

The Perspectives of Fieldwork Educators Regarding Level II Fieldwork Students

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ABSTRACT. Ten occupational therapists employed in pediatric and adult rehabilitation settings participated in focus groups to discuss their perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks in working with occupational therapy students. Participants identified professional values, opportunities for continued professional development, recruitment of future employees, and pride in learning experiences available as incentives for working with students. Fieldwork educators who had supervised students lacking foundational communication, problem-solving, and clinical skills were cautious about accepting future Level II students. Time constraints and lack of preparation for the educator role were perceived as barriers to working with students. Fieldwork educators expected the academic institution to provide efficient support, including training for the educator role, information regarding the expectations of the academic program, and ongoing communication over the fieldwork experience. Strategies for strengthening the ties between academic programs and fieldwork sites were explored.

KEYWORDS. education, fieldwork supervisor, occupational therapy, supervision

Fieldwork education has been described as a primary determinant in accomplishing the ideals of the 2017 Centennial Vision (Musselman, 2007; Stutz-Tannenbaum & Hooper, 2009). In order to establish a *powerful, widely recognized profession* with a *globally connected and diverse workforce*, more occupational therapists, representing diverse practice settings, will be needed to step into the fieldwork educator role. Will this happen? A recent national study of the occupational therapy workforce estimates a national vacancy rate of 8 to 9% for occupational therapy personnel with regional vacancies as high as 11.9% in the western states. Lack of applicants is identified as the primary barrier to hiring needed staff (Powell, Kanny, & Coil, 2008). Workforce shortage, lack of therapist time to train students, and fieldwork supervisory positions left vacant or converted *per diem* positions may impact the availability of quality Level II fieldwork sites.

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The quality of the student's learning experience may also be compromised by healthcare challenges. Vogel, Grice, Hill, and Moody (2004) found that fieldwork supervisors working in medical settings had higher levels of expectations for students as compared to five years previously. The demands of health care environments, including productivity expectations, larger caseloads, and increased documentation requirements influenced these changes. Although survey results indicated that the participants would likely spend the same or more time directly teaching students, there is a high likelihood that lack of time would impact the types of learning experiences and opportunities for learning available for students. Although studies have been conducted in other countries, there is a paucity of recent research documenting the motivations and perspectives of Level II fieldwork educators in the United States. The purpose of this study is to raise awareness of the needs and expectations of fieldwork educators with regard to Level II students and thereby enrich both the quality and availability of fieldwork education opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Previous research conducted in the United States verifies that fieldwork educators voice a sense of duty to the client, student, and profession, and experience a sense of satisfaction in contributing to the profession through the education of students (Meyers, 1994). Tompson and Proctor (1990), writing from a Canadian perspective, found that fieldwork educators identified Level II fieldwork students as a stimulus for keeping current the treatment techniques and research related to patient care. Quality students were valued for contributing to the development of employee skills and filling staffing needs. Thomas et al. (2007) explored the perspectives of occupational therapy fieldwork educators in Australia and similarly found fieldwork educators' valued opportunities for recruitment, student contribution to work projects, and the development of employee skills. Student promotion of new ideas to energize and refresh staff, students' research skills, and improved connections with local universities were also appreciated. However, staffing issues, lack of physical resources, and prohibitive workload pressures have been cited as obstacles to working with students (Mason & Bull, 2006; Meyers, 1994; Thomas et al., 2007; Tompson & Proctor, 1990). A survey of fieldwork educators and academic fieldwork coordinators revealed a difference of opinion with regard to the impact of reimbursement and productivity standards on acceptance of fieldwork students. Most academic coordinators believed that reimbursement issues had negatively impacted the ability of fieldwork sites to accept students, whereas fieldwork educators were divided evenly on the issue. In addition, most academic coordinators believed that increased productivity standards negatively influenced the willingness of a placement site to accept students, whereas most fieldwork educators disagreed with that assertion (Casares, Bradley, Jaffe, & Lee, 2003).

Another issue preventing expansion of fieldwork placements may be the discrepancy between student and fieldwork educators' expectations. Although fieldwork educators expect to model the application of intervention procedures and behaviors inherent to the professional role for students, they have experienced considerable

stress related to poor student performance (James & Musselman, 2005; Mason & Bull, 2006; Tompson & Proctor, 1990). Performance expectations might be influenced by disparity between academic and practice contexts as to what constitutes *best practice*. In the past 10 years, graduate education has had a much stronger focus on the use of occupation or meaningful activities as intervention (Hooper, 2010), while it appears that practitioners are primarily using component-level procedures to accomplish therapy goals (Smallfield & Karges, 2009). In a study of Level I fieldwork contexts and practices, students reported that opportunities for experiencing occupation-based practice and observing use of theory in practice were particularly limited in physical disability settings (Johnson, Koenig, Piersol, Santalucia, & Wachter-Schutz, 2006). Furthermore, with entry-level practice now at the graduate level, accreditation standards related to fieldwork have changed to be consistent with standards for best practice (American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), 2006). Fieldwork educators are expected to model the use of evidence in practice, be conversant with foundational theories and frameworks for practice, integrate evidence in relation to professional practices, and appreciate the importance of the client-centered therapy process (Hatkevich & Miller, 2009). However, the support mechanisms available from academic programs to assure that these expectations are met have not been studied in the United States. Increased support is likely needed as evidenced by a study in Australia that revealed, fieldwork educators desired ongoing training for the fieldwork educator role, tangible recognition from educational programs, and closer overall collaboration between universities and fieldwork educators to support educational efforts (Kirke, Layton, & Sim, 2007).

While fieldwork educator perspectives have been studied in other countries, the research conducted has been limited in scope and because of differences in healthcare and education systems may not accurately reflect the perspectives of fieldwork educators in the United States. Potential fieldwork shortage, changing work conditions in the healthcare environment, and changes in occupational therapy education impact fieldwork educators and thus it is critical to gain their perspective about fieldwork students and their experiences. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore fieldwork educator motivations for working with students and the kind of support needed from the academic institution.

METHODS

Design

This pilot study used an electronic focus group format to explore the range of factors considered by fieldwork educators when working with students and academic institutions. The specific research questions are in Table 1.

Focus groups offer advantages over the individual interview because the group process provides opportunity for participants to clarify and elaborate on their point of view (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Further, dimensions of the experience untapped by the conventional interview can be revealed and an understanding of the group norms can be attained (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002; Perelman & Curran, 2006). This method is particularly relevant to obtaining fieldwork educator

TABLE 1. Focus Group Discussion Questions

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1. What are the factors that influence your decision to provide Level II occupational therapy fieldwork education?
Probing question: How and to what degree to these factors influence your decision-making?
 2. What do you perceive as the value or benefit of accommodating Level II occupational therapy fieldwork students?
Probing question: How does this benefit influence your work?
 3. What are the drawbacks or challenges in working with Level II occupational therapy students?
Probing questions: How do you go about addressing these challenges? How might academic programs assist you with these challenges?
 4. What type of support would you like to have provided by the academic institution when accommodating Level II occupational therapy students?
Probing question: In what form should support be provided? What other advice would you offer to academic programs about supporting your work as a fieldwork educator?
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perspectives, as the intent of the study is to understand common motivations with regard to students and academic institutions.

Electronic focus groups have been predominantly used in marketing research but have recently been applied to healthcare (Watson, Peacock, & Jones, 2006). The most obvious advantage to on-line groups is the opportunity for greater diversity of participants because there is opportunity to communicate with participants in different geographical areas (Im & Chee, 2006; Tates et al., 2009). In addition, there is a higher response rate to group questions with online focus groups, as study participants are able to respond at their leisure without pressure from other participants (Im & Chee, 2006; Kenny, 2005). Quieter individuals have opportunities to share information and express themselves in electronic focus groups that might not be evident in face-to-face interactions (Tates et al., 2009). Members of an online focus group are able to form a cohesive bond despite lack of direct contact, as the principles of group dynamics are applicable to both the virtual and face-to-face world (Watson et al., 2006). When using electronic focus groups, extra effort must be given to clarify responses because lack of non-verbal cues may lead to misunderstandings. In addition, care should be given to computer usage and training to ensure that all participants are familiar with the technology involved.

For this study, focus groups took place over a 2-week period on the discussion board, an electronic feature of the Blackboard software program. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to the study and all participants gave informed consent through email prior to the focus group implementation. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Participants

Participants with practice experience and an interest in fieldwork education were sought through an email announcement sent to all students enrolled in an occupational therapy online transitional master's program at a Midwestern university; a database of approximately 60 registered occupational therapists. Subjects were required to be familiar with the use of the discussion board feature of the Blackboard course management system and have experience as a primary clinical educator for at least one Level II occupational therapy student within the past 3 years. Ten subjects were chosen to participate in two separate focus groups. One group consisted

of five occupational therapists employed in pediatric practice settings and the other of five occupational therapists employed in adult rehabilitation settings, areas of practice considered representative of the majority of working occupational therapists (National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT), 2004). Of the 10 subjects chosen, eight had worked with Level II fieldwork students from at least three separate academic programs while two had supervised at least one Level II student from one academic program. Subjects were located in five different states and represented diverse geographic regions of the United States.

Procedure

Therapists who had received the email invitation were directed to contact the primary researcher regarding their interest in study participation with their email response serving as a notification of consent to participate in the study. Subjects were provided an explanatory statement outlining the purpose of the study and informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and withdrawal could occur at any time during the course of study without negative consequences. The primary researcher, although employed as an academic fieldwork coordinator in the occupational therapy department of the participating university, was not actively teaching in the transitional master's program during the time period the research study was conducted. In order to encourage participation, the researcher secured permission to offer study participants the equivalent of one point extra credit on a hundred-point scale for a selected course in the transitional master's program.

Participants were informed that they would participate in a discussion board format held for 2 weeks and that the study would involve approximately 90 min of their time. The researcher posted the main research questions in two separate forums of Blackboard (see Table 1). Participants were asked to respond to each question posted by the researcher and respond to at least two of their peers in their focus group within the designated 2-week time frame. A semi-structured interviewing approach was used in both groups, in which core questions were articulated and the researcher asked follow-up questions to invite clarification where the meaning or intent of the response was not clear. The researcher was familiar with the issues surrounding fieldwork education and utilized this expertise to follow-up on key issues where further depth of response was important. In order to ensure trustworthiness in the data collection and analysis, the researcher adopted the technique of bracketing assumptions (identifying personal assumptions related to the data prior to the analysis process to ensure that study results were reflective of actual data gathered rather than researcher bias).

At the end of the data completion period, the data was downloaded from Blackboard into hard copy format with participant names and identifying features of the data deleted. The entire verbatim transcripts of each focus group were read to identify overall phenomena of interest. Potential areas of bias were identified and the data was reviewed again to ensure objectivity. When differences were observed in the data from each group, the original transcripts were again reviewed to determine the degree to which findings were representative of the participant data. In order to support trustworthiness, categories were included only when quotes supporting each category could be found verbatim within the focus group transcripts (Kreuger, 1998).

Throughout the analysis, there was careful analysis to ensure that categories developed in response to each focus group question were reflective of both groups. Data were then placed into an expanded format and, using a content analysis approach (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002), themes reflective of fieldwork educator perspectives were identified. During the data analysis process, the researcher often returned to the data (printed output) to confirm emerging categories and themes as a means to minimize bias. Individual quotes were repeatedly viewed within the narrative of each completed focus group transcript and individually within the sorted category to ensure authenticity and accuracy of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were organized into themes, reflective of the research questions. The four themes were: (1) factors considered by fieldwork educators when contemplating student placement, (2) drawbacks to working with students, (3) benefits to working with quality students, and (4) desired support from academic programs. Each theme is illustrated with a few quotations selected from the participants to support data authenticity.

Factors Considered by Fieldwork Educators when Contemplating Student Placement

Several factors were mentioned when occupational therapists in this study considered whether take a student. This included learning experiences available at the facility, staffing patterns, time available to support student supervision, and their relationship with the academic institution. Therapists considered the learning experiences available for students not only in the occupational therapy program but also in the entire facility. Generally, therapists expressed pride in the quality or variety of learning experiences that they were able to provide to students and felt it was their professional responsibility to *give back* to the educational community that provided learning experiences to them:

I was blessed as a student to have awesome clinical instructors and I want to provide the same or better experience for current students. (A3)

Therapists reported they considered the resources available within the facility before accepting a student, including the personnel resources to assist student supervision. Short staffing patterns and reduced work schedules at the facility, as well as difficulties in arranging the departmental therapy calendar were considered impediments to working with students:

The biggest challenge for our facility is scheduling. Although we have a large occupational therapy staff, only 6 work 40 hours per week and in addition, many work 10-hour days. Most students have to have more than one supervisor; we have had to schedule 3 supervisors recently (for one student) and both the therapists and student found that to be very frustrating. (P5)

When therapists considered whether to provide Level II occupational therapy fieldwork education, they also considered their relationship with the occupational therapy program. This might include both a preference from students because of

the general aptitudes displayed by students from a particular program or a dislike of working with a particular program because of experiences with students. Fieldwork was unanimously viewed as an opportunity to build relationships with individuals in the academic setting. Some respondents expressed interest in involvement in research projects, supporting evidence-based practice and an interest in gaining access to library resources of the university. Participants indicated that this would be helpful to their professional development and ultimately to both their practice and the education of students.

Drawbacks to Working with Students

As fieldwork educators shared about the drawbacks to working with students, flexibility and commitment on the part of staff and clients was often mentioned:

Having students requires a great deal of commitment from departmental staff and flexibility from clients. There is a learning curve for staff to become comfortable teaching clinical skills as well as documenting student outcomes. The development of learning objectives and the student program also involve time, energy, and knowledge from the staff. . . Each student brings different strengths, learning styles, needs and challenges. The staff then needs to be able to adjust either the program or their approach in supporting students. (P4)

When time was mentioned as a drawback, therapists spontaneously joined in the discussion regarding time needed to prepare program for students and the additional work that could be incurred once students were at the facility:

During the initial weeks, a significant amount of time is spent reviewing the basic clinical practices of an occupational therapist including range of motion, manual muscle testing, transfers, dressing techniques, etc. Teaching takes a huge portion of time out of the day therefore decreasing productivity and causing strain on the fieldwork educator to perform job duties in a timely manner. (A3)

I know what you mean! I remember when I had my first student how excited I was that he or she would learn with me and help me be more productive. I had no idea how much work it was going to be. It was rewarding personally but required long hours of education and training to get the student up to speed with documentation, and feeling comfortable with patient evaluations and direct care. Rather than helping me to be more productive it decreased my productivity for all but the last few weeks of the 12 week rotation. I was surprised at how taxing it was. (A5)

When discussing impediments to spending time supervising students, clinicians in adult rehabilitation centers often mentioned part-time scheduling as a stressor, whereas pediatric therapists in school settings reported excessive travel time as a primary obstacle. Respondents in both groups reported creative and flexible use of time to work with students. In pediatric settings, therapists reported using time while driving to and from school placement settings for supervision discussions. Respondents working in physical disabilities placement settings indicated that they would eat their meal and complete student supervision discussions during lunch breaks as needed.

In both groups, the topic of student preparedness for Level II fieldwork stimulated extensive discussion. Several respondents expressed their frustration with students who were not adequately prepared to participate in the fieldwork experience. Skills that were lacking in students included communication skills required for everyday interactions with clients, skills inherent to the assessment and intervention process with clients, and writing skills.

In response to a prompting question from a researcher, respondents shared potential solutions. Several respondents suggested that skills might have been taught but forgotten and stated that students needed to be responsible themselves to review their information before coming to the professional setting. Therapists also indicated that academic educators needed to provide more “hands on” learning opportunities and several suggestions were made as to how academic programs could do a better job of preparing students for the practice setting:

The student had much theory and background, but had little to no authentic observation or hands-on learning experiences. The student stated she did not feel prepared for her fieldwork with the birth to three population. (P1)

Level I students are easy and possibly a missed opportunity as this is where they could complete a “skill requirement checklist” of manual muscle testing, range of motion readings, handling a wheelchair, using modalities, completing a feeding assessment, starting a new evaluation, or writing a weekly/daily note with progress summary or new goals and a discharge plan. This would be better than a case study [assignment] for the school that we don’t see or provide feedback on. (A1)

... prepare students for electronic documentation by giving them a limited amount of time and space for their writing. . . Most importantly, have each student practice how they will explain the profession of occupational therapy to clients and respond to the patient who says “I am retired, I don’t need occupational therapy” or “I don’t enjoy crafts” or “what is the different between physical therapy and occupational therapy?” (A3)

The Benefits of Students

Participants identified several benefits to working with students that were prepared for the practice setting. They identified *good* students as those who had the foundational skills to participate in typical clinical activities such as assessment, intervention, and documentation. Rather than waiting for their supervisor to tell them what to do, these students took the initiative to find answers to questions and clearly communicated concerns with their supervisor when assistance was needed. In addition, these students were responsive to supervisor feedback, changing problematic behaviors once they were pointed out. Fieldwork educators reported that *good* students boosted their energy and that they found it professionally rewarding to see these students’ transition into a therapist role. As an added benefit, several reported that they were able to better stay abreast of changes or new developments in the profession. Students were credited with providing not only information but also motivation for continued professional development:

It is a great opportunity for me to grow professionally. Students come with new knowledge and ideas. They are good at asking questions and offer challenges to the way I practice. This makes me critically analyze what I am doing which improves my performance. (A5)

Students provide me with motivation to offer the best therapies possible because I want to provide a good example to the student and student enthusiasm is contagious. (A2)

The value of new students to me is the new learning . . . I can learn new techniques, different theories, and new mindsets from them. Students always come out enthused and ready to work, sometimes we lose that as seasoned therapists. (P2)

Facility recruitment of potential occupational therapists was mentioned as a benefit of a student fieldwork program. When recruitment was mentioned, therapists indicated that they liked the idea of training students to become therapists as they were then able to shape both the values and skills of potential employees.

Desired Supports from Academic Programs

When indicating the types of support valued before and during the Level II fieldwork placement, most respondents emphasized the need for ongoing communication between the fieldwork site and the academic program. Prior to the fieldwork placement, fieldwork educators felt it was important that the expectations of the facility be communicated to the student. In addition, fieldwork educators were interested in obtaining the student's learning profile in order to more effectively match students to educators. Therapists expressed a desire to understand the basic expectations of each curriculum and particularly the differences in expectations between bachelor's, master's, and doctorate curriculums. There was also an interest in ongoing updates from the school to gain a broad picture of the learning experience of the student:

A review of the curriculum and how accreditation standards are addressed would be helpful and an in-service regarding the various entry-level education expectations for occupational therapy. At our department we have certified therapists with various entry-level degrees. I think this impacts supervision of student in that the supervisor may feel intimidated by the degree level of the student. (P5)

It would be great to have information about fieldwork supervising in general; what the process is, the forms, and a calendar of weekly expectations. (A1)

It would be helpful to have some basic objectives from the college that correlate with the AOTA evaluation criteria . . . it would be beneficial to have room for fieldwork educators to expand on objectives in order to tailor the objectives to the site and population. (A2)

I would like to see newsletters from the school on what's going on or has changed in the curriculum, and the projects the students are involved in on a regular basis, even when I don't have students. (P2)

Several respondents indicated that they would appreciate more resources from the academic setting for providing appropriate feedback, dealing with conflict, and managing struggling students. Fieldwork educators expressed a desire for training updates on the evaluation form and resources for tailoring the learning experience to fit each student:

I would like information regarding student learning styles, tips for planning and preparing for the student and how to support the student through questioning. Learning strategies for providing effective feedback, especially for situations involving conflict would be helpful. I would also like to be aware of the legal implications of clinical education and effective documentation techniques for the struggling student. Any tips for time management while taking a student would also be a plus. (P3)

Communication from the academic program during the fieldwork experience was considered valuable for both the fieldwork educator and the student. It was suggested that communication could be an email at 2 or 3 weeks and everyone agreed that the academic coordinator should contact the fieldwork site by midterm. It was proposed that students should contact the academic fieldwork coordinator at least once during the fieldwork assignment; contact with an advisor was also suggested as potentially helpful. Lack of communication was not reviewed positively:

Waiting until midterm is really placing both the student and the fieldwork educator 'out there' without much support. A check-in with both student and educator after two weeks is a great idea. Maybe this could be in the form of an e-mail, phone call or video conference. It doesn't seem fair to me to only provide support to students who are having difficulty. Just because someone isn't failing their fieldwork doesn't mean they aren't struggling with the transition to a workplace, or to working with a new set of people and their philosophies. (P1)

Communication with the [academic] occupational therapy program is essential before and during student rotations and especially with more challenging students. (A4)

Having thorough background information on the student, awareness of the curriculum and open communication lines is vital . . . Having a sense of the student expectations and needs is also valuable. (P4)

Beyond contact on Level II fieldwork, respondents indicated that they would like to be more closely connected with the university. They indicated they would like to have input into the assignments completed by students on Level I fieldworks and provide feedback or evaluate the curriculum of any given academic setting based on the readiness of students from that particular setting. It was also viewed as helpful for fieldwork educators to communicate with one another while accommodating students, in order to share ideas and struggles. Although communication was valued, fieldwork educators were careful to suggest that communication be brief, direct, and concise. Electronic communication was recommended over telephone contact because of scheduling difficulties and time constraints.

APPLICATION TO PRACTICE AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Participants in this study indicated that professional values, opportunities for continued professional development, and pride in learning experiences available were a positive influence for taking students for Level II fieldwork, similar to the findings of Richard (2008). As with other studies (Meyers, 1994; Tompson & Proctor, 1990), the aspect of *giving back to the profession* was evident as was the opportunity to shape the values and skills of potential employees. Academic programs should consider capitalizing on these findings through incentives, recognizing exemplary fieldwork educators and facilities. Continuing education opportunities offered through the academic program may be a worthwhile incentive for some fieldwork educators. Purposeful marketing of recruitment benefits associated with fieldwork may attract some education sites.

The drawbacks identified to working with students are consistent with the challenges acknowledged in international studies and similar to those reported in the professional literature in the past decade (Meyers, 1994; Thomas et al., 2007; Tompson & Proctor, 1990). Time and productivity constraints affect therapists' readiness to assume responsibility for a longer term Level II student and the quality of support that fieldwork educators can realistically provide to students, especially to struggling students (James & Musselman, 2005; Mason & Bull, 2006). Identified barriers, such as time constraints and staffing problems, may be beyond the control of the individual fieldwork educator. Findings from this study support the need for administrative support for the fieldwork educator role, possibly in the form of reduced caseload, lessening of other responsibilities, and support for fieldwork educator training. A social network of peer support may be helpful in managing the time and productivity demands associated with the fieldwork educator's role. Fieldwork educators may benefit from consideration of fieldwork models highlighting interdisciplinary cooperation during fieldwork, such as the aggregate model introduced by Precin (2007, 2009).

In discussing the drawbacks to working with students, fieldwork educators were adamant about the numerous demands of working with struggling students. Suggestions offered, including more applied learning during the academic portion of the curriculum, appear to be related to frustrations with lack of student preparation for contemporary practice. These findings are consistent with the literature indicating that students and beginning therapists often feel inadequately prepared with regard to practical skills (Hodgetts et al., 2007; Rugg, 2002). Other results suggest that to minimize fieldwork educator frustration, academic educators should carefully communicate with fieldwork educators regarding practice expectations and expand student opportunities to practice skills required in the practice environment prior to Level II fieldwork placement. Pretesting student competencies in assessment, intervention, and documentation prior to Level II fieldwork placement may be another strategy to ensure that practical skills are satisfactorily developed.

Frustration with student skill levels may be related to lack of communication between the site, the student, and the academic institution regarding student expectations in the fieldwork environment. Training for the educator role and regular exchange of information between the academic institution and fieldwork setting regarding desired skills and behaviors of the student have potential to lessen the

identified challenges. Experience in the clinical role does not in itself prepare the therapist for the role of educator (Stutz-Tannenbaum & Hooper, 2009; Thomas et al., 2007). Therapists appeared to be open to a variety of options for learning but were careful to express that their time was limited. Thus, options supporting asynchronous electronic exchange of information were favored over *live* discussion venues. Fieldwork educators report being pressed for time and wanted practical information from the academic program that would assist them in efficiently developing their student program and in effectively providing learning experiences beneficial to student development. For example, they wanted sample objectives and weekly schedules that they could adapt to their fieldwork program. They wanted tips for supporting student learning and dealing with struggling students that could be practically applied even within time-pressured environments. Ongoing communication and the dissemination of practical supports from the academic fieldwork coordinator were desired. It may be in the best interest of academic programs to explore multiple venues for fieldwork educator training, including periodic electronic updates on educational topics throughout the duration of a Level II student placement. Such initiatives may lessen frustration and provide perspective as to realistic expectations for beginning student performance in the clinical setting.

The findings from this study support established accreditation standards for fieldwork education, which emphasize communication and exchange of information between academic and fieldwork settings (AOTA, 2006). Specifically, fieldwork educators want to communicate regularly with academic settings and provide feedback regarding the preparation of students. Reciprocal exchange may be instrumental in bridging the theory–practice gap reported between clinical and academic settings (Kielhofner, 2005). It is noteworthy that fieldwork educators, in spite of time limitations, value opportunities for exchange of information with the academic setting. Opportunities to accommodate information exchange should therefore be transparent and easy to access. For example, a link on the departmental website might easily connect the academic educator with fieldwork educators who are willing to provide a guest lecture on a topic or collaborate on a research project. Such interaction can benefit the education of students, stimulate the professional development of fieldwork educators, and enhance the academic curriculum.

LIMITATIONS

There are significant limitations to this study. First, the respondents were only a small group of individuals from two practice areas. In addition, all participants were currently pursuing education beyond the entry-level bachelor's degree from the same Midwestern university and their perspectives may be reflective of a cohort of individuals more invested in the educational process. However, the purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of fieldwork educators from two diverse practice settings, and the themes presented reflect the experiences of these fieldwork educators. This exploratory study can be used as a tool for a larger and more in-depth study or to use ideas to build relationships between programs and fieldwork educators.

SUMMARY

Fieldwork educators identify several benefits as well as drawbacks to working with students. Opportunities for professional development, increased motivation for practice, and recruitment of potential employees are incentives for participation in student education. Time constraints, lack of training for the educator role, and student performance concerns are deterrents to providing Level II fieldwork experiences. The pride taken by therapists with regard to their work, coupled with professional values, provide a strong foundation for ongoing partnerships between academic and clinical settings. Fieldwork educators appear to value the opportunities for continuing education that might be available through the academic setting, such as access to library resources or updates from students. In this study, they expressed a desire to understand the unique requirements of each academic setting to better meet the expectations for student learning. Fieldwork educators feel they can offer the academic setting quality learning experiences and feedback that would enhance the occupational therapy program curriculum. In order for reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships to develop and flourish between academic and clinical settings.

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