

Short Report

A Canadian occupational therapy organisation has recognised exceptional student supervision for practice placements by giving awards since 1990. Students have voluntarily nominated their practice placement educator by writing a statement outlining why the educator deserved the award. To determine the student's perspective on what qualities make an exceptional educator, the researchers analysed the 103 nominations using thematic analysis. Four primary themes emerged from the data, namely creating a positive learning environment, facilitating learning, being a role model and having a positive effect on the student. Although this study focused on the exceptional practice placement educator, the findings are relevant to anyone striving to improve the quality of the practice placement learning experience.

The Student's Perspective on What Makes an Exceptional Practice Placement Educator

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Introduction

In occupational therapy, practice placement education is a critical component of an education programme (Tompson and Ryan 1996). Practice placement experiences are crucial to integrate theory with practice, develop professional and interpersonal skills and build confidence and may also influence future practice areas (Hummell 1997). Given the relative value of practice placement experiences to professional development, it is important to identify the specific characteristics of practice placement educators that facilitate a positive and effective learning experience. This information can then be used to facilitate better structuring of the practice placement setting and better preparation of therapists to become educators.

Literature review

Within health care, research about practice placement education and supervision has been most active in nursing, medicine, social work and psychology and to a lesser extent in occupational therapy. Interestingly, within the health sciences literature there were no studies identified that specifically addressed what qualities make an *exceptional* practice placement educator. Rather, the majority of the research relevant to this study focused on what behaviours and factors constitute an *effective* versus an *ineffective* educator.

Health disciplines' perspective

Practice placement educators have a significant effect on a student's professional development and, therefore, it is

important to identify the specific educator characteristics that facilitate a positive and effective practice placement experience. Although this topic has been studied from the perspectives of various stakeholders, given the intent of this paper the authors have summarised the student's perspective of effective educator characteristics.

Students value a practice placement educator who is competent, knowledgeable and able to communicate knowledge clearly (Windsor 1987, Bergman and Gaitskill 1990, Kozłowska et al 1997). Students also value an educator who displays confidence in them and who treats them with respect and as a member of the team. Further, they appreciate the educator who provides frequent, objective and constructive feedback in a private and supportive manner (Windsor 1987, Bergman and Gaitskill 1990, Neville and French 1991). Other qualities valued by students include strong interpersonal and communication skills (Emery 1984, Swinehart and Meyers 1993, Onuoha 1994), enthusiasm (Christie et al 1985, Morgan and Knox 1987, Windsor 1987), clear expectations (Windsor 1987, Swinehart and Meyers 1993) and educators who conduct themselves in a warm, patient and calm manner (Windsor 1987, Neville and French 1991).

Occupational therapy perspective

Within the occupational therapy literature, perhaps one of the most relevant studies was that conducted by Hummell (1997), who explored 48 Australian occupational therapy students' perceptions regarding the characteristics of effective practice placement educators. Effective practice placement educators were perceived as being skilled communicators who provided constructive feedback in a

supportive manner, were enthusiastic about having students, respected students and developed a positive rapport with them. Furthermore, these educators created a learning environment where students could develop their skills in a graded manner and also would feel comfortable in asking questions. Hummell's (1997) findings supported previous research on effective practice placement education by Christie et al (1985). In their study, occupational therapy students and practice placement educators in 65 American practice centres perceived effective practice placement educators as having well-developed interpersonal, communication, technical and organisational skills. These educators were viewed as being flexible and enthusiastic and able to adapt the practice experience to meet the individual needs of each student.

Purpose of study

The primary purpose of this retrospective longitudinal study was to determine the qualities that students believe exceptional occupational therapy practice placement educators possess. Having identified these qualities, practice placement educators could then be encouraged to foster these skills and therefore potentially to improve and enhance practice placement education.

Method

The Alberta Association of Registered Occupational Therapists (AAROT) was a Canadian provincial organisation which, during the time of this study, served as a regulatory body for the protection of the public as well as a professional association that aimed to promote occupational therapy within Alberta. In October 2006, AAROT was proclaimed as the Alberta College of Occupational Therapists (ACOT) and the Society of Alberta Occupational Therapists (SAOT) took over the role of the professional association. AAROT had recognised 'outstanding training and guidance during clinical placements' by giving Clinical Teaching Awards from 1990 to 2004.

The award form states that the 'candidates for this award are nominated by the student who believes that his/her practice educator demonstrated exceptional performance in the following areas: communication, theoretical background, practical application, skills development, instilling confidence/independence, and overall teaching abilities'. Occupational therapy students nominated their practice placement educator on a voluntary basis and provided a written statement of why they felt the person was deserving of the award.

Approval for this study was obtained through the Health Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta and AAROT also provided a Letter of Support. AAROT provided copies of the Clinical Teaching Award nomination forms to the researchers, with identifying information removed and coded. The primary researcher entered the students' comments into a computer Word

document verbatim and conducted content analysis by comparing, contrasting and sorting the students' comments into gross categories until themes emerged. Two clinical occupational therapists were then asked to sort the students' comments according to these themes and to provide feedback regarding the appropriateness of the identified themes (validity check). The themes were further refined as a result of this process until consensus was reached. This method of analysis followed the same process as described in Mulholland and Derald (2004).

Findings

Overview

A total of 103 AAROT Clinical Teaching Award nomination forms dating from 1989 to 2004 was analysed. This study covered the entire time that the award existed with AAROT. There was a range of 0-25 nominations per year. The nominees were working in a diversity of rural and urban settings, such as in hospitals, rehabilitation centres and the community, predominantly in the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Themes

Four main themes emerged from the data: creating a positive learning environment, facilitating learning, being a role model and having a positive effect on the student. There were no notable differences in the themes over the years, between practice settings, practice placement educators or gender. The following section describes the themes and provides representative quotes from the nomination forms. It should be noted that the last theme, having a positive effect on the student, does not directly answer the questions posed on the nomination form; however, the students' additional comments provided enough data to include it as a separate research theme.

Creating a positive learning environment

The students described how their practice placement educators created an encouraging and supportive environment within which they felt comfortable to learn. Part of this supportive environment included other people present within the worksite, for example:

[The team's] welcoming attitudes and relaxed personality allowed me to consult with them freely and confidently, and they, in turn, instilled confidence in me by treating me like part of the team.

It should be noted that the students recognised the role that their educator may have played in facilitating the team's positive attitudes towards the students. The students also identified the importance of being treated with respect as a colleague and as a professional.

Facilitating learning

This theme can be defined as anything done by the practice placement educator directly to help, guide or

enhance the student's learning. The students identified and described various teaching styles and strategies that they thought were particularly beneficial, for example:

[The therapist] paced my placement just right from observing to independence.

Communication, particularly in the form of feedback, also strongly emerged as a teaching strategy. Effective feedback was described as being supportive, ongoing, clear and specific. The students also expressed an appreciation for clear explanation and instruction.

The students commented positively on having their thinking challenged and their knowledge tested:

She has challenged me, given me opportunities to analyse and problem solve through difficult case studies.

They identified the importance of being challenged to work outside their comfort zone in order for new learning to occur:

... she seemed to know when to push me, when to let me go, when to let me make mistakes, and when to encourage me.

The students also appreciated the learning opportunities that their educators had given them within a particular practice and/or service area.

Being a role model

Any qualities, skills or abilities that were specific to the individual practice placement educator were captured within this theme. The students acknowledged educators who demonstrated exemplary knowledge, professional and interpersonal skills:

She [was] an excellent role model, showing professionalism, exceptional clinical knowledge, and empathy in all her clinical interactions.

The students recognised the other activities in which their practice placement educators were involved and cited examples of clinicians who participated in professional education, research and academic teaching. The students also appreciated the dedication that the educators showed in mentoring them, giving examples of the time that was taken to help, explain, teach or to offer advice. The students frequently identified desirable educator traits, including friendliness, a relaxed manner, patience and a sense of humour.

In addition to being role models for students, the practice placement educators were seen as role models and leaders in the profession, for example:

Not only does she help us reach our potential as [future] occupational therapists, but she also raises/maintains the high standards of the profession as a whole.

Positive effect on the student

The nomination form was worded to solicit information only about the practice placement educators' personal attributes; however, many students gave additional

information about other ways in which their practice experience had affected them. This information is also included here because it reflects a less direct but overall impact that exceptional educators made on the students through the placement they offered. Many students identified an increase in their level of confidence. Some students expressed how they had been inspired, for example:

His style of mentorship will serve as a model for me to emulate when I become a clinical teacher.

Other students gave examples of what they had learnt or gained from the placement such as:

[The placement] taught me more about being a professional, effective OT than any course or school could have.

Some students indicated that their practice placement experience had stimulated their interest in working in a previously unconsidered area of practice. Finally, several students felt that their practice placement experience had enhanced their appreciation of the profession as a whole.

In summary, the findings indicate that the practice placement educators and the teams they worked within created a positive learning environment that was supportive and welcoming. The educators facilitated learning through effective communication techniques and through graded and individualised supervision and guidance. The educators served as role models both for students and for the profession through their personal attributes and demonstration of knowledge, skill and dedication. Furthermore, the educators and the environment they created had a lasting positive effects on students.

Discussion

This longitudinal study compiles data over the course of 15 years. It is interesting to note that there were no significant differences in the content of the comments made by the students over the years. The findings of this study expand on the existing literature by identifying the qualities that make an *exceptional* practice placement educator and the factors that contribute to a positive learning experience. These factors are addressed solely on the basis of student comments and no attempt has been made to link any of these factors with learning or teaching styles. The themes from the study are discussed in terms of their value to practice placement educators, managers, university educators and more peripherally to students.

A significant finding within this study is the importance of creating a positive learning environment. In the light of these findings, practice placement educators are encouraged to reflect on and consider how the environment may influence a student's ability to learn.

The theme of facilitating learning is an important one to share with practice placement educators. For example, once a comfortable learning environment has been established, this study identified the importance of moving the student towards increased independence, using appropriate pacing,

and providing ongoing and clear, specific feedback. This method would suggest a very student-centred approach to supervision. Interestingly, although the students valued a warm, friendly and enthusiastic person, they also appreciated an educator who challenged them appropriately and who gave them constructive versus solely positive feedback. Another area that deserves consideration for educators is recognising the significant, long-lasting impact that a practice placement education experience can have on professional development. The students described how their practice placement had affected them in terms of their confidence, interest in a particular clinical area and appreciation of the profession.

In respect to creating a positive learning environment, managers may be in a strategic position to facilitate a student-friendly environment by providing support to practice placement educators in terms of time and caseload flexibility, in promoting and supporting continuing education (particularly as it relates to student supervision) and, more generally, by encouraging the team and site to develop a positive and welcoming attitude towards the student. At a management level, there needs to be a greater awareness of the critical role that the educator, team and practice placement education experience may have on the student's overall professional development, on the profession itself and on potential staff recruitment. Within the occupational therapy literature, practice placements are identified as a direct and effective recruitment strategy (Okerlund et al 1995, Smith et al 1995, Mulholland and Derald 2005).

At the university, academic staff could discuss these findings, and particularly those around role models, with students in order to expand their awareness of the broad range of factors that contribute to a successful practice experience. This may be beneficial to consider, because students often focus their attention on a particular area of practice and subsequent skill set when selecting and proceeding with their practice placement education. With this awareness, students may nurture their relationships with practice placement educators in a proactive way and recognise the importance of role models in their learning and continuing professional development.

Finally, managers and universities are encouraged to strive to create a positive overall practice milieu by formally recognising practice placement educators who contribute to their profession by going above and beyond the call of duty when supervising and mentoring.

Limitations of the study

When considering the results of this study, a major limitation that should be kept in mind is the sampling bias because the data consists of nominations from students who obviously had a positive experience. Also, the wording of the nomination form may have biased students to focus on particular practice placement educator attributes in their responses. It should be noted that the study analysed data that were initially collected for another intention, that of nominating individuals for an award,

rather than for a research study. As such, the nominations and the resulting data may well have been influenced by other agendas, such as an educator suggesting that the student nominate him or her. Similarly, it must be kept in mind that this kind of data will necessarily reflect only what students 'liked' in the supervisory process rather than more negatively perceived situations that might still have contributed to their learning.

Conclusion

The findings of this study expand on the existing literature to explore what qualities make an *exceptional* practice placement educator. The findings also identify the factors that students believe contribute to a positive learning experience. This information can be used by various stakeholders in order better to prepare therapists to become educators and to create positive learning experiences within supportive environments.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our gratitude to the Alberta Association of Registered Occupational Therapists for collaborating with us on this project. We also wish to thank Professor Vivien Hollis for her guidance and insight. We appreciate the students who took their time to nominate clinicians for the AAROT Clinical Teaching Award. Last, but not least, we wish to acknowledge the exceptional clinicians who advance our profession by supervising and mentoring our occupational therapy students.

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