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A unique international fieldwork experience combining practice, projects and research: a model for intercultural learning and teaching

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Introduction

Fieldwork is a mandatory part of occupational therapy education programs throughout the world and internationalization is a growing priority for universities. Hence there are increasing requests for international fieldwork placements. As the benefits of international fieldwork in respect of learning and teaching are many, new models for international fieldwork programs are important.

Objectives

The aim of this paper is to stimulate ideas for developing innovative international fieldwork opportunities by describing a unique international fieldwork program and reflecting on its benefits in terms of student learning experiences and supervisors' teaching experiences.

Description

The paper begins with a brief synthesis of literature on international fieldwork as a means of enhancing learning experiences for occupational therapy students. The literature review is followed by a description of a fieldwork program developed in 2007 and implemented in 2008 and 2009 in Australia for Canadian occupational therapy students. Some reflections by students and their supervisors are presented to highlight the influence of the experience on the students' learning experiences and the supervisors' teaching experiences.

Discussion

The challenges in developing a fieldwork program set in a hospital and a university based research centre and involving a combination of clinical practice with research projects were significant. However, the reflections of the participants in the two programs completed to date reveal there were many benefits.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges involved, an international fieldwork placement that provides clinical practice, community project work and research experience offers students many opportunities for a variety of positive learning experiences. Supervisors benefit from collaboration with international schools and are exposed to new teaching experiences.

Contribution to practice/ evidence of OT

Given the increasing demand for international fieldwork experiences, the program described in this paper could be used as a model for preparing students for practice, stimulating their interest in research and enhancing their research skills, and developing their intercultural sensitivities.