A Part-Time Level II Fieldwork Program

Laurie A. Adelstein, Ellen S. Cohn, Robin C. Baker, Mary Alicia Barnes

Key Words: decision making • education, occupational therapy

This paper describes an alternative to the traditional Level II fieldwork program for master's degree students in occupational therapy. In this part-time 9-month program, students complete the fieldwork requirement while simultaneously balancing academic responsibilities. One advantage of this program over the traditional 3-month program is that the extended length of time offers students the opportunity to develop clinical skills beyond the technical level.

Several educators have recommended that alternative approaches to the current 6-month full-time Level II fieldwork model be developed (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1987; Bell, 1986; Crist, 1986; Del Polito, 1986; Hiram, 1987). The current health care provision system with its focus on cost containment, changing demographics in the student population, and the need for therapists who can critically analyze and respond to the changing practice environment are some of the reasons that flexible fieldwork programs are needed.

According to the records kept by AOTA's Research Information and Evaluation Division, the majority of the students in entry level programs are in the 20-to-30-year age cohort (Silvergleit, personal communication, March 1988). Chickering and Havighurst (1981) described this stage of early adulthood as a "period of special sensitivity, readiness to learn, and multiple challenges" (p. 34). Traditionally, this is a time when individuals decide on a partner and possibly start a family, manage a home, and, as evidenced by their preprofessional training status, begin a career. Students in this age cohort have heavy demands on their time, energy, and emotions. "They want curricula content directly relevant to the new range of responsibilities they are learning to manage" (Chickering & Havighurst, p. 37). A full-time fieldwork requirement may be a tremendous burden to the many entry level occupational therapy students within this age group. They may have other role responsibilities, including those of spouse and parent. These students may no longer be financially dependent on their parents and may face economic demands such as school loans and household finances. These realities are further exacerbated by rising tuition costs and reduced scholarship and financial aid funds. Addressing the needs of the nation's changing student population, Cross (1981) said that young people need to blend work into the educational years through part-time study combined with part-time work.

Future practitioners also need to be taught to critically examine and reflect on their practice (AOTA, 1987; Cohn, 1989; Cohn & Frum, 1988; Fleming, 1986; Mattingly & Gillette, 1987; Rogers, 1983). Health care today emphasizes productivity and cost containment. Changing reimbursement patterns have redefined how treatment is implemented—Shorter hospital stays have created an increase in acute care and a rapid turnover of patients. Thus, therapists are in situations new to them or are treating complex or diverse conditions that require critical thinking skills. The 6-month full-time Level II fieldwork model currently used to train master's degree students entering the field of occupational therapy may not be the most appropriate model for developing critical thinking skills. This 6-month model, usually divided into two
different 3-month placements, gives students only enough time to learn the application of textbook knowledge and standard techniques. Fieldwork educators have observed that by the time students have had sufficient opportunity to develop skills and relationships with patients, they are on their way out the door. The students’ opportunities to reflect on their practice, evaluate the efficacy of their therapy interventions, and refine their skills are often limited.

As an alternative to the current Level III fieldwork model, the Gaebler Children's Center in Waltham, Massachusetts, a public facility for emotionally disturbed children between 6 and 16 years of age, has developed a 9-month part-time fieldwork program to meet both the children’s needs for consistent therapeutic relationships and the students’ educational needs. This longer program offers the students an opportunity to learn analytical and adaptive responses to individual patient’s needs. Because it is part-time, this program responds to the needs of current occupational therapy students who are balancing financial responsibilities with career pursuits.

The Facility

Gaebler Children’s Center provides a full range of psychiatric services through a multidisciplinary team of psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, nurses, and teachers. Because the length of stay is variable, assessment and treatment are provided on an acute, short-term, or long-term basis.

Gaebler Children’s Center trains students from many of the disciplines represented on the team. A member of the occupational therapy department participates on a multidisciplinary training committee, which plans and organizes educational events for trainees and their supervisors. The committee members are responsible for educating each clinical multidisciplinary team about their student training responsibilities. This committee supports all student training programs and provides a community for supervisors from all disciplines.

In their commitment to teach students and to develop supervisory skills, the occupational therapy staff follows AOTA’s guidelines, which state that a therapist must have a minimum of 1 year of work experience before supervising students (AOTA, 1983). In addition, experience supervising Level I fieldwork students is a prerequisite for new student supervisors at Gaebler Children’s Center. Although not required by the facility, the Level II fieldwork supervisors have completed a graduate level course, Clinical Education: Applying Theory to Practice, and a 1-day workshop for the new student supervisor, both offered by Tufts University–Boston School of Occupational Therapy. Fieldwork supervisors receive ongoing training and supervision from both the director of rehabilitation and the clinical education coordinator. The clinical education coordinator consults with the academic fieldwork coordinators as needed.

Nine-Month Fieldwork Program

Like most occupational therapy fieldwork programs, the purpose of the Gaebler Children’s Center fieldwork experience is to provide students with the opportunity to integrate and apply academic knowledge through the provision of occupational therapy services. This is similar to the fieldwork purpose established by AOTA (1985). Specific program objectives relate to the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the areas of evaluation, therapy, team participation, consultation, documentation, and overall professional development. Once students master these competencies, the goals of the program shift to promote the development of critical analysis of practice.

Scheduling and Coordination

The fieldwork schedule is based on an academic calendar, mid-September to mid-June, with students working 20 hours, or 2½ days, per week. This schedule exceeds the 3-month fieldwork requirement. In fact, this schedule is equivalent to 4½ months of full-time fieldwork. Depending on staffing resources, approximately three fieldwork slots are available each academic year. Monthly stipends are available to students through a Multidisciplinary Training Grant funded by the State Department of Mental Health. Each year the grant application is filed with the Department of Mental Health’s Office of Staff Training, Manpower Planning and Development. Training programs are supported by the Department of Mental Health as a mechanism to recruit personnel into the public mental health system. Prorated benefits (i.e., sick leave, holidays, and vacation) are provided.

Student recruitment begins with fieldwork educators identifying staffing resources to determine the number of training slots available for the upcoming academic year and sharing the information with the academic fieldwork coordinator at local occupational therapy schools. The academic fieldwork coordinator presents this fieldwork option to eligible students, namely those who have completed one fieldwork experience and will be completing the second year of a 2-year entry level master’s degree program. Because students must live close to the facility and school, placements are limited to local students. Interested students meet with the academic fieldwork coordinator to assess their career goals, financial needs, learning style, and motivation to pursue this part-time fieldwork experience. Although financial and life-
style concerns are considered, the most important variable is the student's interest in the clinical population. An interview is arranged with the fieldwork educator to clarify expectations and to ensure that the student's professional and learning goals are compatible with the fieldwork experience offered. For example, the student must make a commitment to the schedule and understand the types of treatment modalities used at the facility. Each student's schedule is negotiated on the basis of hospital, ward, and occupational therapy department needs and the student's academic schedule.

Orientation

In September and during the first week of training, all professional students at Gaebler Children's Center spend 3 days in an orientation seminar coordinated by the Multidisciplinary Training Committee. The orientation provides a general overview of the facility, its policies, and its provision system. This multidisciplinary orientation provides occupational therapy students with a professional network at their level of training.

In the second week, the students begin their individualized schedules and become acquainted with the clinical population, the staff on their assigned wards, the multidisciplinary team members, and the occupational therapy department. The students are introduced gradually to each element of responsibility, including occupational therapy evaluations, therapy cases, and group work, through observation of therapy sessions and staff role models and through participation in simulated experiences, such as a practice evaluation on a staff member.

The training emphasis in the first few months is on developing basic occupational therapy skills such as assessment, goal planning, use of activities as therapeutic media, and documentation. The students also learn the routines and procedures of the facility.

Supervision and Evaluation

The student meets with the supervisor for 1 hour once a week. Initially, these meetings focus on an exploration and discussion of learning styles and the establishment of the supervisory relationship. The students are asked to articulate their preferred learning style as a means of establishing an open educational exchange. For example, some students have stated that they learn best by observing, whereas others prefer to jump right in. Supervision is used to teach the practical systems of the facility and occupational therapy procedures concretely as well as to address the students' individual needs and anxieties. Recurrent themes at this stage of the supervisory process are concerns about the occupational therapy knowledge base, integration into the system, and interaction with patients.

At the program's midpoint (4½ months), the emphasis of supervision shifts from the students' development of clinical skills to the analysis of practice. The students are encouraged to reflect on their clinical work and are expected to initiate the supervisory agenda by identifying challenges confronted in their patients' therapy, their own strengths and areas for growth, their learning needs, and their progress toward developing a professional identity. The students become more process oriented and use supervision to reflect on conceptual aspects of their casework, team dynamics, and therapeutic use of self. More time is spent on asking interpretive questions requiring students to go beyond the facts in order to relate, criticize, clarify, justify, or apply ideas. The supervisor's role gradually shifts to that of facilitator, which invites students to problem-solve and reason about their practice.

As in all fieldwork experiences, the students are further exposed to the process of reflecting on practice through participation in weekly departmental meetings. At these meetings, the occupational therapists prioritize cases, formulate group memberships, evaluate treatment programs, and report on therapy. The cases are reviewed to promote discussion of the obstacles encountered in the therapy process, to evaluate the strategies used, and to brainstorm for potential interventions. For example, following a staff therapist's presentation of a particularly difficult case, one student said that listening to the occupational therapists think out loud helped her understand the reasoning behind their actions. Through this type of role modeling, students learn that therapy is a complex process that combines a knowledge base with continual analysis.

As opportunities to work with patients increase, the students begin to confront obstacles to their initial impression of the patients, which forces them to revise their initial plans. Through their revisions, the students begin to develop their own reasoning processes and think about patients and therapeutic approaches in different ways. For example, one student was treating an uncooperative child who made limited eye contact and was unable to engage in the therapeutic relationship. The student was frustrated because her initial impression of this attractive and energetic child was that he would be fun to work with. She felt rejected, developed a negative attitude toward the child, and questioned her role in the therapy. Through supervision, she acknowledged these feelings and began reconstructing her view of the child and revising the therapy plan. Moreover, because of the 9-month program, the student had time to observe the child in a variety of settings, such as school and
the therapeutic milieu, to consult with other professional staff, and to learn more about the child’s condition. She was able to formulate her expectations and incorporate new information into the therapy. The 9-month timeframe allowed the student to continue working with the patient to develop a therapeutic relationship.

The supervisors monitor and evaluate the students’ performances by observing patient therapy sessions and performance at team meetings, reviewing written work, and receiving feedback from other professionals. Specific behavioral objectives written for the Fieldwork Evaluation Form for the Occupational Therapist (AOTA, 1986) provide both the student and the supervisor with a thorough delineation of the expected competencies. The AOTA Fieldwork Evaluation is used at the program’s midpoint to provide students with feedback and is formally completed at the end of the 9 months.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Program

Advantages and Disadvantages for Students

The 9-month part-time fieldwork program offers advantages and disadvantages. Our experience, based on six students who successfully completed the program, suggests that students in the program are willing to take risks and to try other styles of interacting with the patients and team members. As the students begin to move beyond standard treatment techniques to new approaches, their anxiety lessens and they appear confident. Because they have time to master procedural skills in the first half of the fieldwork experience, they develop the important skills of incorporating patients’ and supervisors’ feedback. The students have time to experiment with an individualized therapeutic style, to confront their fears, and to learn more about themselves within the context of a clinical setting. For example, at the program’s midpoint, one student revealed to the supervisor that she felt incompetent and unable to work with the patient population. She expressed feelings of uncertainty around setting limits with patients and doubts about the value of her comments at the team meetings. The supervisor, however, had observed that the student had developed basic clinical skills and had made insightful observations of the patients but was unable to share her observations at the team meetings. The supervisory sessions were then structured to discuss the student’s fears, philosophy, and the role of occupational therapy and to identify the student’s strengths and ways she could contribute to the entire therapy process. In the ensuing months, the student and supervisor identified barriers to the student’s ability to form acceptable perceptions of her professional self and trust her own observations and judgments. Supervisory sessions can thus provide a forum in which students can repeatedly test the reality of their perceptions and can formulate plans to ensure the successful development of their occupational therapy role.

In the 9-month program, students have ample time to work through the difficult transitions from student to therapist and from school to clinic. This program provides more hours of supervision than does the traditional 3-month placement. Consequently, students have more time for growth and more time to surrender the student role. This makes the transition from student to therapist less abrupt. Once students become comfortable with the setting, their patients, and the multidisciplinary team members, they can initiate their own interactions with patients and staff as well as with supervisory agendas, scheduling, time management, and therapeutic interventions. Unlike the 3-month placement in which students terminate just as they develop confidence, students in a 9-month placement have time to solidify their skills. This alternative time frame fosters each student’s sense of self as a developing professional rather than as a student.

The 9-month fieldwork experience, coupled with the presence of student interns from other professions, allows students the time to develop relationships with other team members. In addition, the variety of people with whom the students must interact forces them to assume professional roles. Because the 9-month experience provides enough time for the integration of an occupational therapy knowledge base and the development of relationships with patients, the students build the necessary foundation to consult with other professionals. Being sought by other professionals for information and advice helps the students develop their professional identity, because they learn that they have something to offer other professionals. The students are viewed as consistent staff members who become an integrated part of the team. All of these opportunities constitute ways in which students learn about themselves. One student reported that the 9-month experience enabled her to feel a part of the team and said that she learned more than she would have in a 3-month experience.

During the 9-month fieldwork experience, students are simultaneously completing the 2nd year of their academic course work. They will often use their class discussions as a mechanism for reflecting on the fieldwork experience and exploring different theoretical perspectives with their professors and fellow classmates. The days away from the fieldwork setting allow the students time to think about their emerging practice. They often bring fresh ideas and a readiness to try creative approaches to the uncertainties confronted in the clinical setting. The combination of classroom and fieldwork settings gives the students...
the opportunity to formulate a clear, integrated perspective of practice. This fragmented schedule, however, may be difficult for some students, because the part-time model mandates that they will miss some team or community meetings. The supervisors attempt to minimize this problem through careful communication.

All of the patients at the Gaebler Children's Center have similar diagnoses of behavioral and emotional disturbances. The students therefore learn to compare and contrast individual differences among patients with similar diagnoses and to recognize when standard treatment approaches fit and when they do not. The students have the opportunity to work with at least one patient for the entire 9-month period. When students work with a patient for an extended period of time, they are bound to confront obstacles to their initial formulation of the patient's therapy needs. Thus, the students are forced to reformulate their initial plans and to reason in a new way. The obstacles facilitate the reasoning process because students have to think beyond their initial assumptions.

For the students who are dependent on their own financial resources, the part-time program allows the opportunity to augment their small stipend with a part-time job. Furthermore, because the students complete the fieldwork requirement during the second year of their academic program, they are eligible to enter the professional job market 3 months earlier, which may minimize their educational expenses.

Advantages and Disadvantages for the Occupational Therapy Department

The long-term nature of this program directly benefits the occupational therapy department. By the program's midpoint, students can provide quality occupational therapy services, which ultimately means more services for patients with continuity of care. Supervisors, in turn, can focus on program development during the second half of the fieldwork program because their schedules are more flexible. Because supervisors work with the students for 9 months, they receive more substantial supervisory experience. They have the opportunity to help the students move beyond an introduction to the field and can process professional development issues in the context of the supervisory relationship. Staff morale and investment are enhanced by the rewards that the supervisors receive in facilitating the students' growth and development.

One disadvantage of this program is that the space in the occupational therapy department is compromised because more people are occupying treatment rooms and offices and using supplies. Additionally, there is little turnover of students. This limits the diversity of students and the influx of new ideas. Furthermore, it is difficult for the department to have students leave when they are well integrated into the department and therapy programs.

Advantages and Disadvantages for Patients

Most of the children at Gaebler Children's Center come from chaotic and unstable backgrounds and have experienced significant loss and abandonment. It is therefore essential for them to have a stable therapeutic relationship for effective therapy. The 9-month program offers the children an opportunity to develop a solid relationship with the fieldwork students.

Advantages and Disadvantages for Academic Programs

The benefits of the 9-month program to academic programs are less obvious. As noted, the students want curricula directly related to practical concerns (Chickering & Havighurst, 1981). In the 9-month program, the relationship between theory and practice is increased because the students can learn simultaneously in the classroom and the clinic and can integrate the two experiences. Through this process, a relationship evolves that promotes better communication between academic and clinical educators. All of the players become more aware of various perspectives on clinical practice. In addition, this fieldwork program offers a practical benefit to academic programs. Because the 9-month students can orient and serve as role models for the Level I fieldwork students, more Level I placements are available at this facility.

Conclusion

The 9-month part-time Level II fieldwork program described offers students additional time in the fieldwork setting. The program parallels course work and uses process-oriented supervision. The experiences offered serve to integrate the learning and academic experience while providing the students with opportunities to critically analyze occupational therapy practices.

References


---

**AJOT Update • AJOT Update • AJOT Update**

**Coming in February:**

- Improving writing readiness skills
- Perceived competence among OTs in mental health
- Use of upper extremity assistive devices
- Evaluating profitability in OT contract work
- The effects of NDT on daily living skills
- Body part identification in children
- Touch inventory for school-aged children (TIE)
- Application of the job model to Level I fieldwork

**Plus:**

*OT News* insert

Turn to *AJOT* for the latest information on occupational therapy treatment modalities, aids and equipment, legal and social issues, education, and research.