

Students' experiences of role-emerging placement for weight management in Cyprus. An opportunity to expand the professional identity locally.

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Conclusion

This study illustrates that participation in a role-emerging placement offered occupational therapy students opportunities for professional growth, identity development, and engagement with non-traditional practice.

While students encountered personal, educational, and systemic challenges, they also experienced increased confidence, adaptability, and a broader understanding of occupational therapy's potential in health promotion and community care.

Background

Role-emerging placements offer occupational therapy students opportunities to practice in non-traditional settings where established occupational therapy roles may be limited or absent.

In Cyprus, health promotion with an emphasis on obesity prevention and management represent emerging areas of practice with increasing public health relevance, yet minimal occupational therapy presence.

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of occupational therapy undergraduate students while participating in the design and implementation of a role-emerging clinical placement focusing on addressing obesity in Cyprus.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used, with semi-structured interviews conducted with three cohort of students engaged in a 10-week placement for obesity prevention and management.

Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis

Study Context

In Cyprus, occupational therapy practice remains largely concentrated in traditional settings, with minimal integration into health promotion and prevention services. Final-year students are therefore expected to engage in identifying and developing role-emerging occupational therapy placements.

Obesity and overweight are significant public health concerns in Cyprus: recent national data indicate around 17 % of adults are obese and nearly half are overweight, while childhood overweight and obesity remain high, with rates exceeding 20 % among 6–9-year-olds based on COSI surveillance.

Developed Projects

During their placements, participants contributed to the development and implementation of three interventions across different levels of prevention

Grow Active

A 10-week preschool program designed to enhance children's skills and knowledge, strengthen the school's physical and social environment, and engage parents in promoting physical activity, healthy eating habits, sleep routines, and reduced screen time.

Healthy Living

A 10-week community-based program for adults with mild intellectual disability. The aim was to develop skills around health management and empower the administration of the local day-center, around health promotion.

Pathway to Wellness

A six-month lifestyle intervention grounded in occupational science and behavior change theories, aiming to support the development of new habits related to physical activity and diet within a peer-supportive context.

Findings

Analysis of the data resulted in four themes that capture students' lived experiences. Together, these themes reflect how students navigated the demands of creating and delivering a new service, redefined their understanding of occupational therapy, developed professional competencies in uncertain contexts, and engaged with the opportunities and constraints of the Cypriot setting.

Experiencing an incubator

Through active involvement in service design students moved beyond traditional trainee roles and engaged in authentic service creation.

Professional identity beyond rehabilitation

Students reported a broader understanding of occupational therapy as a profession capable of addressing complex, non-medicalized health challenges. This shift contributed to greater professional confidence and an expanded sense of what occupational therapists can offer.

Confidence over uncertain and evolving health systems

Students described learning to manage uncertainty, make informed decisions in real time, and integrate evidence into practice, skills that are increasingly essential in contemporary and evolving health systems.

Leveraging education to challenge systemic barriers.

While students acknowledged limited employment opportunities related to obesity and health promotion in Cyprus, they also viewed education as a critical lever for long-term change. Emerging roles during training was perceived as essential for developing future practitioners capable of challenging existing systems and advocating for expanded occupational therapy roles

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