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Employing a coaching model of supervision during physiotherapy placements: Charting the student experience

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Abstract

Purpose

Placement capacity during physiotherapy degree programmes is presently under unprecedented stress. In the wake of COVID-19, Health Education England has moved to increase university places across all Allied Health Professions (AHPs) by 50%, without any reduction in quality of education. In order to facilitate this increase in student numbers, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and healthcare teams are being asked to change their ways of working and consider alternative supervision models. One such model is the group-based 'coaching' approach which is commonly used in the education of medical students but seldom employed on AHP programmes, where one-to-one supervision remains the default. The research reported herein was tasked with qualitatively elucidating student experiences of such a coaching supervision initiative, introduced by the research team across a set of undergraduate and postgraduate physiotherapy placements in two NHS Trusts the north of England during 2020 and 2021.

Methods

The research team contacted all students who had (a) completed a placement using the coaching supervision model, while also (b) having prior experience of placement(s) using the more conventional one-to-one approach. These students, registered at a number of UK HEIs, were informed that participation would involve sitting for a semi-structured interview in which they would be afforded the opportunity to critically discuss their experiences of the coaching placement. In accordance with time and budgetary constrictions, the first N=20 students to register

interest in participating were invited to take part in an online interview. All invited students provided interviews, with a mean duration of 25 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with redactions made only for participant identity protection. Transcripts were investigated coordinatively by the full research team using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Results

Analysis yielded four global themes. 1. Teamwork and Camaraderie; the collective experience engendered by the coaching model was widely lauded and cited as a source of confidence and support, though some participants were conscious that they were too often deferring to the more 'experienced' students in their group. 2. Leadership; all students cited opportunities to lead and delegate within their group as important to their professional development, though the experience of being led - and delegated to - by other students was more difficult for some than others. 3. Safety Nets; it was commonly asserted that the coaching model exposed both strengths and weaknesses in performance much more than one-to-one supervision, which was taken to simultaneously boost and undermine confidence. 4. Acceleration and Inertia; while all students argued that they initially learned more quickly in the group environment, a few contended that, as time passed, it began to hold them back.

Conclusion(s)

Findings indicated that although the coaching model was generally very popular with students, these successes did not come without caveats. Future research might specifically investigate links between these caveats and student profiles over a wider population.

Impact

These findings have clear import for nuancing in design of future coaching placements, particularly regarding how to maintain the strengths while further improving the student experience.