Physiotherapy Students' Experiences of Role-Emerging Placements: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Role-emerging placements (REPs) have been firmly embedded in undergraduate occupational therapy curricula for a number of years. REPs aim to facilitate the development of essential professional skills to prepare students for an increasingly diverse and evolving workplace. In the United Kingdom, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) has also emphasized the importance of adequately preparing graduates for new and emerging areas of practice. To date, however, there has been no published research exploring the use of REPs in physiotherapy. This study aimed to explore the experiences of undergraduate physiotherapy students who had each undertaken a REP. Six participants volunteered to take part in a focus group which used a research informed semi-structured topic guide. Group discussions were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis of the data revealed five main themes: (1) Establishing a Physiotherapy Role Independently; (2) Finding a Voice and Influencing Change; (3) Developing Professional Identity; (4) Professional Development and (5) Support. The findings highlighted the variability of student experiences in REP settings, both positive and negative. However, all appeared to result in professional and personal benefits for the students, through promoting graduate attributes and skills that may be attractive to employers.

Keywords: clinical placements; contemporary placement; physiotherapy; role-emerging; student placements

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Introduction

Increasingly, physiotherapists are working in diverse areas of practice across health and social care sectors and beyond. Consequently, education providers are being urged to ensure students graduate with the necessary skills to work flexibly in a range of environments in both traditional and emerging roles (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) 2015:1). Role-emerging placements (REPs) are one proposed method of facilitating these skills (Bossers *et al.* 1997, Fieldhouse and Fedden 2009, Wood 2005). The term 'role-emerging' was coined by the occupational therapy (OT) profession and is used to define 'a practice placement which occurs at a site where there is not an established occupational therapy role' (College of Occupational Therapists 2006:1). Students are supported on a daily basis by an onsite-supervisor, and a qualified clinician provides off-site or 'long-armed' supervision, visiting weekly to help students draw on their knowledge of theory to develop their own role (College of Occupational Therapists 2006). These non-traditional placements are embedded into many OT programmes both in the U.K and internationally where they are now established practice (Thomas, Penman, and Williamson 2005, Wood 2005).

Overton, Clark, and Thomas (2009) recognize that the modern workplace is much more varied than the traditional acute and community care settings, suggesting that the more diverse the practice education, the better prepared students will be for dealing with real-world problems. REPs may help prepare graduates for an ever-transforming workplace offering students the opportunity to develop their confidence, clinical reasoning, problems solving skills, leadership, and independence (Cooper and Raine 2009, Fisher and Savin-Baden 2002, Overton, Clark and Thomas 2009).

Research exploring the student experience of REPs, has predominately been qualitative in design and focused within OT (Bossers *et al.* 1997, Clarke *et al.* 2014, Dancza *et al.* 2013, Fieldhouse and Fedden 2009, Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis 2008). Dancza *et al.* (2013) interviewed ten final year OT students to explore their REP learning experiences. They found that students had to adapt to a slower pace of work, which involved more planning and thinking rather than 'doing', and having to learn to work collaboratively. Students reported experiencing a rollercoaster of emotions, alternating between positive and negative emotional states throughout their placement. Despite these challenges, REPs were viewed positively by students who felt a strong sense of achievement on completion. Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis (2008) conducted interviews and focus groups with 17 students who had undertaken REPs, with the majority finding them a useful learning experience. Students reported that they helped improve their communication, confidence, and clinical reasoning skills. Students enjoyed having the "freedom to try new things" (Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis 2008: 352) and found the experience enhanced their reflective skills.

Clarke *et al.* (2014) found that, through working independently to solve problems, students developed a stronger sense of their own professional identity – a finding supported by Fieldhouse and Fedden (2009). Students on REPs developed core OT skills such as observation and assessment, and by reflecting on their own experiences, students were able to construct new knowledge leading to deep rather than superficial learning (Fieldhouse and Fedden 2009).

This article reports the results of a qualitative study involving undergraduate physiotherapy students who had undertaken a REP. The aim of the study was to explore their experiences of this alternative model of practice education.

Methods

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Worcester (reference no.2013:71). This project formed part of a larger ongoing research programme, evaluating student experiences of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy education at the University of Worcester.

A qualitative approach was taken, as the aim was to gain insight and understanding into students' experiences (Merriam 2009). Eleven second- and third-year physiotherapy students who had completed a REP were invited via email to take part in a focus group to discuss their experiences. Informed consent was gained from all participants. Students did not receive any remuneration for taking part; however, travel and sustenance costs were reimbursed.

A semi-structured topic guide was used during the focus group. Development of the guide was informed by the findings of previous research into REPs (Danza *et al.* 2013) and the results of a local end-of-year student survey. The topic guide was used to structure the focus group discussions, whilst allowing the flexibility for participants to explore issues which were pertinent to them. The focus group was facilitated by a member of the research team (RK). Group discussions were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The transcript was fully anonymized before analysis.

A pragmatic grounded theory approach to data analysis was taken (Barbour 2007. Data was thematically analyzed manually, utilizing both *in vivo* and *a priori* codes, refined through immersion in the transcript making analytic memos, prior to manually coding in two cycles following guidelines from (Saldaña 2009). Reflexivity was encouraged through peer review of the transcript and emerging themes with another researcher. Themes were then refined and agreed by the research team (YT and HF).

Findings

In total, eleven physiotherapy students had undertaken a REP, of whom six (four third-years and two second-years) consented to take part in the focus group. The second-year placements were part-time; consisting of two and a half days over a twelve-week period. The third-year placements were six weeks full-time. Participants included five females and one male participant. REP settings included nursing homes (*n* = 4) and charities (*n* = 2). Five main themes emerged: (1) Establishing a Physiotherapy Role Independently; (2) Finding a Voice and Influencing Change; (3) Developing Professional Identity; (4) Professional Development and (5) Support. These themes are discussed below with illustrative quotations to provide supporting evidence from the data.

1 Establishing a physiotherapy role independently

The main focus of a REP is to establish a physiotherapy role in an organization that currently does not employ physiotherapists. Students expressed a mixture of apprehension and excitement when discovering they had been allocated a REP. Knowing that they were expected to develop the physiotherapy role, required a greater level of independent thinking and planning than they had previously experienced:

> on the first day I was just like "How am I gonna' do this on my own?" because there wasn't a physio there already (Participant 5).

> I felt quite pleased 'cause I think I do better working things out for myself rather than having someone watching over me all the time (Participant 3).

For some students, apprehension resulted from a fear of the unknown, and the lack of structure or a set clinical 'path' such as experienced during traditional neurology or musculoskeletal out-patients, for example. There was also fear that the placement would not offer them the same 'hands-on' experience or learning opportunities:

> I was concerned with this placement, that obviously being third-year that all my friends would have different, more specific placements and my knowledge would kind of stay static. And I wouldn't really learn that much from it (Participant 4).

Once a potential role had been identified, students had to be able to articulate this to the staff they were working with. For some, this meant explaining what physiotherapy was to providers who appeared unclear of the role of a physiotherapist:

> they'd heard of physio but they hadn't really understood why it would work in their setting (Participant 5).

Similarly establishing a role meant managing the expectations of staff:

> I think ours thought we could change the world; thought we could walk patients that weren't gonna walk and things like that (Participant 1).

When placement providers and students had a good understanding of their role, the experience appeared less challenging:

> I knew why I was going, they understood why I was there, so that one was really good because it was positive experience (Participant 5).

Students had to work out their scope of practice and be confident to communicate this to others, especially if students were asked to act outside of this:

> it was a bit difficult knowing what I could and couldn't do (Participant 4).

> they asked me to teach manual handling, and like that's not something that I can do as a student and so the understanding just wasn't there for what we're actually there to do and what we could and couldn't do (Participant 1).

One student described the importance of clearly defining your role after being asked to change beds and take clients to the toilet when her supervisor was not present:

> other healthcare professionals that are working there try to push you out of your remit of what you're meant to be doing [...] I think maybe establishing that [your role] before and asking your placement educator (Participant 3)

2 Finding a voice and influencing change

Where they encountered inappropriate practices, the students had to learn appropriate ways to challenge these, tactfully. Over time, and by reflecting on their communication skills, students learnt to challenge the status quo in order to implement new practices. Students appeared to find this a daunting, tiring, and – at times – frustrating process:

> I think places like that are quite set in their ways when there's not a therapeutic influence. So, when there's no OT or physio going in every day […] with things like that we sort of came in and was like "Oh this is shocking how they do some things" (Participant 1).

> you have to know what you're doing all the time. Think about what you're doing every single second that you're there, and I think that made it really hard because I was so tired (Participant 3).

Students described a variety of ways of dealing with issues and conflictual situations, developing strategies for instigating change and justifying their actions along the way:

> …rather than saying, "This is rubbish. Don't do that" just maybe giving suggestions on my point of view from things, and I think in the end they appreciated it because it helped them run their exercise group better. But it is quite daunting when you feel like you're, kind of, going in and treading on their toes a little bit (Participant 2).

> I put someone in a wheelchair and someone basically shouted at me for it saying I took away their independence. Which I took quite to heart [...] and we had a conversation and then it was fine (Participant 6).

Within the focus groups, students recognised their efforts to educate others gave them an opportunity to witness tangible change for service users and in the practices of other staff:

> I think I only put as much work in as I did 'cause I could see the benefit there for the service users […] I don't think that if I hadn't had seen the benefit, I don't think I would have put as much in as I did (Participant 5).

3. Developing professional identity

The experience of the REP appeared to be empowering for students, based on independent and experiential learning. In comparison to other placement experiences, students felt that their role was more highly valued by staff and service users, than in placements where there was an established role and a more experienced educator. Being independent gave students the opportunity to develop as a professional, rather than being 'just' a student. They reported being respected more by others, and this helped them to become more confident as professionals:

> some people respect you more because you're the only person there (Participant 4).

> I learnt a lot about myself and my own skills and that actually in some ways I do know what I'm doing and that I can talk to people [...] some people did take notice of what I was saying. And that's quite nice really to have more confidence in what I was actually doing (Participant 1).

The REP provided an opportunity for students to be responsible for their own professional practice and learning. Without external expectations or specific skills to be learnt, the students were free to explore the interventions that would work for the clients in the placement setting. This required independent learning and testing out ideas and learning from the results. Students valued the opportunity to learn who they were as professionals through reflection on this experience:

> I really value the independent learning and being responsible for my own learning [...] whenever I've done that I've shown my best qualities. Whereas if I have somebody who's particularly overbearing I kind of go inward and I can't display the things I want to display. Or I come across the wrong way (Participant 6).

> I also learned that it's okay to maybe miss some things and make mistakes every now and then because there's not necessarily anyone there telling you, "You haven't done it the way I like you to do it so I don't think you've done it right." It was nice to do it myself (Participant 1).

Students described a journey of self-discovery whereby tackling challenges, their confidence grew, they became more independent and began to develop a sense of professional identify:

> I think I really got to be myself, who I was as a practitioner instead of trying to please people (Participant 6).

> Some educators try and mould you into a smaller version of them but you don't have that on this placement [...] you can sort of work out who you are as physio on one of these placements (Participant 1).

Through leading interventions with service users and observing the benefits, students were able to become the professional they wanted to be:

> I think seeing the benefit from them and knowing that was something that I'd done myself that I'd inputted things for them rather than it being my educator's decision to do things. It was me that had chosen to help them walk or do the activity with them (Participant 1).

4. Professional development

Despite their initial concerns and the challenges some faced during their REP, students felt these unique experiences had enabled them to develop a broad range of professional skills. There was general acknowledgement that the skills and knowledge developed were different to those that would have been developed in a more traditional setting. However, the skills gained were seen as valuable for their personal and professional development:

> You learn different types of skills that are invaluable and you would never learn on different placements (Participant 4).

> …it's just made me grow up, grow up a lot [...] just matured me really which is good really (Participant 3).

The students recognized that the skills they had developed would be advantageous in any setting, and therefore should be desirable to employers. The skills identified included communication, time management, problem solving, and decision making skills:

> I've learned so much [...] maybe not like clinical stuff [...] but the independence, the time management and things like that, and finding your own voice (Participant 3).

> I wasn't very confident before I went and then I managed to be confident around a lot of people and my communication got a lot better with people who were non-verbal communicators (Participant 5).

> problem-solving ability because you're obviously there on your own. You have to make your own decisions without checking and know your own scope of practice [...] it made me have confidence within my own decisions (Participant 4).

Students identified developing leadership skills:

> we had to do a business plan to justify our role there which, at first I thought, "Why?" But then that's brilliant for jobs if we go and we said, "Well, look this is what we did for our role and justified it within the home to the employer" (Participant 6).

> when my practice educator is there one day every week, she'll sit back and just say "What do you want to do?" So I'm still leading [...] everyone's happy for me to be putting things in place (Participant 3).

Despite the obvious applicability of these skills to other areas of practice, students reported that other practice educators had voiced concerns that these placements may not be highly regarded by employers:

> I was a bit put off really by her saying "Well, you haven't learned anything clinical, you can learn leadership when you're like a band six [senior physiotherapist]. You don't need particularly to be like a leader of a team at a band five [newly qualified physiotherapist]." (Participant 5).

One student reported a lack of understanding of the benefits of REPs at a national conference, despite the current emphasis on leadership skills and flexible practice from the CSP:

> We went to the big regional, well national, conference, and not a single person there could tell me what it was or what the value was in it. But if you listen to the

> stuff coming out of the physios, it's all about leadership posts, it's all about self-preservation so they're the ones that are not progressive (Participant 6).

Students also expressed concerns about how REPs might be viewed by potential employers and were concerned that this might be a disadvantage in the future:

> we don't know how employers are going to view physios doing role-emerging placements, and you don't know what they're going to think of that when they see that (Participant 1).

Despite the concerns, the REP was generally considered to have been valuable to students and their professional development, and students believed they would enhance their employability and prepare them for the workplace:

> it prepares you to then go out and get a job and be on your own with a little bit of support so I think if available, everybody should be offered one [...] I think it teaches you different skills which really everybody should have, coming out as a newly qualified (Participant 4).

5. Support

Students felt that support from their university was essential prior to the placement, in providing adequate information to students, arranging pre-placement visits, and ensuring that 'long-arm' and on-site supervisors all received sufficient training on the aims and expectations of the placement. Support during the placement from the university ensured good communication between all parties, and also helped students cope with the, sometimes unpredictable, nature of a REP:

> 'Cause it is a new thing, and if it's a new environment you can't predict what's gonna happen [...] then the fact that uni listens to what you have to say as well as what the management are saying helps to just keep working through and change what needs to be changed (Participant 5).

Following the placement, the opportunity for debrief was recognised as important by one student, in providing an opportunity to reflect on their learning:

> …you have to get beyond you know negative experience and realise that you've actually learned a lot [...] I had quite a few debriefs after it and I think if I hadn't [...] I don't think I'd have got past that point and realized what I'd actually done. So, I think having debriefs after is definitely something you need to do (Participant 5).

Students also felt their university had a wider supporting role to play in educating local practitioners and employers about REPs and the potential benefits:

> …if you put it out there, then people will know, and if people that have had positive experiences and people get jobs and they see what we've done and it was a good thing then they'll know (Participant 1).

Students valued the 'long-arm' supervisor who was vital for helping deal with conflict, complex cases, and for developing clinical/hands-on skills. Students felt that support should be flexible and tailored to the individual needs of the student, and many felt that an hour a week was not enough:

> I think it would be good to sort of say "This is what I would like this week" and sort of, be able to book that in yourself rather than it being, "Well I'm your long arm supervisor. I come out for an hour." Cause you're in control of everything else. Of what you're doing and your timings and who you're seeing and what you're doing with them (Participant 1).

flexibility 'cause there were some weeks where I had more questions that I needed longer than an hour for, but other weeks we'd just be doing our project and didn't really need to discuss anything (Participant 2).

Students highly valued peer support where available. Speaking to students with REP experience helped them feel prepared. They thought that, ideally, students should be placed in pairs with either an OT student or another physiotherapist, so they could support each other, work as a team, and avoid feeling isolated;

I felt very alone even though it was only three days, so I think that you need to be with another student but not doing the same project (Participant 5).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore physiotherapy students' experiences of undertaking a REP. The findings identify both positive outcomes and challenges which reflect and support previous REP literature in OT (Clark *et al.* 2014, Dancza *et al.* 2013, Fieldhouse and Fedden 2009, Overton, Clark, and Thomas 2009, Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis 2008).

All students felt successful in their placements, achieving person-centered goals through improved education, access to exercise, and activity and improved mobility; supporting the principles and pillars of the profession (CSP 2015). This study demonstrates how students met CSP requirements by identifying client problems, undertaking research, and facilitating interventions to address the clients' needs, all within an environment where there was no full-time physiotherapist in post. There was also evidence of clear, and developing professional autonomy within these experiences. Through reflection and supported practice within the REP settings, the students could, with indirect support, think outside of the box to identify and address person-centred problems that prevented or limited movement and function.

Participating in a REP enabled the students to define and develop a professional physiotherapy role, and gain clarity in what they could (and could not) offer their clients as a student (Clarke *et al.* 2014, Fieldhouse and Fedden 2009). To establish their role, students used clinical reasoning to determine what was achievable, make justified and safe decisions, and reflect on what was permissible and safe within this situation (Cooper and Raine 2009, Fisher and Savin-Baden 2002, Overton, Clark, and Thomas 2009). The REPs in this study encouraged independence, validated learning, and supported confidence reflecting the experiences discussed by Gregory, Quelche and Watanabe (2011). New ways of working were established, providing patient-led services that enhanced function, through advocacy, collaboration and practice, enabling students to develop into "caring, confident and autonomous physiotherapists" (CSP 2015: 1).

By developing a new physiotherapy role, students gained confidence in their own practice through thinking, planning, delivering, and reflecting on their practice (Dancza *et al.* 2013). Students took responsibility for their actions, behaved ethically, established and delivered an effective service, and promoted the physiotherapy profession in novel environments. Although ultimately rewarding, this was not without its challenges, as noted in previous studies (Clarke *et al.* 2015, Dancza *et al.* 2013, Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis 2008). However, the more diverse the practice education, the better prepared students will be for dealing with real-world problems in more diverse care settings.

Adequate support was integral to the success of REPs, particularly in helping students cope with the cognitive and emotional challenges they encountered. Peer support appeared to be particularly valued by students, a finding mirrored in previous research (Kearsley 2012, Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis 2008). The pace and flow of interventions within the REP was particularly challenging for students. While one student suggested that there were periods of time where there wasn't anything to do, another reported thinking and doing all the time, and found the responsibility exhausting, supporting the findings of Clarke *et al.* (2015). REPs have

"been described as an emotional rollercoaster" (Dancza *et al.* 2013: 432), however, such challenges may not be unique to REPs and have been reported by students in more traditional placement settings (Morris and Leonard 2007).

Thomas, Penman, and Williamson (2005) acknowledge that the skills gained on REPs may differ from those gained on more traditional placements. The present study suggests that REPs provided opportunities to develop a variety of professional skills, including but not limited to: organizational skills, time management, problem solving, communication, and leadership. The placements also facilitated greater autonomy in practice within the established four pillars of practice, notably exercise and movement (CSP 2015), and the code of professional values and behaviors (CSP 2011) was illustrated in the students' experiences. Some students developed business cases to justify their role, pushing established boundaries and demonstrating innovation and leadership, the development of which has been identified as a key priority for NHS staff at all levels (NHS Improvement 2017, The King's Fund 2017).

It has been suggested that REPs may limit the opportunity to develop 'hands-on' skills (Thew, Hargreaves, and Cronin-Davis 2008), a concern expressed by one student's practice educator in this study. Although students also acknowledged this as a limitation of REPs, they were able to clearly identify a broad range of other essential professional skills that they had developed. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP 2015) has stressed the importance of considering students' placement profiles as a whole, rather than focusing on the skills and knowledge acquired on any one placement. A REP represents only a small part of the total placement hours required, allowing students the opportunity to develop different skills on different placements.

The findings highlight negative attitudes of some physiotherapists and students regarding the usefulness of non-traditional placements. However, the CSP has long since discouraged the notion of traditional 'core' placements, suggesting that they have become "increasingly unworkable" in contemporary practice (CSP 2015: 11). The CSP welcomes and promotes flexibility and "enterprise, innovation and creativity" in accessing new placement settings (CSP 2015: 2). The physiotherapy profession should consider the fifteen years of literature regarding development of REPs within OT. It is clear that while concerns existed in the early days (Fisher and Savin-Baden 2002), the uptake and growing evidence of REPs in OT has demonstrated the value of such placements to student learning and to graduate employment (Cooper and Raine 2009, Fisher and Savin-Baden 2002, Overton, Clark, and Thomas 2009).

Education providers in the United Kingdom and internationally are facing increasing problems sourcing sufficient clinical placements for allied health students (CSP 2014, Rodger *et al.* 2008). REPs have the potential to both increase placement capacity and equip students with the skills to deal with increasing complex global healthcare needs (Rodger *et al.* 2008). However, REPs should not be viewed as a panacea for the shortage of placement opportunities, and it is important to publicize both the challenges and benefits associated with this placement model (Clarke *et al.* 2015). Successful REPs require careful planning and provision of adequate support mechanisms (Thomas and Rodger 2011). REPs do, however, offer a different, developmental learning opportunity where students can experience their own role emergence as a student physiotherapist.

This study is the first known study of REPs in physiotherapy, and has found that students value the experience and gain a range of professional skills through the REP. Of particular interest is the suggestion that when students work independently to establish a physiotherapy role, they also become more established in their own professional identity. Hammond, Cross, and Moore (2016) state that "[t]he construction of identity is fed by...how one makes sense of the interplay between personal and professional identities and experiences (75). The REP provides an optimum environment for students to nurture their professional identity through establishing a novel work role, and through their discourses with institutional managers, clients, and other staff. This study suggests that REPs enable students to develop their own professional identity,

or as one student said it '*you can sort of work out who you are as a physio on one of these placements*' (Participant 1).

Limitations

The study is limited by a small sample size, which represents the views of a selection of those who have undertaken REPs from a single higher education institution. This should be taken into account when interpreting the results. One of the authors (RK) acted as the facilitator for the focus group which may have introduced bias; however, we sought to minimize this through the use of a topic guide and independent review of the transcripts and coding framework by members of the research team. A focus group methodology was chosen to facilitate discussion and obtain richer data; however, there is potential for inhibition of honest, open dialogue if participants feel vulnerable or certain members dominate the discussion (Braun and Clarke 2013: 114). In order to mitigate this, participants were made aware that all data would be anonymized, and that the content of the discussion should be treated confidentiality by all group members. The facilitator also ensured that all participants had the opportunity to respond to each question.

Ideas for further research

This study explored the experiences of students on REPs. Further research might focus on specific groups of students and their outcomes on REPs. There is a need to continue this research via focus groups and other methods to generate more data, including the views of the 'long-armed' and on-site supervisors, and the staff working on the sites where a REP was established. It is also important to identify and explore the beliefs of physiotherapists about REPs in physiotherapy. Finally, the views and experiences of the service users, who might not otherwise receive physiotherapy, are important.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the REP experiences of second- and third-year United Kingdom physiotherapy students. The findings highlighted both positive and negative experiences, but most students felt the REPs had resulted in a number professional and personal benefits. REPs appear to offer a non-traditional developmental learning opportunity where physiotherapy students can experience their own role emergence. These experiences appeared to facilitate the acquisition of graduate attributes and skills that may be attractive to employers, including organizational skills, time management, problem solving, communication and leadership.

Acknowledgements

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