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**Supervising role-emerging placements: a CPD opportunity that supports innovation in practice**

Abstract

Supervision of occupational therapy students on placements is a challenging, but rewarding experience. There is a growing body of literature related to role emerging placements but the experiences of the occupational therapists who undertake the role of off-site supervisors are underrepresented. These placements are based in settings where there is no defined occupational therapy role and the professional supervisor is not based at the placement site.

Drawing from research in two European countries with off-site supervisors the enablers and barriers of this role are presented. Supervising students with innovative occupational therapy interventions positively influenced the off-site supervisors’ professional practice. Practical guidance for those interested in this role is shared to encourage occupational therapists to pursue this rewarding role including the need for peer support while undertaking this valuable role.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the educational approach of role emerging placements in occupational therapy education from the perspectives of the occupational therapists who undertake the role of off-site supervisors. In order to raise the profile of this valuable role, key findings from two interlinked research projects in Ireland and the United Kingdom are presented.

Role emerging placements are widely used in occupational therapy programmes and have been used internationally since the 1930s (Friedland et al 2001). According to Wood (2005), role emerging placements occur in a non-traditional setting where there is currently no established role for the occupational therapist in that country. The day to day supervision is completed by an on-site supervisor who is not an occupational therapist and off-site, professional supervision is provided by an occupational therapist who may be in a clinical, managerial and/ or academic role.

There are many reasons for the implementation of role emerging placements in occupational therapy and other professional programmes. This includes placement shortages, changes in health care and encouraging students to work in new areas of practice once qualified (Wood 2005). From reviewing the literature (Clarke et al, 2014) highlighted the potential valuable role of this placement model within occupational therapy education.

Off-site supervisors are also referred to as long-arm supervisors. The occupational therapist provides professional supervision on a sessional or part-time basis with minimal direct observation of students at the site The role involves offering support and encouragement while facilitating students with their professional reasoning. Students complete these placements individually or students may be paired in the site with another occupational therapy student. The role emerging placement sites vary, but may include schools, homeless shelters, prisons or other areas which do not have an established occupation therapy service. The setting may be familiar to the off-site supervisor through their own particular interest working in this area, or the site may be unknown to them.

From reviewing the limited research on the experiences of the off-site supervisors, the role is perceived as time consuming (Wilcock et al 2009; Thew et al 2008); although in a study by Rodger et al (2009) the face-to-face time was less than originally anticipated. It is important to negotiate the expectations of all involved in the role emerging placement including defining supervisory roles (Rodger et al 2009; Boniface et al 2012). Undertaking the off-site supervisor role is acknowledged as rewarding (Matthews et al. 2009; Warren, 2011; Warren et al 2010/11; Thew et al 2008) and beneficial as a continuous professional development activity (Wilcock et al 2009; Matthews et al 2009). Peer support for off-site supervisors is recommended when undertaking this role (Boniface et al, 2012; Dancza 2015; Warren 2014).

Research with off-site supervisors

The limited literature warranted further exploration of the experiences of occupational therapists in the role of off-site supervisors. This led to the authors working collaboratively to combine data from two larger qualitative studies following relevant ethical approval and consent from participants.

Semi-structured interviews were completed individually with eight off-site supervisors. They had experience of supervising between two and ten students from undergraduate or graduate entry masters occupational therapy programmes. Occupational therapy students were on placement individually or in pairs on a full-time placement between eight and ten weeks in duration. The settings for the role emerging placements included schools, community education and charitable organisations.

The anonymised transcripts were analysed using the qualitative analysis process of content analysis (Robson, 2011). Codes were categorised into the challenges/ barriers, enablers and practical strategies utilised by the off-site supervisors during role emerging placements. The researchers shared codes and descriptors for consistency and completed the analysis via Skype©.

*Enablers*

Participants identified enablers which facilitated their role as off-site supervisors during the role emerging placement. These included building or maintaining a relationship with the site; utilising the student peer or paired supervision model; and identifying both the personal and professional gains from completing the role.

*Challenges*

Participants identified some challenges or barriers to overcome in their role as off-site supervisors during the role emerging placement. These included supervising in an unfamiliar context and having to build a relationship with the on-site supervisor; underestimating the time commitment and having to contain both the ideas and the emotions of the students throughout the placement.

Implications for practice

The off-site supervisors utilised a variety of practical strategies to support their supervisory role that evolved across the duration of the placement. Strategies included:

* Making time to get to know the context through site visits or contact with the on-site supervisor before the placement begins.
* Focusing supervision sessions on linking theory with practice. This was invigorating for the supervisors as it reinforced or reconnected their practice and theory.
* Being flexible about the venue for supervision. Students and on-site supervisors valued the off-site supervisor being in the context so they could answer questions and offer support. At times, however, students benefited from being in a neutral venue (such as the university) away from the placement site so they could discuss issues within a confidential environment.
* Encouraging students to take responsibility for structuring the supervision and arriving prepared.
* Setting up their own support networks and making time for debriefing sessions whilst undertaking this role. This was sometimes linked to university staff and/or with peer clinicians.

Conclusion

Role-emerging placements have value not only for student education, but also for the off-site supervisors involved in this practice. To enhance the experience of the off-site supervisors, it is important to support those occupational therapists undertaking this role with practical strategies. Through highlighting the challenges and enablers to this innovative role, it is hoped that more occupational therapists will be encouraged to pursue the challenge and rewards of supervising occupational therapy students in emerging areas of professional practice.

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