An Exploration of a Service-Learning Environment for Occupational Therapy Students and Their Community Partners: Outcomes and Perceptions

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Introduction
Service-learning is a pedagogy based on the philosophies of social justice, reciprocity and social inclusion (Flecky & Gitlow, 2011).
Service-learning aims to link academic learning with real world experiences through engaging students in volunteering work and exploring their experiences, perceptions and learning about disability.

In addition, service-learning should be mutually beneficial; both the students and the community partners work together to engage in occupations of their choice.

This qualitative research project examined the outcomes of a service-learning module at one university for first and second year occupational therapy students and their community partners (for the purposes of this study this refers to people with intellectual disabilities).

Objectives
- To explore the nature of the relationships between the occupational therapy students and their community partners
- To explore the personal and professional development outcomes for both parties
- To explore the potential for occupational engagement and participation as a result of the service-learning environment

Methods
Focus groups were completed post service-learning module.
Participants
1. First and second year occupational therapy students
2. Two cohorts of students with intellectual disability engaging with certificate courses within the university.

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis.

Results/Themes
Community Partners
- Partnership/Relationship
- Self-Development
- Inclusion and Support

Occupational Therapy Students
- Partnership/Relationship
- Self-Development
- Attitude Change
- Developing New Skills

Conclusion
Both cohorts experienced personal and professional growth by achieving their course goals, developing skills, engaging in new occupations, increasing their occupational competence in existing occupations, changing attitudes and being in an environment that was supportive and inclusive.

A key theme that emerged was the nature of the service-learning partnership. The relationship was collaborative which led to mutual self-development. Both groups reported they helped each other to develop in addition to receiving help.

The themes of ‘inclusion and support’ and ‘attitude change’ were linked in the results. Many community partners noticed the change in their service-learning partnership and felt more comfortable over time, coinciding with the students’ change in attitudes.

The results suggest this service-learning module offers opportunities for occupational enrichment through the development of skills, attitudes, personal growth, feelings of competence and feelings of inclusion and support for occupational therapy students and their community partners (Molineux & Whitford, 1999).

References