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Adriana Sandoval
University of Puget Sound

Winter F. Wildt-Bailey
University of Puget Sound

Dr. Holly Roberts PT, DPT, GCS, NCS
University of Puget Sound

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Global Health Perspectives in Physical Therapy Education: A Qualitative Report on a Service Learning Experience in Guatemala

Winter Wildt-Bailey, SPT; Adriana Sandoval, SPT; Holly J. Roberts, PT, DPT, GCS, NCS

Clinical Relevance

Service learning has been defined as “a form of experiential learning in which students engage in community activities that address human and community needs” and is “intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.” The benefits of service learning in health professions educational programs are well-documented and include improving interpersonal, hands-on, and clinical reasoning skills; promoting continued participation in service activities following graduation; improving confidence; and providing opportunities for interprofessional clinical experience. In particular, international service learning programs support APTA’s commitment to provide culturally sensitive care in that they provide opportunities for developing cultural competency skills. The results of this qualitative report are consistent with literature examining the benefits of experiential learning in healthcare education. They demonstrate the potential for an international service learning experience to facilitate development of cultural competence, clinical reasoning skills, communication skills, and confidence in one’s knowledge and abilities.

Five Themes

Cultural Bias

“Taking experiences with other cultures, whether in the United States or in other countries, and making them reflective experiences where I challenge my perceptions and assumptions.”

“I think I must guard myself against automatically assuming that everyone who walks into a clinic here will have had a poor surgical outcome, or will have received poor medical care.”

Identity

“I learned that… I’ve chosen the right career, because I enjoyed it thoroughly… that I love working one-on-one with patients just as much as I thought I would.”

“I look at this experience in Guatemala as my ‘aha’ moment. I think it has made me even more in tune to really trying to understand where my patient is coming from and the importance of thinking about the environmental/persontal factors of the ICF! I have always been a big advocate for thinking about health in this fashion…”

Skills Development

“I think I will now be able to use non-verbal communication more effectively. I found that effective demonstration of certain exercises with appropriate manual cuing is highly effective and still have use even when language barriers are not present.”

“Another change I have noticed with my time in On-Site Clinic is that I am even more willing to try something new.”

“I felt more like an impotent and less like a physical therapist. However, as our first patients entered the mobile clinic, I realized how well our training has prepared us to interact with patients.”

Confidence and Competency

“Because of limited access to follow-up care, no one had told him to take off the boot and begin to practice weight-bearing. Additionally, he had not been taught how to use proper use of his crutches.”

“I was not surprised that this patient still had a lot of pain.”

“Another change I have noticed with my time in On-Site Clinic is that I am even more willing to try something new.”

“Because of limited access to follow-up care, no one had told him to take off the boot and begin to practice weight-bearing. Additionally, he had not been taught how to use proper use of his crutches.”

Healthcare Disparities

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Purpose

Doctor of physical therapy (DPT) students at the University of Puget Sound traveled to Zacapa, Guatemala to deliver physical therapy services for 5 days as part of an elective course introducing students to physical therapy and health care delivery from a global health perspective. Participants journaled about their experiences, responding to prompts provided by the course professor/clinical instructor. The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of the experience of working with 9 different pediatric patients over the course of 5 days have increased my own confidence in my abilities.”

Methods

Ten student physical therapists (SPT), 9 females, 1 male, mean age 29 years (range 25-45) in the fourth semester of a three-year DPT program consented to allow their de-identified journals to be included in this report. Two SPT’s noted recurring themes that emerged in the journal entries.

Results

Five common themes emerged among the journal entries: 1) Cultural bias: recognizing cultural biases, the impact they have on patient care, and identifying strategies for addressing them; 2) Healthcare Disparities: recognizing disparities in access to healthcare, patient education, and resources between the U.S. and Guatemala; 3) Confidence and Competency: overcoming feelings of inadequacy as novice clinicians and appreciating the extent of knowledge and skill gained through didactic coursework; 4) Identity: reaffirming one’s decision to pursue a physical therapy career and that it aligns with one’s values and identity; and 5) Skills Development: adapting to working with limited resources, and developing effective communication skills with a language barrier.

Conclusion

Reflection is a central tenet of service learning. The personal reflections of DPT students participating in a short-term service learning trip to Guatemala as part of an elective course in global health perspectives revealed the experience allowed students to recognize and address cultural biases, recognize healthcare disparities, build professional confidence and competence, reaffirm professional goals, and develop important skills in communication and healthcare delivery.

References


