WHAT CAN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY OFFER THE YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE? A REVIEW OF A PILOT PLACEMENT OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY STUDENTS AT THE YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE (TOWNSVILLE/THURINGOWA)

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Abstract

The Youth Justice Services (YJS) were set-up in 1999 as part of the Queensland government’s response to juvenile crime. The overall aim of the YJS is to deal with the factors that contribute to young people offending, in a manner that will divert them from reinvolveinent in the justice system (Department of Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland 2000). Two third year occupational therapy (OT) students from James Cook University were given the opportunity to investigate the potential role of occupational therapy at the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa). During this placement, it was observed that a large proportion of the adolescent client group were not participating in structured occupations nor meeting a proportion of their needs and desires in a socially and legally acceptable and healthy fashion.

Occupational therapy (OT), by its very nature aims to enable people to engage in occupations in the areas of self maintenance, productivity (School, work), and play in order to facilitate health and wellbeing. Areas such as motivation, basic life skills (eg. budgeting, social relations and cooking), behaviour management, problem solving skills and self-identity are just some fundamental components of occupational fulfilments that were found to be lacking amongst the clientele at the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa). It is therefore suggested that occupational therapy can have a role within the justice system.
Introduction

As part of course requirements for Occupational Therapy at James Cook University, students are expected to complete 1000 hours of practical experience in role-established or role-emerging placements. An opportunity arose for students to complete a seven week placement at the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa). This was a role-emerging placement, meaning that no existing occupational therapy program existed at the service. The students’ role was therefore to identify, establish and implement (if time allowed) an occupational therapy role within the Youth Justice Service (Townsville/Thuringowa).

What is Occupational Therapy?

Occupational therapy, by its very nature, aims to enable clients to engage in occupations in the areas of self-maintenance, productivity (school, work) and play, in order to facilitate health and wellbeing (Rodger & Ziviani 1999; Turner, Johnson & Foster 1996). Occupational therapists ‘work with people to help address the functional difficulties that affect their daily lives’ (Turner, Johnson & Foster 1996, p. 2). It is a person’s roles and duties which give their life meaning and also occupies their time. Occupation is what people do, it is what defines our being. Difficulties in initiating and fulfilling occupational tasks are likely to cause a dissatisfaction with performance and an decreased ability to meet one’s physical, cultural and psychosocial needs causing one’s overall health to be affected (Chapparo & Ranka 1997).

The Role of Occupational Therapy in the Juvenile Justice System

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the existing role of occupational therapy in the justice system. It became apparent that there is, in fact, an obvious lack of literature denoting the role of occupational therapy in the justice system internationally. An article written by Farnworth (2000) details the time use and leisure occupations of young offenders in Melbourne, Australia. The results from this study highlight that young offenders do not occupy their time in the same way as non-offenders and this may in fact, contribute to their offending behaviour. Using a self-report method, it was reported that the young offenders engaged in passive leisure occupations fifty-seven (57%) of the time, and ten percent (10%) of their time was filled with productive occupations (eg. Paid employment). This time spent in passive leisure occupations was thirty percent (30%) higher than for the average Australian adolescent.

The young offenders most often engaged in less structured occupational activities (such as ‘time-out leisure’ – watching television, listening to music) which may not contribute to their health and wellbeing (especially mental health (Passmore, cited in Farnworth 2000, p. 317)), and could actually negatively impact on their future development of skills for independent living (Farnworth 2000, p. 323). Extensive engagement in passive leisure occupations may be concerning, because it id done at the expense of engagement in achievement leisure or productive occupations. Long-term effects of occupational repetition (watching television at the exclusion of other occupations), could potentially affect cognitive, physical and emotional growth and development from adolescence to adulthood.

Passmore (cited in Farnworth 2000, p. 322) agrees that achievement and social leisure occupations may lay foundations for supporting a range of occupational roles. A research project undertaken by Hoge, Andrews and Lescheid (cited in Farnworth 2000, p. 322) indicates “that effective use of leisure time is one factor that protects young offenders from engaging in criminal activities.” These results may suggest that occupation-based intervention with juvenile offenders would be appropriate to assist clients to develop effective use of time in order to maintain health and wellbeing at a level desired by the clients.
Meyer (cited in Farnworth 2000, p. 315) suggests that by providing opportunities for engagement in daily occupations (self-care, work, leisure and rest), a person should be able to fulfil personal interests and meet needs and desires for their physical and psychological wellbeing. The society we live in states that we must do this legally. Occupational therapy may provide services/programs/referrals which empower clients to meet their needs and ‘achieve what they want’ in a safe, just, effective and culturally-appropriate manner. Occupational therapy aims to help people to develop ways to use their time in balanced and meaningful ways in order to achieve satisfaction with lifestyle choices.

It could be suggested that the client group at the YJS are not fulfilling occupations in a socially acceptable manner, or may have difficulty coping with environmental demands. One of the goals of the YJS is to reintegrate individuals into the community. The review suggests that occupational therapy can aid in this transition by assisting individuals to deal with environmental demands and occupational requirements.

**The Potential Role for Occupational Therapy at the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa)**

Identification of potential areas of occupational therapy involvement was the aim of the seven week role-emerging placement at the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa). Participation in normal workplace activities, interactions with YJS staff, visits to associated services, involvement with the client group, research on related topics and integration of occupational therapy theory with the daily experiences and observations assisted in the development of four perceived areas of possible involvement. It must be highlighted that the following ideas were produced by two third year occupational therapy student over a seven week period, and the role of this profession in the youth justice system may benefit from further exploration. The four identified areas will be briefly discussed below.

1) Identification of Youth’s Needs, Desires, Abilities and Motivations
2) Justification of Service Provision
3) Potential Programs/Resources
4) Development of a Team Approach

1) **Identification of Youth’s Needs, Desires, Abilities and Motivations**

Occupational therapy focuses on an individual’s *needs, desires, abilities and motivations* as a basis for intervention, with the intention of making the intervention more purposeful and relevant to that individual (Chapparo & Ranka 1997).

Occupational therapy by its very nature is a ‘hands-on’ profession. At the YJS a therapist/student (as part of the service delivery team) could dedicate time to building rapport with a client in order to identify and explore the young person’s needs, desires, abilities and motivations, through the use of occupation as a tool for therapy. Once such factors have been identified, a program could be developed with that particular client to enable them to engage in meaningful occupations whilst completing their court orders. With programs specifically targeting individuals’ needs, evidence suggests that they are more likely to develop skills to function independently in the community without reverting to criminal behaviour (Farnworth 2000).
2) Justification of Service Provision

Occupational therapy is a relatively young profession, and to date, its involvement in the justice system is limited. Should occupational therapy (at either a student level or professional level) be incorporated into the YJS, it would be necessary to justify the effectiveness of this profession in such a unique setting. All activities must have a therapeutic purpose and be meaningful to the individual/group involved. This is a core belief within occupational therapy. Three key manners by which the effectiveness of occupational therapy within the YJS could be justified and communicated include:

I. The completion of a program proposal/outline, including goals, strategies, and measurable evaluation methods for all programs conducted by an occupational therapist at the YJS. The effectiveness of a number of programs could then be determined to identify the value of an OT within this setting, and to identify the need for improvement in any areas.

II. Presenting in-services detailing the purpose of interventions, approaches used during interventions, and professional models used to guide practice could be conducted within the department, to occupational therapy students (as a means to promote OT involvement in the justice system), and to fellow community/government agencies. Such a strategy would aim to promote a greater understanding of the role of occupational therapy in the justice system.

III. The experiences of occupational therapists (at a student or professional level) within the justice system could be publicised through the submission of papers to professional journals or through presentation of papers at professional conferences.

3) Occupational Therapy Input into Programs/Resources

Over the course of the seven week placement, a few program ideas and resource suggestions were identified that we, as students, felt could benefit the clientele at the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa).

- A ‘Needs’ Questionnaire

An occupational therapist/student may find that a questionnaire is a valuable tool to form an overview of the self-perceived needs and desires of the current client group at the YJS, Townsville/Thuringowa. The results from this questionnaire, completed by the client group, may be used for relevant program development.

- A Resource Directory

It may be useful to create an informative community directory which could be utilised by clients and staff. Such a directory would include brochures and/or information from useful community agencies in the Townsville/Thuringowa region giving basic details of the services and how to contact them. An aim of the YJS is to promote integration into the community by utilising existing services so that they may learn to fulfil needs and desires.

In order to enable clients to live in a safe, healthy and independent manner, it would be useful to assist them to develop skills which will allow them to become self-sufficient and responsible for meeting their own needs and desires. This may involve learning how to use the directory with the assistance of staff at the YJS.
• Life Skills Program

Life skills can be considered those activities which enable one to live independently in the community. Being able to fulfil needs and desires in a safe, legal and appropriate manner is a potential goal for this client group and an appropriate area of intervention by occupational therapists. It is understood that some life skills are currently being addressed at the YJS, however, it may be appropriate to develop a structured program/plan in order to address this need in a consistent and effective manner for each individual.

It has been observed that a practical approach (as opposed to didactic teaching) would be most appropriate to assist clients to develop life skills. The following are areas that may be considered in this program.

- Managing Finances (budgeting, source of income)
- Grocery Shopping
- Cooking* and Nutrition
- Household Management
- Accessing Community Services (transport, health services, etc.)
- Childcare (ante-natal, post-natal and beyond; potentially addressing issues impacting on both parents)
- Grooming/Personal Care
- Time Management / Goal Setting
- Cognitive Skills Development (eg. problem solving, effective coping mechanisms, behaviour management, consequences of actions, etc.)

* Transition Programs
- between Cleveland Youth Detention Centre and the Youth Justice Service
- between the Youth Justice Service and the community

There is a need to support individuals to meet their personal interests (eg. leisure opportunities and desires) as well as their physical, psychological and socio-cultural needs in the community (Meyer cited in Farnworth 1999, p.315). The support that individuals are offered at the YJS/Cleveland does not appear to concentrate on these needs and thus an area for potential program development is evident. It is an important skill to be able to function independently in the community. Occupational therapy can assist people to develop skills which enable them to fulfil occupational requirements (work, leisure/play, self-care and rest) in a socially-acceptable, self-rewarding and health promotive manner.

* Transition programs could include:
- life skills components (eg. cooking, budgeting, diet (healthy foods))
- community access components (eg. using a flexi teller, public transport, accessing health services)
- time-tabling/organisation components
- structured leisure opportunities
- establishing community supports/links
- goal-setting/priority making skills
- finding accommodation, employment/education components

Activities in such a program would need to be tailored to meet the needs of the individuals involved. Various aspects of the program could be graded, eg. amount of supervision/support, community visits, difficulty of task, duration of sessions etc..
An Increase in Structured Occupation

In a study by Farnworth (2000), it was suggested that young offenders engage in a high proportion of unstructured occupations, and that this factor could affect their health and wellbeing and have a negative impact on their future development of skills for independent living. It appears that many of the clients at the YJS would benefit from a consistent and structured timetable, regarding the events that they wish to and/or are required to engage in while under the YJS jurisdiction.

A structured environment is important for occupational fulfilment. As is an ability to alter and transact with one’s environment in order to facilitate occupational performance. A consistent and culturally appropriate environment is likely to support individuals in developing independent living skills, developing responsibility and tools to cope with change, as well as optimally enhancing their own health and wellbeing.

4) Development of a Team Approach

There would be potential benefits from working in a department that utilises the skills of a variety of professionals. It would be beneficial to establish an open communication plan amongst staff, whereby various members of the team could discuss their interactions with a particular individual on a consistent basis. Formal goals and strategies could be identified which incorporate the skills of all team members and the client in order to meet his or her needs. The goals and strategies should be negotiated between the team and the client in order to keep with the perspective that meaningful activity promotes occupational performance.

Conclusions

Our role, as two third year occupational therapy students entering the Youth Justice Service (Townsville/Thuringowa), in a role emerging capacity, was to identify, establish and if possible implement an occupational therapy role within this setting. Our time frame did not enable the implementation phase to occur, however, through our observations and experiences it was apparent that an occupational therapy perspective could contribute to the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa). From our observations, it was assumed very likely that the client group were not partaking in a great deal of structured occupation, as were their peers who were attending school, or who were working. It was apparent that the majority of the clients were meeting their basic needs, however, this was not necessarily occurring in a socially acceptable nor healthy fashion.

Based on these experiences and integration of occupational therapy theory, it was perceived that the role of an occupational therapist within this setting would be to work with individuals to empower them to meet their occupational desires in a legal and health-promotive manner. Potential areas which may be covered include exploring inter and intra personal issues, time management, community access, self-care activities, and all components of occupational fulfilment. All intervention would be based on a premise that “a relationship exists between balanced, purposeful and varied use of time and a person’s health and wellbeing” (Meyer, cited in Farnworth 2000, p. 315). This occupational therapy focus could compliment the existing professional perspective’s within the YJS (Townsville/Thuringowa) and assist in meeting the aim of the service. ‘To deal with the factors that contribute to young people offending, in a manner that will divert them from reinvolvement in the justice system’ (Department of Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland 2000). There is extreme value in ‘doing’ and ‘being’ – and it is identified that occupational therapy has a very important role in enabling clients to meet their needs and partake in self-motivating occupations, without breaking the law, or damaging self or others.
References


