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The lived experience of an Occupational Therapist circa 1906): Sharing Jessie Luther's world of occupation

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Introduction

Jessie Luther was already an accomplished artist and craftswoman when she began practicing occupational therapy in 1901 at a Settlement House in Chicago. There she helped immigrants and the poor develop or maintain their handicraft skills. In 1903 in Massachusetts, she used her craft-based approach to treat people suffering "nervous collapse" brought on by the stresses of everyday life. Luther's greatest challenge came with her work at the Grenfell Mission in Newfoundland where she was asked to help an isolated community develop skills to improve their economic, social, and emotional well-being. In all of these settings Luther's approach to her clientele was non-medical and focused on enhancing their abilities to function more fully in everyday life. Luther kept a diary and wrote to her family telling of her experiences at the Mission. A content analysis of these materials helps explicate the links between early occupational therapy and current practice.

Objectives

1) to explore the rationale behind Luther's approach to her clientele; 2) to understand the use of artistic activities to enhance well-being; 3) to consider where this non-medical approach might have led the profession had it continued, and 4) to examine an occupational therapist's life in the early 1900s

Methods

A content analysis of Luther's diary and letters will provide a description of the lived experience of an early occupational therapist in the western world.

Results

Themes from the analysis will elucidate Luther's rationale for her use of occupation at this time and place.

Conclusion

Luther's work was rooted in the values of the Arts and Craft and Settlement House Movements in the western world. These values were significant components of our professional heritage and warrant our consideration.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy

Strategies for providing greater opportunities for full societal participation will be discussed and implications for research and education will be considered. Critically analysing the foundations of our profession can help occupational therapists as they plan future directions for sharing the world of occupation.