
Changes in Occupational Therapy Students' Attitudes towards People with Disabilities: The Importance of Firsthand Experience

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Abstract

Background. A therapist's attitude towards people with disabilities contributes significantly to the therapeutic relationship. Therefore, occupational therapy programs should structure curricula that encourage the development of positive attitudes towards people with disabilities among their students.

Purpose. To examine changes in attitudes among occupational therapy students towards people with disabilities throughout their course of study.

Methods. Two hundred and eighteen occupational therapy students from five consecutive cohorts filled out the Attitudes towards Disabled Persons (ATDP) questionnaire at the beginning of each academic year. **Results.** Positive attitudes increased as students progressed through the educational program.

Significant improvements were found in students' attitudes from the first to the second year ($p < .000$) and from the second to the third year of their studies ($p < .003$). No significant differences in students' attitudes were found between

the third and fourth years of their programs. **Conclusions.** The results suggest that students in the occupational therapy program developed a progressively more positive attitude towards people with disabilities. It is recommended that occupational therapy study curricula should include in-depth interactions between their students and people with disabilities during the first and second years of their study program to support the students' development of positive attitudes.