Fieldwork in Schools: A Model for Alternative Settings

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Objective. An exploratory study was conducted at the University of New Hampshire to increase the number of school-based fieldwork opportunities for occupational therapy students and to guide the development of a model for first-time fieldwork supervisors in schools.

Method. Responses to a questionnaire completed by 119 occupational therapists working in schools in northern New England provided a description of both school-based occupational therapy practice and of their needs as supervisors. Interviews with 12 occupational therapists who had supervised fieldwork students in schools provided qualitative information.

Results. Findings suggested that school-based practice issues such as working part time, traveling between schools, and using a variety of service delivery models created particular challenges for fieldwork supervisors in schools. A process of addressing fieldwork supervisors' concerns during recruitment and in a fieldwork supervisor seminar and providing ongoing support resulted in successful fieldwork experiences for occupational therapy students.

Discussion. This process of studying a practice setting in order to develop a model for fieldwork that addresses the uniqueness of the setting may be used to develop fieldwork opportunities in other practice settings as well.

Practice environments for occupational therapists have expanded beyond traditional medical facilities to include schools, work places, day care centers, technology centers, residential care facilities, and independent living centers (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1991b; Baum, 1986). Entry-level occupational therapists must understand and prepare to work in the variety of practice settings that exist today and will increase in the future. Fieldwork experience is important in helping students to develop not only the clinical skills but also the interpersonal skills that they will need to work effectively in a particular setting. Because working relationships are not the same for all types of settings, Baum encouraged students to prepare themselves for potential employment settings by pursuing fieldwork experiences in the settings in which they are likely to eventually practice.

According to the most recent AOTA member data survey (1991b), of all types of facilities, public schools employed the largest percentage of registered occupational therapists. However, Rovenec and Coutinho (1991) claimed that occupational therapists lack a basic understanding of special education issues within the school setting. Understanding the school setting enables occupational therapists to more effectively identify their roles in relation to teachers and other school staff members (Niehues, Bundy, Mattingly, & Lawlor, 1991). Niehues et al. suggested that occupational therapists need preparation before they begin working in schools. Coutinho and Hunter (1988) emphasized that occupational therapists must know the laws governing occupational therapy services in schools and understand how the school system operates in order to become part of that setting. They also indicated that occupational therapists who work in schools must have the interpersonal skills necessary to communicate effectively with teachers and parents. Communication difficulties created by the lack of a common language between occupational therapists and educators may preclude occupational therapists from understanding special education issues and from establishing effective working relationships (Coutinho & Hunter, 1988). Kaplan and Porway (1988) have urged occupational therapists who are planning to work in schools to obtain supervised, practical experience in the school setting before taking such a job. Fieldwork opportunities that prepare occupational therapy students for school-based practice are central to their educational needs (L. Jackson, personal communication, March 15, 1994; Whitworth, 1994). The Pediatric Curriculum Committee described pediatric Level II fieldwork as essential to preparing occupational therapists for entry-level practice (AOTA, 1991a).

Despite the emphasis in the literature on the need for preparation, the lack of fieldwork opportunities in the school setting limits the number of occupational therapy students who are able to gain the necessary experience.
In a random survey of 250 occupational therapists working in pediatrics, only 18.6% had completed a Level II fieldwork experience in a school system (AOTA, 1991a). Although the number of fieldwork sites in schools is increasing, the increase lags far behind projections for the number of occupational therapists who will be employed in schools (L. Jackson, personal communication, March 15, 1994; C. Rogers, personal communication, March 22, 1994).

Exploratory Study

To prepare to establish new fieldwork sites in schools for occupational therapy students at the University of New Hampshire, we conducted an exploratory study of occupational therapists who worked in schools within the university’s primary fieldwork region. Through the study we obtained basic information about school-based occupational therapy practice and occupational therapists’ fieldwork supervisory needs. We later used this information to develop components of a model that would be used to increase the number of school-based fieldwork opportunities for occupational therapy students.

Names of occupational therapists working in schools were obtained by contacting each school district in the state of New Hampshire as well as the area within a 100-mile radius of the University of New Hampshire that covered southwestern Maine and northeastern Massachusetts, including the greater Boston area ($N = 237$). An 8-page questionnaire was designed for the study to: (a) obtain an overview of school-based occupational therapy practice that we could use both to prepare students for practice and to help supervisors prepare for a fieldwork student, (b) identify the fieldwork supervisory needs of occupational therapists working in schools, and (c) identify occupational therapists who had experience supervising fieldwork students in schools. The questionnaire, along with a cover letter that explained how the data obtained would be used, was sent to the 237 occupational therapists working in schools; a reminder card was sent 2 weeks later. Of the 237 questionnaires sent, 119 were returned complete enough for analysis. We continued our exploratory study by interviewing 12 of the 23 occupational therapists in the region who indicated that they had supervised fieldwork students in schools. Our goal was to discover how they overcame obstacles to fieldwork in schools and how they juggled the responsibilities of fieldwork supervision with practice.

School-Based Occupational Therapy Practice

The questionnaire asked the respondents to provide (a) their employment arrangement with the school district (i.e., direct, independent, or agency contract), (b) the number of hours they worked in school districts, (c) their activities during a typical work week, (d) the number of children in their caseloads, (e) the sites for therapy, and (f) the frequency of their communication with other occupational therapists working in schools.

Analysis of the data (see Tables 1 through 3) revealed that the respondents were hired through a variety of arrangements and that they worked from a few hours to full time. Most worked 40 to 5 school days. Ninety percent of the respondents were not responsible for school duties such as lunch, bus, or recess. Most of their time was spent providing one-to-one treatment, group treatment, or assessment. Respondents reported seeing an average of 22 children per week (interquartile range: 13 to 30 children per week). Most of the respondents had weekly to monthly contact with other school occupational therapists.

Fieldwork Supervisory Needs

One section of the questionnaire contained a list of 20 perceived fieldwork supervisory need statements derived from studies by Christie, Joyce, and Moeller (1985) and Cohn and Frum (1988) as well as from concerns that we identified as specific to the school setting as a fieldwork site. Respondents indicated whether each item would be Very Helpful, Somewhat Helpful, or Not Necessary to becoming a fieldwork supervisor or to helping them become a better fieldwork supervisor. Fifteen of the 20 items were identified as Very Helpful or Somewhat Helpful by more than 60% of the respondents.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term of Employment</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hired directly by school district</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent contract (private practice)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract from outside agency</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 126$. Some of the 119 respondents worked in more than one school district and answered questions for each district in which they worked.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours worked in school district</td>
<td>5-12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children seen per week</td>
<td>0-99</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours spent per week in occupational therapy activities</td>
<td>Direct treatment: one-to-one</td>
<td>0-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct treatment: group</td>
<td>0-21</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>0-6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>0-18</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 126$. Some of the 119 respondents worked in more than one school district and answered questions for each district in which they worked.
A panel of seven occupational therapy educators, three of whom had experience as academic fieldwork coordinators, analyzed and categorized the 15 items by the type of information that they addressed (see Table 4). This panel identified three categories of needs: (a) general fieldwork needs, which are common to most new fieldwork supervisors, included issues related to establishing and implementing a fieldwork program; (b) administrative-logistical needs, which are more specific to occupational therapists working in schools, included issues related to the school setting and to service delivery; and (c) supervisory skill needs, which are common to most new fieldwork supervisors, included issues related to the interpersonal communication involved in supervising a fieldwork student.

### Occupational Therapists With Experience Supervising Fieldwork Students in Schools

Of the 119 respondents, only 25 (19%) had supervised Level II fieldwork students in a school setting. Telephone interviews with 12 of them provided information about how they first began supervising fieldwork students in schools, how their supervisory needs were met, and what level of success they perceived in the experience.

Five of the 12 respondents worked part-time. All described their work setting as “typical school-based practice,” in which they traveled between schools, used a variety of service delivery models, and worked independently of other occupational therapists. They did not see themselves (or their work scenarios) as different from other school-based therapists.

Five of the 12 respondents had shared supervisory responsibilities for a fieldwork student. 7 had been the student’s only supervisor, and 1 worked in a school in which other occupational therapists also supervised a fieldwork student. All felt successful in their fieldwork supervision experiences. When asked how they began supervising a fieldwork student, most respondents said that they had not sought out a fieldwork student. Several respondents worked in a school district in which previously employed occupational therapists had scheduled fieldwork students; others had been asked to do so by an academic fieldwork coordinator at a nearby university.

Respondents identified a variety of benefits to fieldwork supervision. They said that fieldwork students had a positive effect on their school administrator’s attitude toward occupational therapy. They also described their own professional growth that resulted from the experience, saying fieldwork students “had new ideas,” “refreshed my own knowledge,” and “kept me alert by their thought-provoking questions.” Respondents expressed a strong motivation to continue supervising fieldwork students and a strong belief that fieldwork in a school setting is essential preparation for practice in that setting.

### School Fieldwork Model

On the basis of the information obtained from the questionnaires and interviews, we developed a model designed to increase fieldwork opportunities in schools. The process of developing fieldwork sites in schools consisted of four key components: (a) recruiting occupational therapists, (b) preparing occupational therapists for fieldwork supervision, (c) preparing occupational therapy students for school settings, and (d) supporting supervisors and students.

#### Recruiting Occupational Therapists

To select potential fieldwork supervisors, we considered occupational therapists’ interest in supervising a student (as expressed on the questionnaires), the school administration’s willingness to support the supervisor and the student as needed, and the school’s geographic location.
We contacted potential fieldwork supervisors by telephone and explored their concerns, their needs, and the administrative support available to them for fieldwork supervision. Respondents expressed concerns about four primary issues:

1. **Part-time work.** Several respondents questioned how they could supervise fieldwork students when they themselves only worked part time. We resolved this concern by helping them establish shared supervision responsibilities and offering them guidance in the selection of a colleague with whom they could share supervision tasks.

2. **Liability.** Several respondents expressed concern that they would be responsible for professional liability because fieldwork students would not have coverage to work in schools. We informed them that the students carried their own malpractice insurance through a university group policy and that practice liability was no different in schools than in other settings.

3. **Student learning opportunities.** Respondents who worked with children with a wide range of disabilities (from a mild learning disability to severe multiple impairments) were concerned about the lack of consistent caseloads for fieldwork students. They also were concerned because they did not see all the children on a regular basis, as frequency was determined by a child’s individual education plan (IEP). Thus, students would lack continuity in learning. To address these concerns, we discussed the importance for fieldwork students to broaden their knowledge and skills by working with a greater number of children of different abilities and providing services to more children per week.

4. **Service delivery methods.** Many respondents, who consult with classroom teachers and work in classrooms with the teachers, expressed reservations regarding sufficient opportunity for fieldwork students to provide direct services with children. We helped occupational therapists recognize that experience using multiple service delivery models and skills in consulting and communicating with other staff members are precisely what fieldwork students need to become effective in working in schools.

Once their initial concerns were addressed, most respondents were interested in the possibility of supervising a fieldwork student. At this point we explained our school fieldwork model to them. We discussed the benefits that a fieldwork student might bring to them and their schools. We also sent written information about the fieldwork model to them and to their respective school administrators in order to help them make a final decision about whether to supervise a fieldwork student.

**Preparing Occupational Therapists for Fieldwork Supervision**

Twenty-nine occupational therapists agreed to become fieldwork supervisors for this project. Of these 29 participants, 27 completed a 2-day seminar before receiving a student for a fieldwork rotation. The 2 participants who were unable to attend either of the two scheduled seminars received seminar information during a 1-day meeting with a seminar faculty member. Through didactic learning, group discussion, and experiential activities, the seminar faculty members (the authors and guest presenters) provided theoretical and practical information to help participants develop and implement fieldwork programs in their schools.

We helped participants with their general fieldwork needs by providing them with guided practice in writing, help in organizing objectives and outlining learning tasks for their fieldwork students, and assistance in evaluating student performance. We also helped them define the role of fieldwork supervisor. We assisted participants with their administrative/logistical needs by helping them articulate the benefits that fieldwork students bring to children with special needs and to personnel in their schools. Participants explored creative ways to provide timely supervision to fieldwork students without disrupting service delivery in the schools. We helped participants with their supervisory skill needs by offering role-playing activities, in which they practiced providing clear explanations to possible fieldwork student questions, dealing with problems, giving constructive feedback, and developing effective supervisory styles.

During the seminar, participants examined the school-based occupational therapy practice activities in which they took part and used developmental learning theory to identify beginning, intermediate, and advanced level competencies for those activities. Participants then used these competencies to develop learning objectives for fieldwork students in their setting.

**Preparing Fieldwork Students for School Settings**

The 25 fieldwork students in this study had taken the courses required in the occupational therapy curriculum for pediatric practice. These courses provided information on social-emotional child development and neurodevelopmental evaluation and treatment. In addition, students who had requested a fieldwork experience in a school took a required half-semester seminar that was designed to prepare them for the school setting. This seminar emphasized communicating and working effectively in the school environment.

The seminar provided students with information about the unique features of the educational system, the laws governing occupational therapy services in schools, and the roles and limitations of occupational therapists in...
Providing Support to Supervisors and Students

Support has been identified as a need by fieldwork supervisors (Christie et al., 1985). Responses to our questionnaire confirmed this need. In our fieldwork model, support for supervisors began with the initial contact for recruitment, in which we responded to participants' questions. Multiple contacts were made to confirm participation in and provide information about the supervisor seminar. After the seminar, we called supervisors to relay student information and answer their questions as they began to develop their fieldwork programs. Throughout the fieldwork experience, participating fieldwork supervisors and students were called several times. The telephone calls provided opportunities to answer questions that the supervisor or student had and to help them establish a better relationship with each other. We made fieldwork site visits to 16 of the 29 occupational therapists.

As part of the ongoing support offered during the fieldwork experience, supervisors and students attended a 1-day, midplacement seminar after completing 6 weeks of fieldwork. First, supervisors and students met in their respective groups to share experiences, formulate goals for the remainder of the fieldwork experience, and explore possible steps to meet these goals. Then, together, supervisors and students discussed how the fieldwork experience was influencing their views of school-based occupational therapy practice. Supervisors and students shared their assessments of the fieldwork experience up to this point and examined plans for the future on the basis of the goals each had written earlier in the seminar. The seminar also gave the fieldwork supervisors and students contact with their respective peers—an aspect which they claimed was especially helpful because alternative fieldwork sites, such as schools, generally provide limited contact with other occupational therapists.

Outcomes

Both the fieldwork students and the fieldwork supervisors who participated in this model reported many benefits for themselves and for the school setting. The students reported that they gained clinical skills and a better understanding of the school environment as a practice setting. Students reported that this particular setting contributed greatly to their ability to organize their thoughts and actions while remaining adaptable and flexible. They said that they had more self-confidence because of the independence necessitated by the school setting. Students who had two supervisors believed they were at an advantage over students who had one supervisor because they experienced two different approaches to occupational therapy. Some students who had two supervisors were involved in two school districts, each with different personnel. These students reported that the experience broadened their perspective of school-based occupational therapy practice and enhanced their ability to identify an occupational therapist's role.

Several fieldwork supervisors said that helping the fieldwork students understand school-based occupational therapy practice aided in their own awareness of the setting. They said fieldwork students gave them a "fresh look at therapy in schools," provided new ideas for treatment activities, and enhanced their own knowledge base. As fieldwork students began to work independently with children, supervisors found they had more time for their own professional development, consultations with classroom teachers, and new program development. All supervisors agreed that fieldwork students asked thought-provoking, stimulating questions.

Supervisors also reported that a fieldwork student's presence had a positive effect on their school administrators' attitudes toward occupational therapy. Several special education directors wrote to the project faculty members to express their eagerness to continue offering fieldwork opportunities to students. They recognized the value in having an occupational therapy student offer creative ideas and enhance occupational therapy services. In several districts the students offered programming, such as developmental activities in a readiness classroom and a handwriting curriculum, that ended when they left the school. Administrators also saw the fieldwork students as potential employees who had entry-level skills specific to the school setting. Several special education directors requested the names of all the students who had completed fieldwork in schools for use in future job openings.

Discussion

This fieldwork model was developed for school systems
as an alternative to fieldwork settings that use a medical model. To establish fieldwork in this setting, we prepared students for fieldwork in the schools, recruited and prepared occupational therapists to serve as fieldwork supervisors, and supported supervisors during their first fieldwork supervision experience.

Although school-based occupational therapists had some fieldwork supervision needs specific to the school setting, most of their needs were identical to those previously identified by Christie et al. (1985) as typical of all first-time fieldwork supervisors. Because their fieldwork supervisory needs do not differ substantially from those of occupational therapists in other practice settings, we found it necessary to identify and address potential fieldwork supervisors' questions specific to their setting in relation to fieldwork and provide formal preparation. We went through a process of studying a practice setting and applying the information to a fieldwork model of supervisor recruitment and preparation, student preparation, and providing ongoing support. This process was viewed as successful by the fieldwork students, occupational therapy supervisors, and school administration. The process might be useful in expanding fieldwork opportunities in other alternative settings.

Acknowledgments

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References


