

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS



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A fieldwork placement at Amar Seva Sangam: A “just-right” experience in community-based program development

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In 2014, I had the pleasure of completing a fieldwork placement in a picturesque 30-acre property surrounded by the Western Ghats mountain range. Nestled in the heart of rural Ayikudi in southern India, the campus of Amar Seva Sangam (ASSA) is lively and unique. Aromas of jasmine and incense fill the humid air, and clouds float along the majestic peaks. Resounding Hindu mantras pierce the silence early in the morning and intertwine with ASSA’s quiet prayer for equality, carried in the hearts of its people. The atmosphere is innately inspiring, for ASSA aims to empower people with physical and mental health challenges—as individuals and as a collective—to be active agents of change who can guide the population of South India toward becoming a more inclusive society. A self-proclaimed “valley for the disabled,” the establishment is full of colourful buildings that bustle with people of diverse abilities who work together to make in-house rehabilitation and community outreach services available to the rural villages of Tirunelveli district (Krishna, 2003). In 2013-2014 alone, ASSA provided services to over 800 villages, influencing the lives of more than 14,000 individuals living with disability (ASSA, 2014). ASSA aspires to play the role of an “enabling agent” for equality in society (ASSA, 2014, p.7), a role that greatly mirrors that of the occupational therapist in “enabling a just and inclusive society,” as described by Townsend and Polatajko (2013, p. 380). This orientation makes ASSA a highly appropriate context in which to do role-emerging occupational therapy work. Indeed, ASSA offers a tremendously valuable experience for therapists and students interested in improving their program development skills in the context of rural, community-based fieldwork. The aim of this article is to discuss this program development opportunity by sharing a specific project that I worked on during my fieldwork experience.

Overall placement structure

Two of my peers (another student occupational therapist and a student physiotherapist) and I ventured to Ayikudi feeling excited and uncertain. Our uncertainty was primarily due to our anticipation of the challenges typically associated with community-based placements (CBP) and role-emerging placements. Gat and Ratzon (2014) described CBPs as “unique, valuable and challenging practice experiences for students and educators” (p. e48) because students work—individually and collaboratively—through the complexities inherent in the process of delineating and implementing occupational therapy programs. As well, our project

felt challenging because the role-emerging nature of the placement meant that we worked with an off-site supervisor to establish a program that met the needs of the community (Thew, Hargreaves, & Cronin-Davis, 2008). Our occupational therapist supervisor—who provided virtual support from Ottawa—encouraged us to adopt a knowledge translation approach that focused on meeting facility-wide needs in a sustainable manner. After consulting with leaders at ASSA, three major projects subsequently emerged: (1) a two-day workshop to inform staff and clients on the spinal cord injury unit about pressure sore prevention and intervention, (2) a one-day workshop to show caregivers and teachers how to provide supportive positioning using readily available materials for children living with cerebral palsy and (3) a six-week program to educate elementary school teachers about designing classroom sensory-related interventions for children with developmental disabilities. The focus of this article will be on the third project.

Program development: Initial stages

Prior to the start of the placement, teachers at Sangamam School (on site at ASSA) had become increasingly concerned about the poor academic performance of their students. Children who attend this school are 5-12 years of age and are living with autism spectrum disorders and/or developmental delays. The teachers had learned from previous volunteers that academic performance may be impacted by problems with sensory processing. They did not, however, understand how these problems affected academic performance, or how to mitigate their effects. My supervisor and ASSA’s head physiotherapist identified this as an area of potential growth, which was imperative to the development process because introducing a program that is meaningful to the target population is critical to ensuring its sustainability (Scaffa, 2001).

Next, in the process of assessing stakeholder needs, preliminary discussions with my supervisor emphasized the importance of considering time constraints, limited resources, cultural differences and language barriers. Because the placement was only eight weeks long, and because the students did not speak English, we determined that working with them on an individual basis would not be effective. Instead, we decided that it would be more sustainable to offer teachers an educational program that would empower them to autonomously address their students’ basic sensory needs long after the end of the placement.

Program development: Connecting stakeholders and establishing goals

Working in an international role-emerging CBP was particularly enjoyable because of its dynamic nature. In addition to sharpening critical thinking skills, creating community-wide solutions allows students to exercise collaboration, consultation, leadership and management skills, as well as practice being mindful of the cultural needs of a group (Gat & Ratzon, 2014; Thew et al., 2008). Advancing a high quality program required building alliances among stakeholders and resources, including ASSA staff, who communicated their needs and inspired program goals; a McGill University professor, who helped formulate the intervention by drawing on her clinical experience and relating current evidence to practice; and my supervisor, who used her expertise in rural and remote practice to propose strategies that facilitated maximal use of limited resources and promoted program sustainability. My role was to organize on-campus and virtual meetings that connected and engaged stakeholders and resources, which eventually generated an agreed-upon, culturally relevant program to realistically address Sangamam School's needs. Program objectives included familiarizing teachers with the basic principles of sensory modulation and developing their ability to: (1) observe and identify signs of non-optimal modulation affecting students'—as well as teachers'—performance in the classroom, (2) determine sensory activities appropriate for use in the classroom, (3) recognize classroom environmental elements contributing to modulation problems and (4) pinpoint beneficial environmental modifications for optimal student and teacher performance. The ultimate goal was to cultivate teachers' skillfulness in these areas so they could apply this new knowledge long after the fieldwork placement had ended.

Program development: Introducing and adapting the Alert Program®

Williams & Shellenberger's (1996) Alert Program® (AP) explains sensory modulation concepts by relating levels of alertness to the speed of a car engine: "low," "high" and "just right." Teachers can use the program to learn how to identify strategies that change or maintain students' levels of alertness. Occupational therapists commonly use the AP with students with sensory processing problems (Hui, 2014), as the literature has revealed that it is effective in improving sensory processing skills, self-regulation, behavioural management and executive functioning (e.g., Cobb, Fitzgerald, & Lanigan-O'Keefe, 2014; Wells, Chasnoff, Schmidt, Telford, & Schwartz, 2012). Although the majority of the evidence for the AP originates from the United States, the program's benefits have also been demonstrated with Canadian, English, Irish, Australian and Maltese populations (TherapyWorks, Inc., 2015), suggesting that it is applicable across various—albeit largely Western—cultures. To align the AP better with the culture and context of South India, examples of South Indian activities and environments were used in explanations of sensory processing principles. This teaching strategy was augmented by discussions that encouraged teachers to reflect on their daily routines and how different activities and settings affected their levels of alertness. One teacher, for example, was surprised to discover

that listening to Hindu prayers at the temple helped regulate her "engine" level in the morning. Another teacher noted a high "engine" level after riding her scooter to work, zipping through the busy, narrow streets. She began considering ways to modulate this level before entering the classroom.

Considering that English is these teachers' second language, the program was simplified so as to avoid overwhelming them with theoretical principles and unfamiliar vocabulary. While all senses were examined in initial teaching sessions and when analyzing student observations, in-class activities and interventions were designed with a focus on targeting primarily the proprioceptive system. Our intent was that, over time, future student occupational therapist cohorts would work with the teachers on designing interventions that revolved around the other senses—one at a time—with each successive year. Teachers were encouraged to think of whole-body proprioceptive activities (e.g., pushing against the wall, moving books, etc.) when planning interventions, because it was felt that they would cater best to the varying sensory needs of a large group of students. These kinds of activities can have calming and alerting effects, and are unlikely to overload the nervous system (Williams & Shellenberger, 1996). Regarding sustainable environmental strategies, teachers were given the opportunity to implement modifications that they felt would balance auditory and visual stimuli in the classrooms. Cluttered classrooms were cleared, blackboard frames were covered with red tape, and "quiet corners" decorated with calming colours, pillows and blankets, were created in each classroom. The school was also provided with vendor information for obtaining headphones to add to the quiet corners.

Due to language barriers, and to help teachers better understand the nature of sensory strategies used in occupational therapy, they were invited to engage in activities that facilitated experiential learning—a recursive process of "experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting" (Kolb & Kolb, 2015, p. 194). Reflective exercises were used to foster teachers' understanding of how their own behaviours and activity choices represented their varying preferences and reactions to sensory input. This helped clarify the relationship between sensory processing profiles and unconscious self-regulating behaviors. Experiential learning was promoted further through random visits that were made throughout the day to ask teachers to identify their "engine levels" by noticing bodily sensations, current behaviours and environmental elements. Additionally, program classes, run after teachers' working hours, would typically begin with a proprioceptive group activity. This was intended to optimize teachers' learning by addressing their often-reported "low" engine levels, and to facilitate teachers' appreciation of what it might be like for their students who need sensory modulation to be able to focus in class.

Other program activities focused on strengthening teachers' reasoning skills related to sensory processing, through active practice. During two activities, teachers were asked to vocalize (in real time) changes to students' engine levels as evidenced by their behaviours. Discussion sessions followed, to facilitate reflection and allow the teachers to articulate their reasoning. Finally, teachers were challenged to independently tailor sensory strategies for three of their students. This step was designed to

offer teachers a chance to exercise their developing skills, and, together with the constructive feedback that followed, cultivate teachers' sense of competency in tailoring and implementing strategies independently.

Eliciting experiential learning was emphasized in our program plan, not only because it has been shown to promote students' confidence in their therapeutic skills, decision-making abilities and autonomy (Smith, Emmett, & Woods, 2008), but also to promote sustainability. Our hope was that by allowing teachers to directly experience the effects of simple sensory strategies, teachers would gain confidence in their use and become intrinsically motivated to continue using them after we had left. Indeed, anticipation of positive outcomes has been shown to improve teachers' perceptions about the acceptability of an intervention program, and program acceptability has been identified as one of the four "essential ingredients" that characterize sustainable classroom-based programs (Han & Weiss, 2005, p. 672). Other elements we considered included ensuring compatibility of the program with teachers' own beliefs, cultivating teachers' self-efficacy and preventing burnout (Han & Weiss, 2005). Because the school was short staffed, the adaptations mentioned above aimed at making the program manageable so as to avert teacher burnout and discouragement.

Final reflections

CBPs develop student occupational therapists' ability to develop community-based occupational therapy programs (Gat & Ratzon, 2014). This skill development and the role-emerging nature of my experience in India certainly prepared me for the job in which I am currently working. My transition into my position in Merritt, BC, also necessitated defining an occupational therapy role to meet the community's needs. This process was easier than it might have been otherwise because I had a strong foundation in role-emerging, community-based practice. Although training with virtual supervision can be intimidating, it also facilitates the development of a strong professional identity (Wood, 2005), and it improves students' cultural competence and perceptions of personal responsibility (Gat & Ratzon, 2014). My time at ASSA nurtured my resilience and ability to adapt to atypical settings, making it a pivotal milestone in my professional journey.

Update on ASSA

As of 2016, ASSA now collaborates with seven Canadian universities that send students for fieldwork placements throughout the academic year. Canadian occupational therapists now travel to ASSA to provide volunteer occupational therapy services and to supervise students in person. To learn more about ASSA and its volunteer program, contact Dinesh Krishna at: dkrish6@gmail.com

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