Liberating Structures: Balancing Collaboration and Control in Occupation-Based Practice with At-Risk Youth

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Overall Study Purpose

- To describe the reasoning of occupational therapists as they develop occupation-based, student-centered programming for at-risk youth in non-traditional educational settings

- Presentation focus:
  - A primary finding of this study, occupational therapists’ thinking about balancing collaboration and control
Intervention Activities

- Palette Program
  - Healthy leisure
  - Vocational training
  - Practical living
- Examples
  - Doghouse construction
  - Playground equipment for local early intervention program
  - Puzzle painting
  - Tile mosaics
  - Car maintenance
  - Cooking (omelettes, stir-fries, red beans and rice)
  - Interview role playing
  - Internet job, college search
Studies

- **Study One, Spring 2002**
  - Exploratory, focused the methods and intervention

- **Study Two, 2002-2003**
  - Develop occupational therapy services that are occupation-based, student-centered, and group-based for at-risk youth
  - Settings: Two rural alternative schools
  - Action research cycle: Student dyad and panel video-taped interviews, therapist audio-taped reflections, research team meetings, Ethnograph analysis producing analytic memos, resulting changes to program

- **Study Three, 2003-2004**
  - Program refinement
  - Settings: Two alternative schools (Kentucky, Virginia), one juvenile justice detention center
  - Action research cycle: therapist audio-taped reflections, research team meetings, Ethnograph analysis producing analytic memos, resulting changes to program
Need for Control

- "I got in trouble a lot last year. Like I harassed people and I threatened a couple people and I got in trouble for that. That’s why I’m here." (Alternative school student)

- Therapists dealt with inappropriate behaviors through group discussion and limit setting, re-sizing or splitting up groups, pairing by gender, censoring images or words, sending students to in-school suspension, showing support for laws or school rules, equalizing power by awarding activity roles.
Occupational Therapy and Liberation: Historical Perspectives

- “A pleasure in achievement, a real pleasure in the use and activity of one’s hands... began to be used as incentives in the management of our patients instead of... abstract and repressive rules” (Meyer, 1922)

- “Occupational therapists should become aware of the body mechanics... as the stability of instability influences the usefulness of the upper extremities in purposeful activities in self-care and vocational objectives.” (Stattel, 1955)

- “Justice is particularly relevant when we enable occupational well-being because well-being comprises participation in nondiscriminatory, inclusive environments that value differences in people. Thus, the challenge for occupational therapy practitioners is to use our professional understanding of humans in everyday contexts to raise consciousness in society to promote inclusion and build just communities.” (Padilla, Gupta, & Liotta-Kleinfeld, 2004).
Therapists’ Conceptualization of Liberation with At-Risk Youth

Therapist Quotes

“…”It’s okay to go with the flow and to work from the students’ feedback instead of being so authoritative with it.”

“I quickly found myself overruling my natural tendency to anticipate the [students’] needs and to step in to provide help. When I stopped myself from doing those things… [they] were just fine on their own.”

Student Quotes

“…”They [occupational therapists] get you out of your desk and outside…”

“They were always asking us what we needed help with…”

“…”Most of the kids here don’t have people that care about them, their families. But… when OT comes [sic]… it was somebody that actually cared about them and, you know, enjoyed being around them…. So that really makes a difference…. It’s like a good friend to look out for you.”
Liberating Structures: Balancing Liberation and Control

“[The most difficult part of using this approach] is knowing how much to let go, and when to intervene when they really are getting off track or are inappropriate. I have tried very hard to structure the sessions, kid with the boys when they were off-track, and not be demanding of their attention at all times. I think they appreciate that they can talk with us without constant reprimanding, but it can get stressful...”
Choices Within Structure: Spatial Strategies

- “The physical space for the group was set up when the students arrived: the radio was playing music, the skillet and all of the ingredients and utensils were in full sight on the table, the posters were taped to the windows, and the basket with the ‘Here and Nows’ was in the center of the table.”

- “The structure of the session and the handouts gave the boys something to check rather than having to ask one of us what to do next.”

- “We have accumulated a lot of ‘stuff’ that we are carting back and forth to the school.”
Choices Within Structure: Sociocultural Strategies

- The use of community volunteers or others to provide assistance during group sessions
- Older, more experienced students sometimes provided help to younger ones
- Already established school norms and rules
- Verbal or written instructions to students
Choices Within Structure: Temporal Strategies

- Pre-planning needs
  - Conceptualization of activity
  - Purchase, prepare, organized supplies

- Rituals and routines
  - “Here and Nows”
  - Pass-it-on-Book
  - Reflection and planning

- Seasonal occupations
Collaborative, Student-Centered Goal Setting

- “The hardest part is not assuming control for the planning but constantly going back to the [students] to get their ideas about how they want to spend their group time.”
- “I have to zip my lips and keep my hands in my pockets to let them direct the activities.”
Occupation-based, Student-Centered Assessment

- Occupation collage
- Pie of Life
- Coat of Arms
- Life Maps
- Spend-A-Buck
- Personal Goals checklist
Therapist Supports to Increase Student Ownership of Intervention Activities

- Using interview data about interests and identities of these rural Appalachian youth to select intervention activities
- Involved the youth in choosing, planning, and carrying out activities
- Peer group-based intervention
Retaining Therapist Control

- “As a therapist you are guided by the students’ goals but then find yourself problem-solving and synthesizing the specific therapeutic activity.”
- “Keeping [the students] in charge takes quite a balance because you also want them to ‘get something’ out of the group.”
Summary

- Action research over three years to develop the Palette Program
- Need for control
- Therapist urge to liberate clients
- Balancing liberation and control for effective intervention
- Giving choices
- Collaborative, student-centered goal-setting
- Student ownership
References

- Pierce, D. E. (2004). *Providing Rural Interdisciplinary Services for Youth with Mental Health Needs (PRISYM)*. Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions, Quentin Burdick.
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Discussion Questions

- Is the concept of liberating structures a key concept in the application of occupation with other populations?
- To what degree do therapists require control over occupations in therapy in order to feel secure and effective? Does this vary between therapists? With levels of experience?