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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Providing School-Based Occupational Therapy Can Be Difficult

In "What Is the Problem With Third-Party Prescription for School-Based Practice" (*AJOT*, October 1996, pp. 750–751), Royeen discusses the difficulties of third-party therapists involved in the evaluation of a child receiving school-based occupational therapy. I agree with the author that an evaluation void of the school environment is problematic. Frequently, third-party therapists have little awareness of the problems faced by the school-based therapist. Specifically, school-based therapists rarely have a place to work, and equipment is usually carried into the school by hand. Without the knowledge of the situation faced by the school therapist, the third-party therapist may recommend a treatment plan that is very difficult or inappropriate to implement in the school.

When a third-party evaluation is done without any consultation with the school-based therapist, the school therapist may feel undermined. Parents may believe that their child should be receiving additional services that the school therapist may not be able to provide in terms of numbers of hours or type of treatment. It may also be problematic if a school-based therapist has observed and worked with a child for several months, whereas the third-party therapist has seen the child for an hour or two. Who is in the best position to correctly evaluate the child? Without joint consultation between therapists, the parents are left to wonder who indeed has the correct evaluation.

School-based occupational therapists need to actively educate administrators, parents, teachers, and non-school-based occupational therapists about the difficulties faced in providing

school-based occupational therapy as well as the legitimate roles that need to be carried out. The American Occupational Therapy Association also needs to continue to address this issue via *AJOT*.

The most important focus for school-based occupational therapists is assisting in creating an atmosphere of educational success for the student with disabilities. To achieve this, school-based therapists need support, not competition.

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## The Topic of Leadership Among Program Directors Deserves Expanded Study

In the recent article by Linda Dudek-Shriber, "Leadership Qualities of Occupational Therapy Department Program Directors and the Organizational Health of Their Departments" (*AJOT*, May 1997, pp. 369–377), she investigated leadership and organizational health of occupational therapy academic programs. The study concluded that "both faculty and program director respondents held a positive perception of their departments' overall organizational health" (p. 375). Program directors were found to be rated highest in the area of respectful leadership and lowest in the area of communication leadership by their faculties.

The leadership qualities of program directors are critical in the overall functioning of occupational therapy academic programs. This topic became of particular interest to me as a result of the fall 1996 semester at Utica College of Syracuse University when I was asked to assume the role of acting program director of occupational therapy, during the program director's sabbatical leave. Having this experience for one semester has shed new light and admiration for program directors. Dudek-Shriber's article addresses a number of practical issues pertinent to this important role, how it affects the organizational health of the department, and the fact that the relationship between leadership and organizational health "should positively affect

occupational therapy education" (p. 369).

This article is excellent, yet it suggests further studies. Another study that may extend Dudek-Shriber's work would evaluate the effect on occupational therapy education, for example, follow-up studies of graduates from each of the programs involved in this leadership study to determine the effectiveness of the education when comparing organizational health and program director leadership. One way to compare graduate success is to look at the passing rate of the national certification exam for each program, because all graduates are required to take the same exam. Conclusions could then be drawn among program director leadership, organizational health of their departments, and the passing rate for the national certification exam.

A second study would consider the administrative background of each program director. Dudek-Shriber stated, "For program directors, this is usually the first academic administrative post attained, and more often than not, the first prerequisite to attaining it is simply a willingness to accept the position" (p. 369). For practical purposes, it would be valuable to assess the leadership qualities of program directors with some type of administrative background, comparing their leadership behaviors with those of administratively inexperienced program directors. One might find that the program directors with some type of previous management experience, even if it is not in academia, would score higher in terms of leadership. This information would be especially useful for programs searching for a director, as additional criteria for the position may include administrative experience. In addition, the findings of this additional study could lend support to an existing program director's endeavors to gain administrative knowledge and improve his or her leadership skills through continuing education, requesting resources to be provided by the institution.

Differentiation between program directors of occupational therapy assistant programs and occupational therapy programs could be the focus of yet another study. One may wonder

whether significant differences exist in the leadership qualities between the program director of a 2-year program and the program director of a 4-year program. Programs for the preparation of occupational therapy assistants usually require fewer faculty members than do occupational therapy programs. The differences between program directors of these two levels could be related to management skills, management background, and the organizational health of their departments.

The implications of additional studies regarding leadership qualities of program directors and the organizational health of their departments offer present and future program directors motives and evidence regarding this amazing role. According to Gilkerson (1997), "Lecturers, instructors, fieldwork educators, professors, program directors, department chairs, deans, and vice presidents are leaders, and occupational therapy education" (p. 26). The role of program directors, as leaders of nearly 100 occupational therapy programs and more than 140 occupational therapy assistant programs, should be developed and rewarded, as they provide guidance to their faculty, collaboratively preparing thousands of students to become occupational therapy practitioners. Seig (1986) recognized the lack of training for these persons, called "department chairs" at that time: "The way a department chair relates to faculty members, the expectations the chair holds for them, and the way the chair communicates these expectations set the overall tone of the department" (p. 93). Certainly, this is the organizational health of the department referred to by Dudek-Shriber.

In terms of leadership, the program director with stronger leadership skills and a more extensive administrative background may prove more successful in the continuous endeavor to identify the best candidates for their programs. Isenburg and Heater (1994) recommended admission criteria, including a high grade point average, interviews, reasons for wanting to be an occupational

therapist, written essays, and previous education for acceptance into a program. Further research recommended by these authors to help confirm these academic criteria could relate the experience and leadership qualifications of the program director to the appropriate selection of students. Danka (1993) discussed curriculum planning and student recruitment, which can be influenced by student values and goals. Program planning, evaluation, and management information addressed by Marshall (1991) provided a comparison between occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs.

Policy changes may be indicated for programs as a result of subsequent studies. Potential for policy change exists in the areas of the expansion of occupational therapy education (Donohue, 1990), a formal mentoring process (Schemm & Bross, 1995), continuing education and maintaining professional education (Strickland, 1993), and the creation of a clinical climate in the classroom (Peloquin & Babola, 1996). The leadership role of the program directors is critical in each of these areas, and the opportunity for changing policy in terms of education essentials is in the hands of these persons.

The *Standards of Practice for Occupational Therapy* (AOTA, 1994) has only one brief statement regarding management, "A registered occupational therapist shall provide the management necessary for efficient organization and provision of occupational therapy services" (p. 1042). Further research pertaining to program directors, leadership, and management expectations could also facilitate changes in AOTA documents.

Further studies would raise awareness and respect for the role of the program director, while creating opportunity to alter practice within academic programs as well as policy at the institution and the local, state, and national association levels. As Dudek-Shriber emphasized, "The mission of occupational therapy education is changing from a primary emphasis on teaching clinical skills to an expanded focus that includes more research and scholarship" (p. 376). The

leadership of the program director is important in the preparation of occupational therapy students and the organizational health of their departments.

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