

Opinion

This opinion piece outlines the personal reflections of a visually impaired student's experience throughout her studies, both at university and on placement. Its purpose is to raise awareness of students with disabilities in 2003, the European Year of Disabled People. By highlighting relevant literature and drawing on personal experience, some recommendations are made for the future. Government policy in the United Kingdom aims to remove the barriers to education and to subsequent employment for those with disabilities. This may not always be the case, as highlighted by this narrative.



The European Year of Disabled People

The Journey of a Visually Impaired Student becoming an Occupational Therapist

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Introduction

Attitudinal barriers are the hardest of all barriers to overcome. Laws are in place to ensure that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to gain an education, employment and public access (Employers' Forum on Disability 2002). However, without society being willing to uphold these laws, they are not worth the paper that they are written on (Hanebrink 1997). This opinion piece draws on the literature and on personal experience to raise awareness of the experience of students with disabilities in the European Year of Disabled People and to make some recommendations for the future.

Literature review

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 came into force in December 1996 (Employers' Forum on Disability 2002). It protects disabled people from discrimination in employment and requires employers to make 'reasonable adjustments'. If disabled people are at a disadvantage in relation to other employees, reasonable adjustments are a way of levelling the playing field for people with disabilities (Employers' Forum on Disability 2002). In addition, the employer is liable for the discriminatory actions of his or her staff, unless the employer can prove that he or she has taken reasonable practical steps to prevent staff from discriminating against others, such as providing disability awareness training.

The DDA has been amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (Employers' Forum on Disability 2002) and it is now unlawful for any educational institution to discriminate against disabled students. The College of Occupational Therapists (COT) has found that

occupational therapy schools have been responding positively to the DDA (Harrison and Chia 2003). The resource implications must be recognised if students with disabilities are going to have both the level of support and the equipment that they might need to facilitate their full participation in education (Harrison and Chia 2003).

A search of the literature showed a paucity in relation to the attitudes of occupational therapists towards students or occupational therapists with disabilities. Research by Elliott et al (1992) in the United States examined the attitudes of registered occupational therapists and certified occupational therapy assistants towards occupational therapists with a disability. They discovered that the attitudes varied depending on the type of disability. When the disability was associated with a mental illness or with AIDS, the attitudes were less sympathetic than when the disability was physically related.

In a survey of disabled physiotherapists (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy [CSP] 1996), 17% reported experiencing discrimination and harassment from other physiotherapists while 24% experienced these from managers. Similarly, the disabled physiotherapists in the Disability Network (a pressure group of disabled physiotherapists) of the CSP reported a lack of respect and awareness, teasing and a lack of regard for their views by non-disabled colleagues.

A further study by Velde (2000) indicated that disabled therapists viewed themselves as competent skilled therapists and did not believe their disability to be a barrier. However, the findings also indicated the challenges that the occupational therapists with disabilities had encountered. These challenges included the varying attitudes of supervisors about their competence and the need to recognise their own limitations, in order to adapt the various responsibilities that they faced as professionals, in

consultation with their supervisors. Hibberd (1998) described how she identified her own limitations and took the leading role in managing her deafness in a multidisciplinary team meeting.

Mutchnick and Blount's (1996) study, however, highlighted the attitudes of occupational therapy supervisors towards occupational therapy employees with a disability and found that the participants with training about the disability acts had more positive attitudes towards making reasonable accommodations than those without such training. This was certainly the case throughout my fieldwork placement.

The author's journey

I cannot read any font size less than 18 (even with my magnifying glasses) and I also have difficulty seeing things far away. This makes me visually impaired. I am very grateful for the sight that I do have and I am satisfied because, never having had full sight, what I do not know I will not miss.

I want to share my experiences as a visually impaired occupational therapy student by describing how my impairment has had an impact on my professional development throughout my education and training. Having overcome the barriers to achieving my potential as a student, I will be able to confront the barriers that I will undoubtedly have to meet in my professional career.

At university

I entered the field of occupational therapy fully aware that my visual impairment would make the whole experience more challenging. However, I did not foresee other people's reactions to my disability. I would often encounter concerns about my ability to succeed in my chosen profession.

When I commenced my degree in occupational therapy, I was excited and eager to work. I was not prepared for the workload that would be required; for example, the volume of reading required in a set period of time. Initially, there was no support system in place, which hindered my grades. As a visually impaired person, I need support and various aids to assist me. I am an able person and when my needs are accommodated I am able to be independent, which is something that most people take for granted. Most other students do not need a magnified screen to enable them to use the computer or to have text enlarged to A3 size to be able to read, nor do they need a note taker to take adequate notes. All of these tasks took a lot of time and energy and, at times, it became very difficult to manage a workload that seemed to take twice as long to complete as everyone else.

Regardless of all these issues, I was determined to become an occupational therapist, a professional person. So I kept going by overcoming setbacks and viewing them as part of my learning curve rather than as failures. If it had not been for the continual support of my peers in giving me encouragement and setting up study groups and for some staff at the university who, at all times, provided me with materials in a large font size and verbal encouragement, I

would definitely not be where I am today. Other students with disabilities may not have felt so confident or had the support that they needed in the first year to succeed and, therefore, may have left their course.

On placement

My experience of support during four fieldwork placements was varied. I suppose that if I am honest, I was a little naïve when I started my first placement. Before I disclosed my disability to my supervisor, I had made a positive and productive start which I thought was fantastic. I soon realised that my supervisor was unaware of my disability. Once she was told about it, her attitude changed to one of overprotection, making me feel on occasions more like a patient than a student.

On the other hand, another supervisor, who had been fully informed about my impairment, was open minded and flexible around my needs. This kind of support enabled me to work independently and to explore various techniques that I found worked best for my individual needs as a visually impaired student, without it being condescending and restrictive.

Another hindering factor at the fieldwork placements was not having the continual support from the university throughout the placement; for example, computer software such as JAWS and a support worker for reading the clinical notes. However, I found that by having a supportive team, I was able to overcome these problems.

Barnes (1996) highlighted three major strategies that he used at various stages of his life to cope as a visually impaired person: minimisation, compensation and openness. Throughout my experiences as a student, I found that compensation and openness enabled me to function independently; for example, compensating by using special software for reading and a dictaphone for recording information for the duration of an assessment. I found that being honest and open with regard to my impairment benefited me because there were times when I needed additional support with, for example, reading small print. In addition, being honest raised awareness.

I concluded from these experiences that informed supervisors and lecturers, together with adequate support, had a positive impact not only on my overall work performance but also on the work of my colleagues.

Looking to the future

This opinion piece has highlighted some of the difficulties encountered by occupational therapists and other health professionals with disabilities during their education and training and when practising professionally. This section identifies the steps to be taken in order to overcome these challenges.

Presently at the COT, there is a need for a national support network for occupational therapy students with a disability, because it will enable them to withstand the demands that their education and fieldwork placements put

upon them. This could be provided by a virtual support group through the COT website.

It is important that the COT provides a variety of resources, for example enlarged print sizes, Braille, audio recordings and CD-ROMs to visually impaired students. Currently, *Occupational Therapy News* can be requested to be in an enlarged print size but this service must also be met with other information resources. There are also guidelines in progress for occupational therapy supervisors for students with a disability, but awareness training is vital.

In universities, it is important to have any additional needs in place prior to the start of the course, such as computer software packages and note takers, because this would enable the individual to function independently. Throughout the course, there should be continuity in providing enlarged notes with all lectures, including those by visiting lecturers. *PowerPoint* would enable handouts to be obtained in a preferred font size. As mentioned above, it is now unlawful for any educational institution to discriminate against disabled students (Employers' Forum on Disability 2002).

Placements need to be found and students with varying levels of disability need to be accommodated. The placement officers also have to manage risk in the clinical area. In addition, it is necessary that, whilst on placement, the student has continuity in the support that he or she received at university, because this will enable an individual to function at his or her full capability.

At present in my university there is a support group for people with dyslexia, but none specified for visually impaired students. Ideally, a solution to this is that support groups for individual disabilities need to be formed, rather than a general disability support group. The individual's emotional needs are overlooked in comparison to physical needs; it is vital to have regular meetings with the disability officer to review the individual's current issues.

Occupational therapists in practice must receive training with regard to the DDA. Also within a clinical setting, it is important to have guidelines and training on working with colleagues with a disability, which would provide a supportive environment for both the therapists with disabilities and the non-disabled therapists. As stated, it is the responsibility of an employer to make reasonable adjustments (Employers' Forum on Disability 2002).

Occupational therapy students with an impairment or disability must be upfront and honest with regard to their disability of any nature and should disclose it to their practice educator. Coping with one's disability by oneself

does not raise awareness in society and it will not help future occupational therapy students with their disability.

Conclusion

This opinion piece aimed to raise awareness of the experience of students with disabilities through the journey of a visually impaired student. Awareness is the key to identifying and changing attitudes and, ultimately, to removing barriers. It is hoped that the points made will provoke thought, action and debate.

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