

A learning journey in fieldwork: The supervisor's experience

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Introduction

A student's experience while undertaking fieldwork placements is a valuable and significant aspect of their professional socialisation. Fieldwork placements prepare students for occupational therapy careers by enabling them to practise professional skills and behaviours with consumers in a supervised environment. Supervisors observe student performance and are required to make judgements about the level of competence demonstrated by the student. It is not always clear to supervisors what should be expected of students at different stages of their training and they often have little preparation especially in evaluation of student performance.

Objectives

In most fieldwork opportunities, throughout the global occupational therapy community, the assessment of student performance is the responsibility of the local on-site supervisor. This study was undertaken to investigate the experiences of fieldwork supervisors making decisions related to the performance and evaluation of occupational therapy students. The aim was to provide knowledge that could guide future practice in fieldwork supervision and supervisor preparation.

Methods

This research explored the experience of occupational therapists who supervised students during their long full time fieldwork placements. The data obtained through a series of in-depth interviews was analysed using qualitative methods to determine the issues and challenges of the various supervisory roles required of educators.

Results

While supervisors, fieldwork sites and students are highly diverse, the goal of fieldwork is the same - to establish whether or not a student meets professional performance expectations. The experiences and challenges faced by the participants of this study frame the learning journey of students during fieldwork.

Conclusion

The study reveals the context, process and factors affecting supervisor decision-making that should be considered in curricula, placement and fieldwork educator professional development strategies.

Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy

The judgements that supervisors make about student performance are critical to course integrity, graduate quality and future standards of professional practice.