

Sensory Integration

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The Importance of Mentoring for the Professional Involvement of Therapists Specializing in Ayres Sensory Integration®

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Mentoring, a term that originated with Greek literature, has been defined as a reciprocal, enabling relationship that promotes growth and development of the mentee (Milner & Bossers, 2005; Rose, 2005; Scheerer, 2007; Schemm & Bross, 1995). Generally, this relationship focuses specifically on development of the career of the mentee. The mentoring relationship serves multiple functions and may occur in many forms, providing role modeling, support and encouragement, socialization to the culture, advocacy, and perhaps even protection. Mentors also provide training, advice, and guidance. Mentoring may occur formally or informally, and the culture of the organization in which the relationship occurs may affect the nature of the relationship significantly. Formal mentoring programs have been popular in the business world during the past decades but more recently have entered the field of health care, specifically allied health.

There is little literature in the field of occupational therapy regarding the importance of mentoring for development of clinical practice, professional development, and leadership in the field (Milner & Bossers, 2005; Paul, Stein, Ottenbacher, & Lu, 2002; Scheerer, 2007; Scheerer, Drumheller, & Mehbod-Owens, 2004; Schemm & Bross, 1995). Published research suggests that mentoring is an important part of research productivity of junior occupational therapy academicians (Case-Smith, 1999; Paul et al., 2002) and practitioners in leadership positions (Schemm & Bross, 1995).

Although occupational therapists are required to complete two 3-month fieldwork experiences with direct clinical supervision, the level of mentorship received will vary based on the setting and the inclinations of the supervisor and student. Even with optimal fieldwork experiences, new graduates require a significant amount of further learning and clinical mentoring to become experts in practice, which is particularly true of specialty areas of practice such as occupational therapy using the Ayres Sensory Integration® approach. Although mentorship likely will affect clinical skills positively, additional benefits may not have been examined yet.

As part of a doctoral-level course in qualitative research, a group of 16 occupational therapists were interviewed about the factors relating to their professional involvement. This article discusses the findings from a small subgroup of expert clinicians who spe-

cialize in Ayres Sensory Integration. The purpose of the interviews with this particular group was to examine the factors that led these American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) volunteers, researchers, and therapists to make significant contributions to the professional development of younger practitioners through their teaching of continuing education courses and their writing for publication.

Method

Of the 16 respondents, 6 had been directly mentored by Dr. A. Jean Ayres, the founder of sensory integration intervention approaches. These 6 respondents were all women over 40 years of age who work in pediatric practice, are married with children, and have been occupational therapists for their entire careers. All names have been changed to protect the respondents' identities, and certain demographic information that might breach confidentiality has been left out.

The interviews were completed by telephone and recorded. All respondents were aware of and gave verbal consent to being tape recorded. In addition, careful notes were taken during each interview. All interviews were transcribed by the author and then entered into Atlas.ti software (www.atlasti.com) for analysis. The interviews were coded using Atlas.ti with the initial coding strategy developed from the preliminary model. To assist in the development of themes and patterns, a variety of matrices were created.

Results

The individual interviews suggested a variety of themes and highlighted both the individual nature of therapists' relationship with their profession and the interconnectedness or balance between professional involvement and the various supports and barriers. Respondents mentioned their involvement in presenting at conferences; speaking at seminars; writing for newsletters, journals, or textbooks; volunteering for national or state professional organizations; participating in clinical research; and maintaining their membership in national and state organizations. Many mentioned volunteering to do local in-services for community organizations or volunteering for causes that were important to them (e.g., multiple sclerosis, autism, Special Olympics). Each spoke of the importance of the mentoring they received, and the importance they attributed

to mentoring suggests that the occupational therapy profession must implement a more formal procedure of mentoring in specialty practice in occupational therapy.

Mentoring for Professional Involvement

Mentors were identified as having multiple influences on the professional involvement of the respondents and considered “match-makers” who helped respondents to find the right activities that were suited for their skills and abilities and gave them confidence to attempt the new activities. Once this match was accomplished, many of the respondents mentioned that the mentor “opened the doors” to opportunities for engagement in the new activities. Mentors also instilled a strong attitude regarding the importance of the profession and the importance of professional involvement, such as in local, state, or national organizations. Along with this attitude of professionalism, the respondents reported feeling fortunate to have been mentored by more experienced therapists and identified feelings of responsibility to “pay it forward” by helping newer practitioners to engage in similar mentoring experiences.

Mentor as Matchmaker

In examining the statements about mentors, one quality of a good mentor clearly stood out. The majority of the respondents mentioned that their mentor was able to determine their strengths and find the right match for them in terms of how to proceed in their career. “Mentoring helps people find their match” was a frequently reported idea, and this idea of mentor as matchmaker was fairly consistent across multiple respondents. However, many of the respondents specifically highlighted Dr. Ayres as a “master mentor” and someone who was incredibly adept at this. For example, Tracy said, “One of the things [Dr. Ayres] was so good at was being so observant and able to see the abilities in people, pull out the skills of people. Give people the right jobs.” Not only do good mentors help practitioners to find the right match for their skills, but also instill confidence in the mentee, allowing him or her to feel comfortable to try the new area. One respondent, Tina, said that mentors

show you your potential. They're huge in that sense. I think for me, my mentors let me see what I knew and what I could do. It was an affirmation, not a revelation. They give you confidence that you can do it; it's just support.

There were a few comments that helped to flesh out the importance of mentoring over and above an individual's personality and history. For example, one respondent, Sarah, was asked whether she had always been *driven*—a word she used—or did this trait develop later in her life. She answered,

No, I don't think that anyone who knew me in my younger days would say I was driven...I think that kicked in later....[My first mentor] really hooked me, and then Dr. Ayres just stole my heart. I never really cared about being the best or the best known, I wasn't driven in that way. The work drives me.

Opening of Doors

For many of the respondents, their current professional involvement arose directly from opportunities gained through the mentoring experience. Many spoke of the opening of doors, or of making connections through mentoring, without which they would have been unable to pursue their current activities. Tracy said,

I truly wouldn't be doing what I am doing if I hadn't had [my mentor] bringing me along. There are a lot of doors that open because [the mentors] introduce you to someone who introduces you to someone. And because your mentor has confidence in your abilities, that gives these other people confidence in your abilities, and that gets your foot in the door, and then you can show what you can do on your own. Then you get known for your own abilities. I look at it as very much a growth process.

Jesse echoed these sentiments, saying, “[Mentoring] directly influenced my career. The mentoring opened up doors—being able to teach at [a school] and to present at a conference.”

Pay It Forward

For the respondents who had experienced strong mentoring, many made some statement regarding their personal commitment to the profession of occupational therapy as a vocation or calling. Additionally, they described their mentoring experience as something they cherished and now feel called to provide for others in return. For example, Linda said, “All along my career, people have walked across my path to help me get to the next place, so I feel I need to give back. That's why I want to teach and be involved with the profession as a whole.” Tina, who is highly professionally involved and had strong mentoring, said,

I always felt really lucky to work with both [of my mentors]....I was blessed, and I need to help others have these opportunities. I never took it for granted. I had exceptional experience, and now I have to give back.

Tina also specifically mentioned the mind-set created by the strong mentoring of those who were professionally involved and how that mind-set then leads to professionalism:

I was mentored by [two mentors], and both were influential in the way I viewed being a professional. I learned respect for the profession—what it takes to make a commitment as a professional—that it isn't just daily work. Those two clearly demonstrated commitment and consistently worked at such a level. They set a high bar. They achieved. Being around it, you feel you have to do something. Their influence creates a mind-set that working this way is a given. You have a responsibility beyond your employment, and you're not paid for a good portion of it.

Cindy also mentioned the importance her mentoring experience had in her professional involvement now:

Jean Ayres's mentoring in terms of education influenced me....I want to keep the integrity of her work. It is so brilliant and simple, and I am passionate about maintaining the integrity of this work. She was so committed to it, and now I am as well.

The highly involved individuals in this group of respondents consistently stated that their involvement occurred because there was work that needed to be done, and they believed that it was part of their professional responsibility to help do it. For example, when asked about why she does the things she does, Tracy said,

Someone needs to be the people who push to further things in our profession, and I guess I have enough drive and desire and passion about what I do to be one of them, or at least try to be. I guess also that all these are things you should do to be a good professional... part of what makes the difference between being a 9-to-5 technical worker and being a professional.

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Discussion

Implications

Although the experts in Ayres Sensory Integration have long held the belief that mentoring is crucial for using Ayres's theory in practice (Sensory Integration Global Network, 2009), the results from this project suggest the importance of mentoring for enhancing *attitudes* of professionalism and professional commitment. Other research specifically on mentoring programs has found similar results in terms of fostering professionalism (Milner & Bossers, 2005; Scheerer, 2007; Scheerer et al., 2004; Schemm & Bross, 1995). What this project adds is that, according to the respondents, there is a further relationship between *attitude* and *actual participation* in professional activities. This important link between attitude and action has been noted previously in one study of membership in professional associations (Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000). The present project suggests that generating greater attitudes of professional commitment may in turn lead to greater overall professional involvement and that one way to generate that attitude may be through mentoring. Further, many of the respondents overcame multiple barriers to involvement because of their will to do so, and this will seemed to come at least in part from the mentoring they received.

The importance of strong mentoring suggests the necessity of current professional leaders to mentor others. In addition, the specific qualities reported to be important, such as mentor as matchmaker, suggest mechanisms for mentors to improve their mentoring skills. Because occupational therapy practitioners are skilled in activity analysis, it should not be a large leap to adapt activity analysis to the matching of professional activities to newer or less experienced occupational therapy practitioners in order to assist them in their professional development. According to this project, good mentors are those who help the mentee to gain confidence. This skill also can be learned and practiced. Further, good mentors open doors, and this function requires a professional social network that provides for many doors of opportunity. Individuals interested in mentoring others should strive to strengthen and increase their professional network to provide a range of opportunities for the practitioners being mentored. One cannot be a matchmaker if there are no opportunities for matching.

Based on both interview responses and observations that suggest the importance of relationships in promoting professional involvement, AOTA may be able to assist in this endeavor by creating even more opportunities for networking and relationship building at professional events. Additional relationship building events could serve two purposes: generating networks for mentors to provide opportunities for activities and creating a professional community for newer practitioners to feel a part of. A good example of an event already being held by AOTA is the Special Interest Sections (SISs) networking reception convened at the Annual Conference & Expo. In addition, the new AOTA Emerging Leaders Development Program provides leadership training and ongoing mentorship as well as identifies needs for service within AOTA and matches those opportunities with each participant's area of interest. Perhaps AOTA could expand these programs and events.

Limitations and Future Directions

Typically, common critiques of qualitative projects include the potential for bias and the inability to generalize the results. For the information reported in this article, one area that must be considered a limitation is the sampling, which included a group of women who were highly involved and strongly mentored. Although balanced with less involved and less mentored individuals as the project moved forward, there still may be a bias toward

the importance of mentoring for professional involvement. What is needed is the consideration of practitioners who are highly involved who have not had any mentoring. Occupational therapy practitioners in this situation can be sought out for future inclusion. The results from this initial project require confirmation with the larger community of occupational therapy practitioners. To expand to a larger and more varied sample of occupational therapy practitioners, the author will develop a survey instrument and examine the predictors of professional involvement through regression analysis. Appropriate measures will need to be created in order to proceed with quantitative analysis of these concepts with larger samples of practitioners.

Additional opportunities are available for those involved in the clinical mentoring of therapists using the Ayres Sensory Integration approach. Programs for clinical mentoring already exist in California, Denver, and near Boston (see Appendix for more information about these programs and how to receive clinical mentoring). Although these programs are focused on providing mentoring in using sensory integration strategies in practice, they also occasionally offer mentoring in research. Perhaps these programs could be expanded in some way or serve as models for creating additional programs that aim to assist occupational therapy practitioners in developing professional skills, becoming involved in professional organizations and activities, and improving their clinical skills in this realm.

Conclusion

For occupational therapy to flourish, the profession requires extensive volunteerism at multiple levels. The state and national associations need volunteers to function (AOTA, 2010). For less experienced occupational therapy practitioners to learn and grow, the profession needs individuals to mentor fieldwork students, present at local and national conferences, and impart their knowledge through continuing education opportunities. AOTA needs writers for its publications who are willing to share their information. Although certain places of employment (notably faculty positions) expect many of these forms of professional involvement for promotion, many others may not. We therefore must find ways to create a high level of professional commitment in our professionals to help them to overcome the barriers to professional involvement typically reported. A step toward this agenda involves determining what has led to high levels of professional involvement in our current leaders. This project is a preliminary step in that direction and suggests the importance of mentoring not only for clinical skill, but also for professional involvement. ■

Appendix

Programs Currently Offering Clinical Mentorships in Ayres Sensory Integration Intervention and Related Sensory-Based Approaches

- Occupational Therapy Associates Watertown:
info@otawatertown.com
- University of Southern California:
http://ot.usc.edu/academics/sensory-integration/ot610x
- University of Southern California/Western
Psychological Services:
http://ot.usc.edu/academics/sensory-integration/certification
- Denver Sensory Treatment and Research Center:
http://spdfoundation.net/mentorships.html

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