Interpersonal Competence Related to the Practice Learning of Occupational Therapy Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract : Background: Practice learning is crucial for preparing the healthcare profession to meet the real challenge upon graduation. Students are required to demonstrate their competence in managing interpersonal challenges, such as teamwork with other professionals and communicating well with the service users, during the placement. Such competence precedes clinical practice, and it may eventually affect students' actual performance in a clinical context. Unfortunately, there were limited studies investigating how such competence affects students' performance in practice learning. Objectives: The aim of this study is to investigate how self-rated interpersonal competence affects students' actual performance during clinical placement. Methods: 40 occupational therapy students from Hong Kong were recruited in this study. Prior to the clinical placement (level two or above), they completed an online survey that included the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS) measuring self-perceived competence in interpersonal communication. Near the end of their placement, the clinical educator rated students' performance with the Student Practice Evaluation Form - Revised edition (SPEF-R). The SPEF-R measures the eight core competency domains required for an entry-level occupational therapist. This study adopted the cross-sectional observational design. Pearson correlation and multiple regression are conducted to examine the relationship between students' interpersonal communication competence and their actual performance in clinical placement. Results: The ICCS total scores were significantly correlated with all the SPEF-R domains, with correlation coefficient r ranging from 0.39 to 0.51. The strongest association was found with the co-worker communication domain ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$), followed by the information gathering domain ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$). Regarding the ICCS total scores as the independent variable and the rating in various SPEF-R domains as the dependent variables in the multiple regression analyses, the interpersonal competence measures were identified as a significant predictor of the co-worker communication ($R^2 = 0.33$, $\beta = 0.014$, SE = 0.006, $p = 0.026$), information gathering ($R^2 = 0.27$, $\beta = 0.018$, SE = 0.007, $p = 0.011$), and service provision ($R^2 = 0.17$, $\beta = 0.017$, SE = 0.007, $p = 0.020$). Moreover, some specific communication skills appeared to be especially important to clinical practice. For example, immediacy, which means whether the students were readily approachable on all social occasions, correlated with all the SPEF-R domains, with r-values ranging from 0.45 to 0.33. Other sub-skills, such as empathy, interaction management, and supportiveness, were also found to be significantly correlated to most of the SPEF-R domains. Meanwhile, the ICCS scores correlated differently with the co-worker communication domain ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$) and the communication with the service user domain ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.05$). It suggested that different communication skill sets would be required for different interpersonal contexts within the workplace. Conclusion: Students' self-perceived interpersonal communication competence could predict their actual performance during clinical placement. Moreover, some specific communication skills were more important to the co-worker communication but not to the daily interaction with the service users. There were implications on how to better prepare the students to meet the future challenge upon graduation.

Keywords : interpersonal competence, clinical education, healthcare professional education, occupational therapy, occupational therapy students