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An investigation into the perceived effects of the active engagement of service user and carers in occupational therapy education

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Introduction: There have been many UK government directives (Department of Health, 1998; National Health Service Executive, 1999; Secretary of State for Health, 1997), advocating partnership with clients. However, most research in this area has been conducted in nursing education, not occupational therapy (Felton and Stickley, 2004; Truman and Raines, 2002).

Objectives: To identify the current involvement of service users and carers within occupational therapy education in Wales by;

1. Investigating the nature of that involvement
2. Investigating any perceived effects of service user/carer involvement from the perspective of;

a. students

b. service users/carers

c. lecturing staff

Methods: Qualitative research, which investigates the subjective perspective of research participants can help develop a body of knowledge, (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), is currently lacking in this subject. A survey of academics views of current practice within three separate UK universities was carried out initially. In depth interviews were carried out with the students and service users/carers who had been in contact with the programmes. Academic staff were interviewed and commented on the analysis of the student and carer/service user data. Interviews were taped and transcribed. Data was analysed thematically and returned to participants for checking (Holloway, 2005).

Results: Main themes were;

- Students -
 - Valued the reality of the service users/carers stories
 - Did not feel responsible for the service user - the service user was more in charge
 - Moved out of their comfort zone in the student/client relationship
- Staff felt service user/carers involvement -
 - Offered a heightened awareness of discrimination issues
 - Influence the curriculum
 - Offered a change in the power base
 - Created problems around payment, access and reliability of attendance
- Service users/carers -

-Felt useful to the programme

-Enjoyed the experience

Conclusions: That the contributions which service users and carers can make to student awareness outweigh the often potential barriers to their inclusion in OT education programmes' content, design and selection processes.

Contribution to the evidence base of occupational therapy education: No English speaking Occupational Therapy research articles could be identified on this topic, therefore this investigation would appear to contribute a novel aspect to the evidence base.