Short Communication

Are occupational therapists’ roles in supporting vocational training students with dyslexia in Hong Kong undermined?

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ABSTRACT

Vocational assessment and training is one of the core responsibilities of occupational therapists (OTs). While such interventions can be provided in various settings according to the clientele, those in educational institutes seem to receive insufficient attention. This article aims to reveal the undermined OTs’ roles in supporting vocational training students with dyslexia in Hong Kong. Roles of coordinator of special educational needs in a vocational training system are described and the added values of enabling OTs to take up the post are discussed. Solutions on enhancing OTs’ engagement in the related practices are suggested.

Key words: Occupational therapists, vocational training students, dyslexia, Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

When we suspect ourselves of health problems, the first thing comes to our mind is usually a quest of medical consultation. Similarly, students and parents would like to seek teachers’ advices once facing academic problems. How about having dyslexia? Have occupational therapists (OTs) been ever thought of? Let’s go a bit more details about dyslexia first.

The following is the definition of dyslexia based on the results of intensive research over the years (Schatschneider and Torgesen, 2004):

“Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.”

Dyslexia is hence regarded as neither purely pathological nor pedagogical. Occupational therapy (OT) addresses both facets of the issue to enable schooling and academic performance through various intervention approaches such as remedial approach and compensatory approach (Case-Smith and O’Brien, 2010). Individuals with dyslexia can benefit from OT interventions. According to Tsui et al. (2012), interventions with combined approaches for dyslexia include but not limited to the following:

1. Visual perceptual and visual motor training to improve the abilities to discriminate fine differences in the form and position of strokes in the Chinese characters.
2. Sensory integration therapy for tactile and vestibular input to attend and focus.
3. Training on fine motor accuracy to improve low muscle tone, postural instabilities, weakness on hand grip strength and hand coordination.
4. Learning keyboard typing as an alternate way to manage written works.

Nevertheless, have OTs been granted enough accessibility to the education systems in Hong Kong? The issues behind are rather complicated. In overseas, the awareness of
provision of OT services in educational settings started evolving as early in 1980’s. Blossom et al. (1996) gave a remark on the paradigm shift of OT as an educational professional service. For example, OTs used to pinpoint disabilities and problems but are now emphasizing on individual’s learning abilities and outcomes. OT interventions have been shifted from a pullout isolated basis by OTs only to a whole-school approach by all school personnel partnering with families. The goals have also become more curriculum-based rather than therapy-specific.

How about in vocational training institutes? Should OT roles have been even more important? Vocational assessment and training is one of the core responsibilities of OTs. While it can be provided in various settings according to the clienteles, the one for educational institutes seems to be undermined.

As an academic staff in Vocational Training Council (VTC), the author with OT background nominated himself to be a faculty-based coordinator of special educational needs (SENCO). The SEN Task Force has been formed in response to the philosophy and practice of integrated education to offering equal learning opportunities to students with SEN such as hearing impairment, autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and dyslexia (Vocational Training Council, 2012). The goals are to enhance the support services to cater for diverse needs of individual students with SEN for maximizing their potential, and to help staff members to manage those students (Tse, 2005). There is one SENCO in each of the faculties/departments of each of the numerous campuses under VTC. The SENCOs are mainly the teaching staff whose roles include the followings:

1. Conduct admission interviews to the applicants with SEN;
2. Co-ordinate and assist the students for module exemption applications;
3. Co-ordinate and assist the students for special examination arrangement applications;
4. Arrange for examination invigilation and/or special room during special examination arrangements;
5. Learn the distinctive needs of the students and share with class tutors and subject lecturers on teaching strategies and special managing skills;
6. Liaise with subject lecturers and other personnel to arrange for special technical aids and provide barrier-free study environment for the students;
7. Liaise with students counselors to monitor and follow up the students’ learning progress and overall performance;
8. Attend case conferences or meetings regarding the students’ problems;

Can SENCOs with OT background contribute more and further in the area of dyslexia? The author finds himself more competent and confident in understanding the needs of students with dyslexia and hence designing more tailored interventions. Being more familiar with assessment in the domains of study and work, accommodation of learning can be more specifically recommended which can enable the students to grasp as much as possible the intended knowledge and skills of the program through lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions and fieldwork etc. It would in turn better equip them to work in the industries after graduation. It is the essence of vocational training. However, it may not be as effective for SENCOs without OT or other professional background. They may not be sensitive enough to what the impacts the deficits of the students with dyslexia induce on their learning and so are the accommodation recommendations. So, what can be done? Developing guidelines can be a solution. In addition to a general guideline on the accommodations with reference to the common features of dyslexia, it is also feasible to analyze the various program streams (such as business administration, information technology, design, applied science, engineering etc) respectively to develop discipline-specific guidelines to facilitate subject lecturers’ mastery of the teaching and learning strategies. Of course, back-up support by OTs should be available when the needs of consultation and/or referral arise.

In a long run, it is worth exploring the possibilities of bringing OT services via feasible mode(s) into vocational training settings to enable a wider range of interventions, not only compensatory approach, but also more proactively, remedial approach. While policy and resource implications are always the concerns or even become major obstacles to the initiation of services, advocacy together with evidence is a way out.

REFERENCES


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