Images of Practice

Occupational Therapy Students’ Metaphors for Helping

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Key Words
• helping
• metaphors
• students

Metaphors are powerful devices for eliciting images of practice. Exploring the metaphors of occupational therapy students provides educators with insight into students’ prior knowledge and the constraints their ideas may present in practice. Metaphorical images of helping held by newly enrolled and Level II fieldwork students were examined. Responses to a structured, open-format questionnaire revealed that the two groups were in agreement about conceptualizations of helping. The findings suggest two overarching themes: (1) the importance of client-centered practice and (2) the inevitability of client autonomy and responsibility. These results imply that educators must prepare students to face the realities of practice: working with unmotivated clients and engaging them in meaningful occupations. Thus, a continued emphasis on client-centered practice and the requisite listening skills for a therapeutic alliance are needed. Research should build on the insufficient knowledge of what happens to identity development in the transition from curricula to practice.


Occupational therapy students report the desire to help people is the driving force behind their entry into the profession (Fortune, 2000; Lyons, 1991; McKenna, Scholtes, Fleming, & Gilbert, 2001; Peloquin, 1990; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999). Professional identity develops as students construct images of their profession, including its boundaries, duties, and values. In occupational therapy, the existence of a strong professional identity has been questioned (Fortune, 2000). Researchers have observed occupational therapy students, faculty, and practitioners questioning the identity of the professional occupational therapy practitioner and have witnessed their concerns that the profession may, or indeed already has, become indistinguishable from physical therapy or social work (Fortune, 2000; Ikiugu & Rosso, 2003; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999). Members of one health care team viewed occupational therapists as jacks-of-all-trades who can be counted on to fill whatever gaps exist in treatment—an ambiguous professional identity that may do more harm than good on the health care team (Fortune, 2000).

“Gap filling,” however, is not an appropriate professional identity for highly trained, valuable members of a health care team. Researchers have cited reasons for the existence of this gap-filler identity among occupational therapists, such as help-oriented attitudes and beliefs of most people entering the profession (Lyons, 1991; McKenna et al., 2001; Peloquin, 1990; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999), pre-service curriculum and instruction (Fortune, 2000; Neistadt, 1992; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999), and the way in which many occupational therapy students are socialized into the profession (Bjorklund, 2000; Ikiugu & Rosso, 2003; Mackenzie, 2002).

Cerbini (2000) demonstrated that educators can help students develop stronger professional identities by uncovering the students’ prior knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of the profession; exposing how this knowledge influences student actions; and modifying instruction on the basis of these factors. Researchers have successfully used metaphor analysis techniques to reveal preserve concepts of the practice and role in other professions (Hartrick & Schreiber,
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Occupational Therapy Professional Identity

The literature on occupational therapy students highlights the motivation behind their desire to enter the profession—they want to help people (Fortune, 2000; Lyons, 1991; McKenna et al., 2001; Pelouquin, 1990; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999). McKenna et al. (2001) found no significant change in the characteristics thought to be important for a successful occupational therapist from entry to exit from an occupational therapy education program. Students entering the program valued, for example, the characteristics of good communication skills, positive attitude toward people with disabilities, and honesty and integrity, as did students exiting the program. These results suggest that students who already possess the core values of occupational therapy are attracted to the profession, and their beliefs change little as they proceed through the curriculum. According to Torrance (1975), determining which characteristics a person values can provide clues for helping that person reach his or her potential. These personal and professional characteristics can be linked to a broader identity that a profession seeks to promote. Yet, the processes that help students transition from apprentice to expert are not well understood (Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999).

The discrepancy that exists between academic education and practice appears to disrupt the learning trajectory of students as they attempt to form a focused professional identity. What is known is that students’ beliefs about helping and conceptualizations of practice are often tempered or even disturbed once they converge with the realities of practice (Fortune, 2000; Ikiugu & Rosso, 2003; Mackenzie, 2002; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 2001). Yet Ikiugu and Rosso (2003) found that students recognized an emerging paradigm of occupational therapy that consists of core constructs, values, and a focal viewpoint of practice. Students also recognized their responsibility to manage the paradigm and to be proactive in defining their role in various practice settings. Observations of occupational therapy students’ beliefs and attitudes about people with disabilities can illuminate the impact of curricula on such attitudes. Lyons (1991) investigated students’ beliefs and attitudes about their professional role and attitudes toward people with disabilities and compared the attitudes of occupational therapy students with those of business students. Lyon’s most unexpected finding was that there was no significant difference between the attitude scores of newly enrolled occupational therapy students and business students. McKenna et al. (2001) also examined how students’ attitudes toward people with disabilities, their perceptions of practice, and career plans compared on entry and exit from an occupational therapy education program. Results indicated that, from entry to exit from the curriculum, students’ attitudes toward people with disabilities changed from feeling sorry for them to no longer feeling sorry for them. The researchers speculated that this change may have occurred as students internalized the core values of the profession.

Marchese (1998) suggested that the development of a professional identity is a process that ultimately begins in the classroom and is enhanced as practitioners test their models of practice through experience and reflection. Lindberg, Reznick, Devito, and Espin (2002) reminded educators that these experiences are not insignificant in terms of identity development; once impressions of others (e.g., students in other professional programs) are formed, they are difficult to revise. There is insufficient knowledge of what happens to identity development in the transition from interaction with curricula to interaction with actual practices of the profession.

Evidence exists for the powerful role of fieldwork and supervision in the socialization process (McKenna et al., 2001). The term socialization is often used in discussions of student attitudes, perceptions, and values (McKenna et al., 2001). Socialization has been described as the process by which transmission of the culture of a profession takes place or the mechanism by which people become participating members of a profession (McKenna et al., 2001). Students, through interaction with faculty, curricula, fieldwork supervisors, and peers, acquire and internalize the roles, skills, values, attitudes, and beliefs of the profession. Health care professions seek to shape the professional identity of future practitioners across an educational continuum that begins in the classroom, continues through apprenticeship, and is ongoing with formalized continuing education. Not surprisingly, educators struggle with how to influence the development of personal and interpersonal traits valued by their professions (Fidler, 1996). An exploration of the progression of professional development during fieldwork and the first year of practice revealed intense feelings of shock, anger toward politics in the workplace, and self-doubt among students (Tryssenaar & Perkins, 1999). Mackenzie (2002) found that students transitioning from the classroom to fieldwork report concerns about their level of preparation and relationships with supervisors. In fact, Mackenzie found that supervision was a central issue of concern for students and that the supervisors’ ability to provide constructive feedback appeared to be critical to students’ professional identity development. MacKenzie’s briefing and debriefing of fieldwork students also suggested that first-year students’ and final-year students’ concerns about fieldwork were quite different; first-year students were concerned more with facts about the experience, and final-year students were concerned about greater life issues.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined student views of the occupational therapy role by means of metaphorical language they use to symbolize the act of helping and through identification of ideal characteristics of occupational therapist and clients. The three research
questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. What patterns exist among the metaphors used by newly enrolled occupational therapy students to describe their sense of helping, and how do these findings compare with those of nearly qualified students?

2. What are the ideal characteristics of clients and therapists, and how do these findings compare with those of nearly qualified students?

3. How can curricular experiences be organized to promote a strong identity that value treating the whole person, client autonomy, a client-centered approach?

Method

Research Design

An exploratory, comparative design was used to capture a deep understanding of helping of two distinct groups of occupational therapy students. Participants filled out a questionnaire on metaphors of helping and ideal characteristics of occupational therapists and clients. Next, purposeful case sampling and interviews, considered two of the most important and valid sources of case study information, were used in this investigation. These allowed for in-depth inquiry into and understanding of the socialization process of occupational therapy students (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1991; Yin, 1994). In qualitative inquiry, it is important for the researcher to fully disclose his or her interest in the subject under investigation (Seidman, 1991). Personal interest of the researcher in this type of inquiry stems from work as an educator in an occupational therapy education program and experience watching students try on the identity of a health care professional in a problem-based learning classroom.

Participants

For a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) students were recruited from three midwestern universities with occupational therapy education programs. The sample size was based on Maxwell’s (1996) theoretical saturation method. Participants classified as Group 1 met criteria of placement in the first semester of an occupational therapy education program and were designated as newly enrolled. Criteria for Group 2 inclusion demanded that participants had completed all courses in the curriculum of their occupational therapy education programs and were Level II fieldwork students. In addition, Group 2 participants must have either completed a traditional fieldwork experience within the previous 3 months or were advanced along the continuum of fieldwork to the point at which they were responsible for their own caseload of at least three clients. This group was designated as nearly qualified occupational therapy students.

Data Collection

It is not unusual in health and human services research for an investigator to need to construct measures that fit the purpose of the investigation (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998). A three-part questionnaire entitled Identity Questionnaire was created based on a model by Yamamoto, Hardcastle, Muehl, and Muehl (1990). This questionnaire was used to gather demographic data, evidence of experience working in health care, and perceptions of experience with health care. The sensitizing concept of helping was employed to focus the questionnaire and interviews on broad concepts of the profession in relation to the choice of metaphor. The Identity Questionnaire was piloted on a class of occupational therapy students at the researcher’s university. Other participants in the pilot included a noted author in the field and five educators in occupational therapy education programs. Revisions were made where necessary to strengthen face validity and the rigor of the instrument.

The questionnaire elicited information on two important constructs of the study: metaphors of the experience of being a helper and selection of ideal characteristics of an occupational therapist and ideal characteristics of a client. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) asserted that metaphors go beyond language in defining and understanding human action. For example, “time is money” and “helping is educating” both illustrate the power of the metaphor to drive thought and action. Therapists who consider themselves to be jacks of all trades may be vulnerable to taking on any task suggested to them. Thus, the power of the metaphor can be a way to help communicate the nature of experience, beliefs, everyday realities, changes in the socialization process, and identity development (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lingard et al., 2002; Yamamoto et al., 1990). Greene suggested, “One of the things that makes metaphor so important to the discourse about education is that it can make visible and palpable particular phenomena, those so often submerged in categories” (Green, 1995, 6). For example, an exploration of the statement helping is teaching reveals how a set of experiences can influence action and become a generator of change and transformer of meaning. The researchers speculated that metaphorical images and themes may be a result of the participants’ cohort group, sociocultural context, or individuality and suggested that in-depth interviews be used to probe for clarification of the effects of metaphorical views on everyday life (Yamamoto et al., 1990).

Both structured and open-format questions were used, and forced-choice metaphors were selected by the researcher. The questionnaire directions were as follows:

Certain experiences capture the human experience, for example: sleep is a death, life is a winding trial, my love is a flower. If you were to come up with an expression that captures your sense of “helping” as an occupational therapist, what would it be? Pick one of the provided options below or use your own description.

Participants could choose from nine options following the stem “Helping is:” (1) being a tour guide, (2) swimming in rough seas, (3) watching a flower grow, (4) being like Clark Kent, (5) shining a light on a path, (6) sticking to the recipe, (7) exploring the unknown, (8) wearing the right hat, (9) other.

The metaphors were selected by the researcher because of the power of language to conceptualize experiences. For example, “being like Clark Kent” holds cultural meaning and connotes saving people from harm. “Sticking to a recipe” brings up an image of following a set of rules that ends in production of a desired outcome. “Being a tour guide” conjures images of showing and educating yet is less directive than “shining a light on a path” and more directive than “watching a flower grow.” “Shining a light
on a path” conjures up images of clients choosing a path or being shown a path that is illuminated by a helper and thus can be more directive than “watching a flower grow,” yet less constraining and more client-centered than “sticking to a recipe.”

The metaphors were not intended to be definitive conceptualizations of practice; rather, they were meant to be heuristic devices that communicate beliefs and how these beliefs influence action. These selections and the following section, which asked participants to explain why they chose a particular metaphor, were provided to allow participants to express how they conceptualize helping.

The items for ideal characteristics were ranked from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important). In essence, this section asked respondents to describe the kind of therapist they were striving to become. In addition, this section allowed respondents to describe their preferences for characteristics of the clients with whom they would someday work. Content validity was assured by searching the literature for empirical studies that investigated paradigms of the profession and ideal characteristics of health care workers and clients (Bjorklund, 2000; Mackenzie, 2002; McKenna et al., 2001).

Because interviews can provide an in-depth understanding of the socialization process, interviewees were chosen from participants in Group 2. As participants completed the questionnaire, they were asked by the researcher if they could be contacted at a later date to be interviewed. Interview candidates were then chosen by the researcher using a stratified random sampling based on their choice of metaphor. Specifically, participants’ questionnaires were scanned by the researcher for choice of metaphor, and one interviewee was chosen for each of the five most frequently selected metaphors of helping. Questionnaire participants who volunteered for the interview were then contacted by the researcher. The purpose of the interview was to explore in-depth the meaning behind each of the most frequently chosen metaphors. Interviews were conducted by the researcher, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hr and was conducted at a convenient location for participants. Once interviews were transcribed, participants received a copy of their interview, were encouraged to verify the content of the interview, and were asked to clarify any responses to interview questions.

**Data Analysis**

A three-step content analysis process was used to identify conceptual clusters of images and ideas of helping from all participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, qualitative responses to a question asking why the participant chose a particular metaphor were read through line by line twice by the researcher and once by a peer auditor to identify words or phrases that captured the particular image of helping. Next, the researcher tabulated metaphor descriptors from both Group 1 and Group 2 for comparative analysis and identification of clusters of meaning. Examination of the conceptual clusters was then used to support the meaning derived from the metaphor chosen. To contextualize the data, five in-depth interviews were conducted with one participant from Group 2 for each of the five most frequently selected metaphors of helping. Interviews were limited to Group 2 participants to gain in-depth knowledge of the socialization process of occupational therapy students who had experienced socialization that occurs during fieldwork.

Triangulation of data was accomplished by using multiple data sets, such as interviews, questionnaires, and member checks by interviewees. It has been suggested that the question of generalization should be addressed in qualitative inquiry as transferability and attention should be given to context as a natural limit to generalization (Patton, 2002). The degree of transferability of qualitative data is a direct function of the similarities between contexts. Decisions about transferability of data in this investigation can be addressed by the description of the participants as well as by recognizing the similarities of issues in context.

**Results**

A total of 124 occupational therapy students between ages 21 and 46 (110 female, 14 male) participated in the study. Two of the participants’ universities were similar in that they were large, hospital-affiliated research institutions; the third was a small private university. Two were entry-level master’s occupational therapy education programs, and one was an entry-level occupational therapy doctorate program. Participants in Group 1 consisted of 74 students (64 female and 10 male). Participants in Group 2 consisted of 50 students (46 female and 4 male). As expected, more participants in Group 1 fell into an age range of 22 or younger, whereas 90% of those in Group 2 fell into the 23- to 30-year-old age range. The majority of students had undergraduate majors in a health care field; the second largest group majored in psychology. University human subjects review standards for protection of student participants were upheld for all three universities. Group 2 participants were from universities with Level II fieldwork experiences worth between 16 and 18 credit hours.

Descriptive statistics for choice of metaphor of helping are reported in Table 1. Overwhelmingly, participants in both groups chose “shining a light on the path” as their metaphor for helping (55% for Group 1 and 44% for Group 2).

Results of pattern matching of the meaning of the metaphors for participants are presented in Table 2. Results of tabulations of qualitative data gathered from the Identity Questionnaire revealed that participants who chose “shining a light on the path” prefer facilitating the health of clients rather than taking a more authoritarian or directive approach to treatment. The majority of participants in both Group 1 (70%) and Group 2 (78%) had experience working in health care.

When asked to choose a metaphor that describes helping, 16% of nearly qualified or fieldwork students opted to describe their own images of practice and chose “other” compared with 7% of newly enrolled occupational therapy students. Although none of these “other” responses attained a sizable frequency, the underlying themes of support and facilitation appeared to be common. Samples of metaphors and their dimensions of meaning that participants generated themselves included being a coach (empowerment), mixing fertilizer into the soil (enrichment and nourishment), and being a salesman (offering knowledge and skills). It could be
inferred that newly enrolled occupational therapy students are not as able to imagine as are nearly qualified occupational therapy students because they have less experience with the enactment of helping.

Tables 3 summarizes the participants’ rankings of ideal characteristics of occupational therapists and ideal characteristics of clients on a scale of 1 to 6 (1 = most important; 6 = least important). Of the 41 newly enrolled occupational therapy students in Group 1 and 22 nearly qualified students in Group 2 who chose “shining a light on a path” as their metaphor for helping, the modal ideal characteristic of an occupational therapist was “attends to client needs.” Other rankings of ideal characteristics for occupational therapists differed somewhat, depending on the group (see Table 2). The modal ideal characteristic of clients was “motivated” for participants who chose the modal metaphor for both Group 1 and Group 2. An independent sample t test demonstrated no statistically significant difference in how the two groups regard clients’ ideal characteristics.

### Students’ Conceptualizations of Helping Expressed Through Metaphor

Despite choice of metaphor, a constant comparative analysis of the themes for helping in five cases resulted in two overarching themes reflective of helping: (1) the importance of client-centered practice and (2) the inevitability of client autonomy and responsibility. The subthemes of holistic practice, rapport building, client education, and therapist competence were derived from participants’ conceptualizations of the enactment of practice. Results point to the existence of a strong pattern among the metaphors used for helping for students in two distinct educational phases: newly enrolled and nearly qualified students. In addition, these groups share common views of ideal characteristics of occupational therapists and ideal characteristics of clients. The metaphors make visible students’ sense of helping (Green, 1995). Both newly enrolled and nearly qualified occupational therapy students from the entire sample overwhelmingly chose the metaphor of helping “shining a light on a path” because
Table 3. Summary of Rankings of Ideal Characteristics of Occupational Therapists for Participants Who Chose “Shining a Light on a Path”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newly Enrolled Students</th>
<th>Rating* Mode</th>
<th>Nearly Qualified Students</th>
<th>Rating* Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attends to client needs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Attend to client needs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates caring behavior</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Is knowledgeable</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes clients’ problems seriously</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Demonstrates caring behavior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is knowledgeable</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Maintains confidentiality</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains confidentiality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Takes clients’ problems seriously</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends to treatment areas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Attends to treatment areas</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 = most important; 2 = 2nd to most important; 3 = 3rd to most important; 4 = 3rd to least important; 5 = 2nd to least important; 6 = least important.

of its power to symbolize their conceptualizations of practice (e.g., guiding, facilitating, empowering, enabling).

Evidence in this study demonstrates that both newly enrolled and nearly qualified occupational therapy students hold similar images of practice, and the majority appear to value client-centered and holistic practice and understand that the client is inevitably in control of the treatment process. All of the participants who participated in the case studies (nearly qualified students) expressed the belief that their metaphors of helping would have been different from metaphors chosen during the first semester of the curriculum in an occupational therapy education program. This is evidence of the power of reflexive consciousness, a premise of symbolic interactionism, embedded within the process of participants’ interpretation of events (Blumer, 1969). The following excerpts from the interviews illuminate the meaning behind the metaphors. Each participant selected a pseudonym for use with this investigation.

Shining a Light on a Path

Emma represented one of the 51% of participants in this investigation who chose “shining a light on a path”—the most frequently cited metaphor for helping of both groups of participants. Fieldwork taught Emma that a therapist cannot dictate which path the client should take. For Emma, it was evident that the client must choose the path that will then be illuminated by the occupational therapist. Emma stated, “Telling the clients what to do and being a director [in therapy] has never been effective. It takes away the client’s control and sense of self.” Emma found out what motivated her clients by “constantly asking what you can do to further help.” She claimed she would show she cared by listening and “taking the extra time to find things that work or motivate that person.”

Being a Tour Guide

When asked to choose a metaphor that captured his sense of helping, Scott chose, “being a tour guide”—the second most frequently chosen metaphor (14%) by both groups. When asked to elaborate, Scott responded, “Because a tour guide can lead a group to show them new things, but the recipient will only learn from what they put into it.” Scott, like Emma, was not inclined to be overly directive with his clients. Scott explained that his metaphor for helping reflected his experience as an occupational therapist,

We saw a lot of men who wanted to get back to their golf, who may have been in their 50s or 60s. I created a little golf rehab protocol for strengthening and endurance that they didn’t have. They had different hand, wrist, elbow injuries that were withholding them from golfing, and I think the therapists had a good grasp of treating the injury but not getting them to the next level, like getting them to the occupations that they wanted to be doing. For some 60-year-old men that are retired, golf is their life, in most cases, honestly, I was the one that was pushing that forward, and I enjoyed doing it.

When asked if Scott’s beliefs about helping had changed because of his participation in fieldwork, Scott responded that when he was still in the classroom, he felt he would have more power in the therapeutic milieu, and now that he is a fieldwork student he realizes that clients have to be willing to be helped.

Watching a Flower Grow

Anne began her fieldwork in occupational therapy with extensive experience working with people challenged by disease or disability. With all her experience, it was no surprise that Anne was one of the 11% of participants who chose the metaphor of “watching a flower grow” to describe her sense of helping. For Anne, within this metaphor of helping was her role as gardener, nurturer, and cultivator of new growth.

Anne used the term “nurturer” several times in her description of the role of helper. According to Anne, the occupational therapist who treats clients holistically most likely pays attention to clients’ needs and must have the essential attitude and skills to do so. This is consistent with Anne’s choice for the most important characteristic of an occupational therapist—pays attention to client needs.

Exploring the Unknown

Sophia represents the 9% of participants who chose “exploring the unknown” as the metaphor for helping—the fourth most frequently selected metaphor by both groups in the investigation. This metaphor symbolized for Sophia the sense of helping as an occupational therapist. Sophia chose this metaphor because “When working with young children I help parents explore this new and scary place by showing them ways to find answers and finding help with them.” When Sophia was asked about conceptualizations of practice that exploring the unknown symbolized, she said

Helping people, especially an OT is about helping them find things that they haven’t known before, along the lines of equipment, or ways of thinking, anything like that. I think we have a unique knowledge base, so that is our job to show them what they don’t know, and I think it is our job to put our knowledge out there and that is what we do. A lot of people don’t know what resources are out there, and it is for us to say “this is what there is and this is what you can do,” when maybe they haven’t had any kind of hope for anything like that.
A deeper look at Sophia’s experiences and images of helping reveal that when in school, she felt she had to know everything and have all the information to serve people in the helper role. This is why exploring the unknown has so much meaning for her.

**Wearing the Right Hat**

Rachel represents the participants who chose a metaphor for helping that was also selected by 7% of the participants. She chose “wearing the right hat” as a way to describe helping. Rachel explained her beliefs as follows:

All clients or clients are different people with different needs. The activities that motivate different people are unique, as are the therapy style they respond best to. We have learned all the skills in school and on Level II’s [fieldwork]. Now we must implement them in an effective manner.

When asked to elaborate on how the metaphor reflected her experience as an occupational therapist, Rachel responded, “I find myself approaching people and problems differently as the situation/person warrants.” Rachel was asked if her metaphor for helping might have changed from the beginning of her experience with the occupational therapy curriculum to now, and Rachel replied that when in school she believed that helping was showing clients all the wonderful things an occupational therapist can do for them. In reality, according to Rachel, she had to manage each therapeutic situation in a unique way because it is a unique client with specific needs.

**Discussion**

Even though metaphors for helping appear to remain stable across educational experiences, the interviews revealed a deeper level of learning and a juncture where a disruption of the meaning of helping appears to occur. It is interpreted here that behind the images of practice of guiding, facilitating, empowering, and enabling, there is a stronger belief in power and control located within the helper when students begin an occupational therapy curriculum than when they finish, and this belief, substantiated by Tyssemaar and Perkins (1999), is often perturbed when students engage in actual practice.

Of the participants who chose “shining a light on a path” as the metaphor for helping, the modal ideal characteristic of an occupational therapist was “attends to client needs.” Not surprisingly, the choice of metaphor and in-depth interviews revealed similar themes and subthemes of helping. Overwhelmingly, interviewees and participants in both groups appeared to understand that client centeredness is built on holistic practice and rapport with clients. These findings concur with McKenna et al. (2001) and may suggest that students already possess values of the profession when they enter occupational therapy education programs. For example, “shining a light on a path” for participants did not mean that the practitioner held the “light” from a perspective of power; rather, they possessed knowledge that could help if and when clients chose to follow a particular path. Thus, participants appear to believe that, ultimately, it is the client who is in control and must be responsible for the final outcomes of treatment. These findings support Bjorklund (2000), who also found that nearly qualified occupational therapy students perceived that, ultimately, it is the client who is responsible for his or her health. A caveat to this is the belief of participants that client education and therapist competence, especially with regard to listening to and exploring the unique needs of clients, will support better therapeutic outcomes. Therefore, therapeutic use of self is central to the process of “shining a light on a path.”

The modal ideal characteristic for clients was “motivated” for both groups. These findings suggest that students who select the profession of occupational therapy may already possess traits that are compatible with the profession, such as being client centered and valuing holistic treatment. The choice of “motivated” for ideal characteristic of clients is consistent with the desire to “help” people, because helping is facilitated by the client’s willingness to engage in treatment. Interestingly, the interviews revealed that students were cognizant of the power of therapeutic use of self, including active listening and a client-centered stance, to motivate clients in therapy. This finding is consistent with Bjorklund (2000), who found that nearly qualified students felt their primary role in practice was coaching and problem solving. This finding implies that occupational therapy curricula are successful in teaching students the importance of therapeutic use of self and all the skills that are embedded within this concept. Not surprising was the finding that, despite choosing the metaphor for helping, “shining a light on a path,” in-depth interviews of participants’ revealed their images of practice at the beginning of their curriculum in occupational therapy were constructed of symbols of power and control. This discussion provides several implications for educators of occupational therapy students.

First, it must be recognized that some students enter occupational therapy education programs with holistic and client-centered images of practice. Students are drawn to the profession because of the focus on the whole person, the context of the person, and the occupations that are meaningful to clients and their families. Equally important are the previously held images of practice that are often perturbed once students face the realities of fieldwork, especially those images of power and control. The enthusiasm of students is often dampened by the unmotivated client. Fieldwork students must reconcile their desire for clients to be motivated with the reality that clients are autonomous beings who may not be ready to participate in therapy or may or may not choose to take responsibility for their treatment.

In addition, students need to learn how to recognize the deeper issues underlying the seemingly unmotivated client. A therapeutic alliance will often reveal what is motivating to the client. Thus, occupational therapy educators must address the affective component of therapeutic use of self and prepare students to anticipate issues of power and control in the clinic. Perhaps a focus on the narrative frames of reference, emphasizing the clients’ stories, will better prepare students for the autonomy of the client. Student self-awareness and reflection can be increased through the use of assignments such as videotaping student interaction with mock clients, assigning follow-up reflection papers, and engaging in peer and instructor evaluation after role-play. Occupational therapy educators also will want to explore
the subthemes of client education and therapist competence under the theme the inevitability of client autonomy and responsibility and emphasize client motivation, communication skills, and clinical teaching skills in the didactic portion of the curriculum. Again, videotaped role-play and client simulation exercises are excellent vehicles for learning and assessing interactive reasoning.

Limitations of the Study

The lack of psychometric testing on the instrument is a limitation to this study. The identity questionnaire was developed by the researcher specifically for this investigation; thus, reliability and validity have not been established. However, the Identity Questionnaire is largely a self-report, and research indicates that self-report measures are generally valid (Portney & Watkins, 2000). Follow-up studies should exercise caution when using the Identity Questionnaire. If the metaphors for helping do not bear the same meaning for future participants, then incorrect predictions would lead to wrong educational modifications. The narrow geographic scope from which participants were selected may limit the transferability of the findings. Finally, information gathered in the case studies on the concept of helping may have been influenced by the unique culture of the fieldwork setting and may not be transferable to other clinical settings.

Implications for Future Research

The study of identity development and the influence of prior knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs are underdeveloped areas in the field of occupational therapy and occupational therapy education. Further research is needed in academic settings to investigate not only the cognitive scope of learning but also the affective scope of learning. The scholarship of teaching and learning is a legitimate form of inquiry wherein classroom activities can be used as research data to monitor student progress and identity development. For example, videotaping of the expression of clinical reasoning while students interact with others would capture the students’ abilities to use interactive reasoning and monitor their affective learning.

Follow-up investigations to the current study might include examining how students’ images of helping and identity development are altered by particular classroom and fieldwork contexts and processes, such as a problem-based learning classroom or fieldwork sites with specific supervision styles. In addition, comparing seasoned practitioners’ images of helping and identity to those of students would be interesting and informative. These phenomena have not been reported in the occupational therapy literature. How student perceptions of ideal characteristics of occupational therapists and clients interact with context over time may influence how education programs socialize students as helpers and what type of learning experiences should be developed by educators next.

Students come to education programs with firmly held images of and beliefs about professional identity and their roles within the profession of occupational therapy. Faculty can use this knowledge of students’ conceptualizations of identity to enhance student learning. In addition, professional identity is foundational to the adoption of specific rules, procedures, and tools of a profession. Understanding newly enrolled students’ conceptualizations of helping allows educators to modify curricula in ways that will direct educational outcomes in positive ways. ▲

References


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