meet the demand for OT services due to limited budgets and staffing. Gupta and Singhal (2004) similarly noted that under-resourced educational systems face significant barriers in delivering adequate therapy services, particularly in regions where specialized support is still developing (17).

The study also highlights administrative obstacles ( $n = 41$ , 22.91%) as a significant gap, with insufficient coordination between occupational therapists, school staff, and administrators hampering service delivery. Participants stressed the need for stronger communication and policy support to align OT goals with broader educational frameworks. This finding reflects Whiting et al.'s (2019) work, which emphasized the importance of administrative collaboration and interdisciplinary teamwork in achieving successful OT integration in schools (18).

Further challenges include limited therapy sessions due to scheduling constraints ( $n = 188$ , 44.55%), difficulties in transferring therapy skills to real-life situations ( $n = 163$ , 38.65%), and resistance from parents or guardians ( $n = 135$ , 31.96%). These issues reduce the effectiveness of therapy interventions, particularly when strategies are not reinforced at home or in the classroom.

### Strengths

The study boasts several notable strengths that enhance its value and reliability. Firstly, it offers a comprehensive scope, thoroughly examining the benefits, challenges, and perceptions of occupational therapy (OT) services in Saudi Arabian schools. By focusing on key areas such as academic achievement, social-emotional development, and physical-functional improvements, the study identifies the domains where OT interventions are most impactful. Secondly, the inclusion of a large sample size of 272 occupational therapists ensures robust representation of the target population. Additionally, the study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data from closed-ended questions with qualitative insights from open-ended responses. This approach provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the study effectively identifies key gaps and challenges—including deficits in awareness, limited resources, and administrative barriers—laying the groundwork for targeted interventions.

### Limitations

Despite its strengths, the absence of direct observation in schools prevents the study from providing a contextualized understanding of OT service delivery and everyday practical barriers.

## Future Recommendations

The study offers several key recommendations to enhance <sup>29</sup>the implementation of occupational therapy (OT) services in Saudi Arabian schools. First, raising awareness through workshops, campaigns, and community outreach is vital to educate teachers, parents, and administrators about the role and benefits of OT. Additionally, training programs for teachers and parents, coupled with improved interdisciplinary collaboration among therapists, educators, and administrators, are essential for providing comprehensive support to students. Increased resource allocation, such as hiring more occupational therapists and providing necessary tools and sensory spaces, is crucial to meet the growing demand, particularly in public schools. The study also advocates for policy development to integrate OT as a core educational service, recommending at least two therapists per school to effectively address academic and functional needs. Furthermore, schools should focus on improving service delivery by ensuring consistent therapy sessions and developing strategies to help students generalize learned skills. Finally, the study highlights the importance of community engagement through culturally sensitive outreach and parental involvement, along with further research on the long-term impact and practical implementation of OT to optimize its effectiveness in educational settings.

## Conclusion

The study underscores the substantial benefits of occupational therapy in Saudi Arabian schools, particularly in enhancing academic achievement, social-emotional development, and physical and functional skills. However, significant challenges, including a lack of awareness, resource limitations, and administrative barriers, must be addressed to optimize the impact of OT interventions. By implementing targeted awareness campaigns, improving interdisciplinary collaboration, allocating sufficient resources, and promoting systemic policy reforms, Saudi schools can better integrate OT services and support students' diverse needs.

## Acknowledgment

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Additionally, we acknowledge and appreciate the support of [KAIMRC], which granted us the necessary permissions to complete this study.

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## Ethics Statement

The Scientific and Institutional Research Board approved the study (XXXXX/XXX/X) and met the ethical principles guidelines of the **Declaration of Helsinki**. We confirm that we have read the Journal's position on issues involved in ethical publication and affirm that this report is consistent with those guidelines.

## Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians included in the study.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

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

## Permission to Reproduce Material from Other Sources

Not applicable.

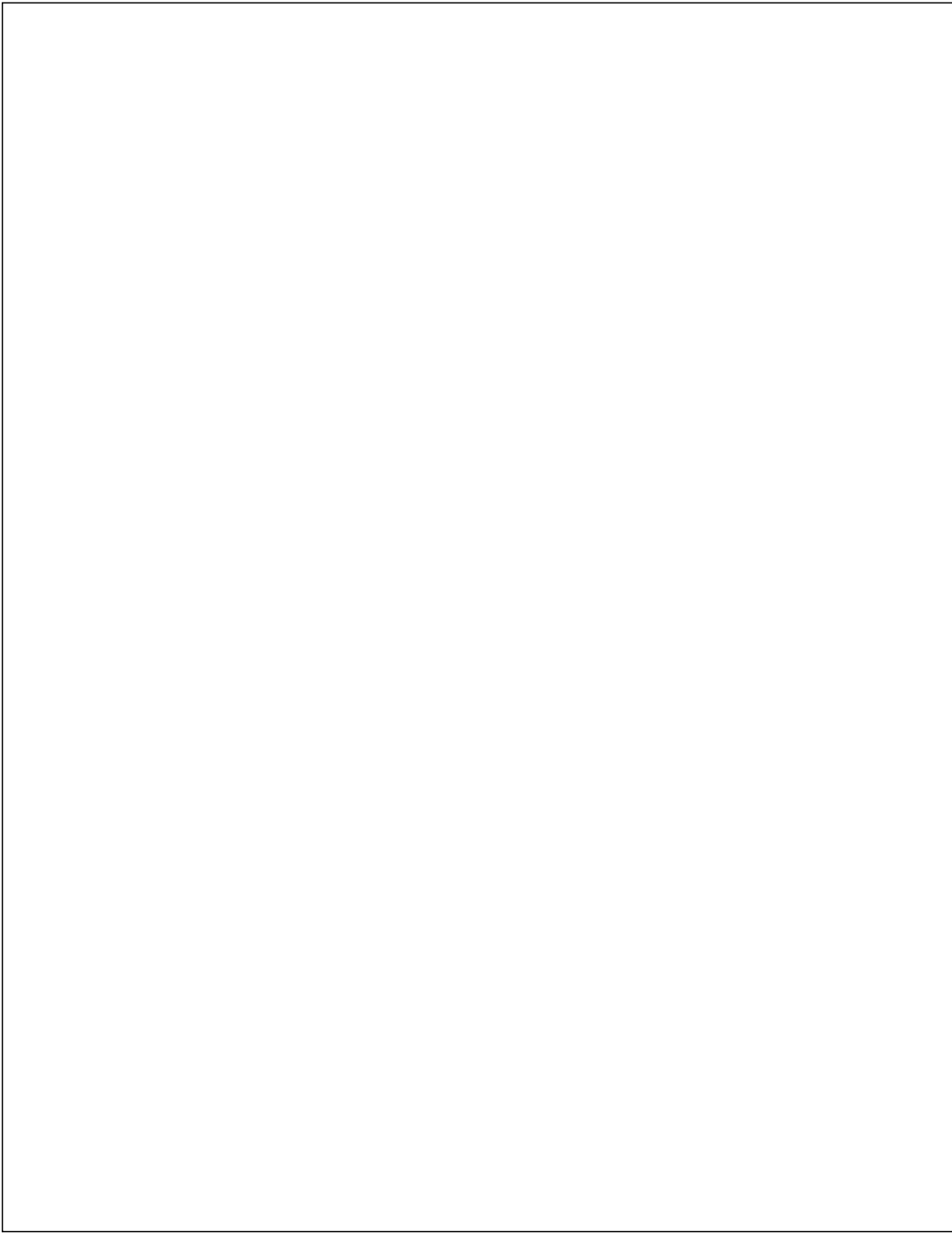
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Not applicable.

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