

BACKGROUND

Practitioners with disabilities are underrepresented in occupational therapy. Research suggests this is due to educational and employment barriers experienced by individuals with disabilities (Chacala et al., 2014). Very little research has been done on this topic. The research that has been done largely consists of case studies. Previous research indicates barriers that exist for students largely occur on fieldwork. Some experienced fieldwork educator bias surrounding a student's abilities and how they meet the demands of the job (Taguchi Meyer, 2014). Chacala et al. (2014) indicated fieldwork sites and educators have limited access to educational resources and supports related to the education of students with disabilities. Additionally Chacala et al. (2014) reports a lack of fieldwork sites for students with disabilities. Clinicians with disabilities indicated negative attitudes of managers and colleagues as a barrier to practice. Some practitioners reported burnout resulting from having to complete additional work to prove professional competence and educate others (Chacala et al., 2014). Research suggest use of accommodations has been a great support for students with disabilities Taguchi Meyer, 2014). However once in the work force individual's with disabilities face difficulty being granted accommodations due in part to the perceived cost (Shur et al, 2014). While the term accommodations is most associated with individuals with disabilities the reality is all employees regardless of disability ask for things, they need to be successful (Shur et al, 2014).

RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this case study is to understand the experiences of students and clinicians with disabilities in occupational therapy.



METHODS

Semi-structured interview questions were drafted for both occupational therapy clinicians and students. The interview questions were then reviewed and edited with capstone mentor.

Project description was posted to a private Facebook group for participant recruitment. Interested individuals were contacted individually to discuss project details further and set up individual interview times.

Three occupational therapy students and one occupational therapy practitioner participated in semi-structured interviews via Zoom. All participants received interview questions and a consent form prior to their scheduled interview. After reviewing the interview questions and consent form all participants were provided with an opportunity to ask any questions or address any concerns. All participants provided signed and verbal consent to being recorded prior to the interview.

Each participant completed a fifteen to thirty-minute semi structured interview. Once completed, interviews were reviewed and transcribed.

PARTICIPANT HISTORY

Participant One: She is an occupational therapy doctoral student in her final year of study. She developed paralysis of her left leg after contracting a virus at the age of four. Upon graduation she hopes to work in either an adult outpatient setting or a non-traditional setting.

Participant Two: She has five years experience as an occupational therapist working in community mental health. She was diagnosed with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CPRS) nine years ago following an ankle injury.

Participant Three: She is an occupational therapy master's student in her final year of study. She currently has a working diagnosis of Bechet's Disease. Upon graduation she hopes to work in the school systems.

Participant Four: She is a second-year occupational therapy doctoral student. A back surgery and subsequent infection lead to physical challenges and additional health concerns. Following graduation she hopes to become a pediatric hand therapist specializing in burn and wound care.

RESULTS

Four occupational therapy clinicians and four occupational therapy students agreed to participate in interviews. One clinician dropped out after deciding she did not want to be recorded. Two clinicians agreed to provide written answers to interview questions. Both clinicians failed to return written responses. The remaining four individuals participated in video recorded Zoom interviews.

Four major themes emerged from the interviews:

Use of Accommodations and Adaptations

Participants described accommodations utilized in the classroom, on fieldwork, and in the workplace. Accommodations utilized include:

- ❖ Verbalizing the steps of transfers to others
- ❖ Use of energy conservation strategies such as scheduling time for documentation throughout the day to build in rest periods and spacing out physically demanding tasks.
- ❖ Working from home
- ❖ Use of mobility aids and splints
- ❖ Part time fieldwork placements
- ❖ Visits to fieldwork sites prior to start date
- ❖ Advocating for and understanding their needs
- ❖ Selecting practice settings that best suited their strengths

Pushback From Others

Several participants described times in which they received pushback from others regarding their decision to pursue occupational therapy given their disability. Consider the following quotes:

"I had an experience at a fieldwork site where another provider an occupational therapist or a physical therapist has straight out asked me how in the world am I going to be an occupational therapist with my musculoskeletal issues. And so that was a little eye opening for me. I can understand it from a patient population, even if they don't know about my health, I'm like 115 pounds and this tiny blond thing. There are these men looking at me like how in the heck is she planning on getting me from my shower chair to my toilet chair. Which I could do if needed. But to hear those words from another provider was something that impacted me for a few days and something that took me down. I didn't expect that from providers especially in occupational therapy and physical therapy. Our job is to help others figure out how to live and be happy and be as independent as possible with adaptations or whatever it may be. So having somebody in the therapy world just have that black and white perspective. "Oh you're sick, you can't do this" was kind of a punch in the stomach." –Participant Four

"So often I've heard professors say, "Oh you can't do it the way we are teaching it? Then you can't do it all"...But it's like no we are OT's you should be able to figure out a way to still do it safely. If a student can't do it the way you are expecting them to do it, think of three other options that could still get there." –Participant One

Disability as an Asset

Participants described viewing their disability as an asset. They feel it helps them build rapport with their patients. It helps them develop empathy for their patients because they know what it's like to be the person in the bed. Several participants described being selective about sharing their experiences with patients as they wanted the focus to remain on the patient. They want their experiences to inspire their patients but don't want to send the "look what I can do" message that can become a barrier to patients.

What They Want You To Understand

"It sounds very cliché but practice what you preach. Have confidence that even OT's who are living with disabilities know what we are doing." –Participant 4

"With a bit of support and effort it can be a really big addition to the workplace." –Participant 2

"I feel like people seem to discount you when you have a disability and work with people with disabilities. I'm not sure where that comes from. But it's almost like because you have something that you can't fix then why on earth would you be able to help anyone else. And that's just crazy. It's been frustrating. Everyone has something wrong with them or will have something wrong with them at some point. I guess just try to be understanding of where people are coming from because it gives us a lot of insight into how patients are feeling and what they are going through and the stress that comes with having a disability, and the frustration, and the setbacks. All of it, it sucks! You can't have that real understanding of what they are going through unless you've gone through it yourself. It's really a unique perspective that I think it can benefit us a lot in our career. " –Participant 3

BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

- ❖ Occupational therapy is profession that promotes independence and inclusion of individuals with disabilities. However, student and clinicians who wish to pursue a career in occupational therapy often face barriers to success in the field.
- ❖ Additional research should be done on this topic to promote diversity in the field of occupational therapy and eliminate barriers for students and clinicians in occupational therapy.
- ❖ With the use of reasonable accommodations and creative adaptations qualified individuals with disabilities can be successful.
- ❖ Educational resources are necessary to increase awareness of issues students and clinicians with disabilities face. The development of these educational tools will hopefully allow others to see that individuals with disabilities can be a valuable addition to the field.

REFERENCES

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