Clinical Teaching: Fieldwork Supervisors’ Attitudes and Values

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The purpose of this study was to initiate the identification of fieldwork supervisors’ educational needs by ascertaining their values and attitudes toward exemplary principles of teaching advocated by adult educators. Each principle was rephrased as an attitude or value associated with fieldwork, matched with a Likert-type 5-point interval scale, and distributed to a convenience sample of 81 fieldwork supervisors. Ninety-two percent of the questionnaires were returned. The statement responses were tallied by frequency and were then summed and ranked. The range of scores indicated that the fieldwork supervisors’ values and attitudes were congruent with the identified principles of teaching. The rankings revealed that the supervisors placed the highest value on providing a thorough orientation and the lowest values on individualization of the fieldwork experience and supervisor-student collaboration. The findings indicate a need for further education about ways to individualize learning and involve students in planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning experience.

Fieldwork educators are faced with the dual challenge of coping effectively with the demands of the health care environment and providing learning experiences for students of increasingly diverse ages, interests, and abilities. Currently, 19.9% of the students enrolled in professional occupational therapy programs are 25 years of age or older (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1989). These changes in the occupational therapy student population reflect current trends in higher education. The Carnegie Council on Policy Standards in Higher Education (1980) reported that the pool of traditional students (i.e., 18 years old) interested in attending a 4-year college is diminishing. As a result, colleges and universities are actively recruiting nontraditional students, including older students, women, and minorities. The pool of traditional students applying to programs in allied health and nursing has been reduced further by women’s improved access to male-dominated schools of medicine, engineering, and business.

Although they are responding reactively (Strickland, 1987), the faculty and administrators of educational programs are learning to cope with adult students. Effective supervision of adult students presents new challenges to fieldwork educators. These challenges are superimposed on preexisting problems in fieldwork education, including the dearth of fieldwork supervisors and their limited knowledge of the teaching-learning process and adult development. Occupational therapy fieldwork supervisors need additional information and skills to improve their effectiveness and efficiency in educating both traditional and adult students. The purpose of the present investigation was to initiate the identification of fieldwork supervisors’ educational needs by ascertaining their values and attitudes as related to Knowles’s (1980) superior principles of teaching adults.

Literature Review

Authors representing a variety of health professions have documented the issue of clinicians’ insufficient preparation for clinical teaching (Christ, 1986; Cohn & Frum, 1988; Daggett, Cassie, & Collins, 1979; Edwards & Baptiste, 1987; Irby, 1978; Karuhije, 1986; Meleca, Schimpfauser, & Witteman, 1981). Occupational therapy fieldwork supervisors’ needs were investigated by Christie, Joyce, and Moeller (1985b) and Frum (1986). Christie et al. identified four major areas of need: (a) support, (b) growth in professional competency and currency, (c) supervisory skill development, and (d) the teaching of skill development. Additional findings from their study indicated that fieldwork supervisors look to academic curricula and to AOTA for assistance in preparing them for the role...
of fieldwork educator (Christie, Joyce, & Moeller, 1985a).

Frum (1986) surveyed fieldwork educators and academic fieldwork coordinators to identify training needs. Those persons surveyed preferred such workshop topics as analyzing and bridging the gap between classroom and clinic, evaluating student performance, linking theory to practice, solving fieldwork problems, and supervising students.

Gaitman (1986) observed three major problems associated with fieldwork education: lack of attention to the supervisory skills of fieldwork educators, interpersonal difficulties between supervisor and student, and lack of consistency in therapists’ perceptions of students’ performance. Gaitman postulated that differences in aptitudes and learning and teaching styles contributed to some of these problems.

Christie et al. (1985a) presented critical components of a fieldwork experience. Supervision, the most critical component, involved (a) the meeting of the student’s needs through adaptation of the supervisory approach and program structure; (b) an organized, structured program with clear learning objectives and responsibilities; (c) ongoing, constructive feedback; (d) frequent, supportive, open communication in the development of skills and the application of knowledge; and (e) the availability of the supervisor.

Christie et al. (1985a) identified fieldwork supervisors as critical to students’ selection of a practice preference. This finding was reaffirmed by Wittman, Swinehart, Cahill, and St. Michel (1989) in their study of variables affecting specialty choice. In contrast, the results of a study by Ezersky, Havazelet, Scott, and Zettler (1989) indicated that although the fieldwork experience was an influencing variable, fieldwork supervisors did not have a direct influence on specialty choice.

Differences between new and experienced supervisors were described by Christie et al. (1985b), who said that new supervisors feel responsible for the success or failure of the fieldwork experience and prefer to control all aspects of the program. They develop rigid structures that are applied to all students, regardless of individual differences. Preoccupation with their own performance clouds their ability to perceive and respond to students’ needs. In contrast, experienced supervisors have learned to differentiate between supervisor and supervisee responsibilities. With experience, supervisors learn to recognize students as individuals, assess their individual needs, and modify the fieldwork program and supervisory approach. Flexibility in the supervisory approach increases with experience and seems to be directly related to the supervisor’s increased level of confidence. Experienced supervisors support and promote students’ individuality and creativity and allow students increased responsibility and independence.

Strickland (1987) advocated individualization of the educational experience in his examination of planning for adult students. He suggested that adult students are a viable group for education and practice and that programs should develop options that accommodate their needs. Designers of educational programs also need to be cognizant of the developmental tasks and related responsibilities of older students.

Developmental approaches to student supervision have been presented by Schwartz (1984) and Frum and Opacich (1987). Schwartz proposed a developmental framework for individualizing the clinical learning experience and for student supervision. Frum and Opacich applied a counseling model developed by Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth (1989) to student supervision. Frum and Opacich also suggested strategies and practice exercises that address the four essential elements of the supervisory process (i.e., the supervisor, the supervisee, the relationship, and the environment) identified by Loganbill et al.

Method

Instrument

A questionnaire was used to gather information on fieldwork supervisors’ attitudes and values relative to principles of teaching adults. Likert’s Method of Summed Ratings (Best, 1977) was used as a procedural guide to develop questionnaire statements and analyze data. Twelve of Knowles’s (1980) 16 principles were rephrased into 13 statements of attitudes or tasks associated with occupational therapy Level II fieldwork. The 3 omitted principles—identification of the learner’s problems due to gaps in experience, active participation in learning activities, and opportunities to apply new learning—were believed to be inherent in the Level II experience. The other deleted principle related to the classroom environment. Although it is assumed that occupational therapy settings are conducive to learning, students learn in a wide variety of environments. Because fieldwork supervisors may have little control over the environment, I predicted that answers to this statement would not be useful.

The individual statements were matched to a 5-point interval scale, with 5 representing the highest value and 1 representing the lowest value. The questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and content by a panel consisting of an adult educator and occupational therapy academic and fieldwork educators. The questionnaire was revised and field-tested by occupational therapy fieldwork supervisors who were not part of the identified sample.
Subjects and Procedure

The questionnaire was mailed to a nonrandom sample of 81 occupational therapy fieldwork supervisors. Responses to each statement were tallied by frequency and were then summed and ranked. The summed scores and rank order of the statements were used to determine fieldwork supervisors' values, attitudes, and educational needs.

Results

Seventy-five of the 81 fieldwork supervisors (92%) completed and returned the questionnaire. One questionnaire was unusable. Of the 74 remaining respondents, most were from the Midwest: 63% were from Wisconsin, and 15% were from Illinois, Minnesota, and Nebraska. Sixteen percent of the respondents were from the West, that is, Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Washington. Six percent of the respondents were from the eastern seaboard states of New York, Georgia, and Virginia and from the District of Columbia. Although the results from all of the states were congruent, the findings can be generalized only to Wisconsin. Additionally, all Wisconsin facilities that, at the time of the survey, provided physical disability or psychosocial Level II fieldwork experiences for professional students were included in the convenience sample.

The summed scores and ranks for each questionnaire statement are presented in Table 1. An examination of the rankings provides information on fieldwork supervisors' perceptions of each questionnaire item. Statement 4, that students deserve a thorough orientation, received the highest ranking. Those statements ranked 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7a represent attitudes and assumptions about students or student supervision. In contrast, the items ranked 4, 7b, 9, 10, 11a, 11b, and 13 represent specific activities that require either student–supervisor collaboration or individualization of the fieldwork experience.

Discussion

The survey findings revealed that the fieldwork supervisors placed high value on Knowles's (1980) principles of teaching adults. In addition, the high range of summed scores indicated that the fieldwork supervisors' attitudes and values were congruent with Knowles's principles of teaching.

The highest ranked statement was related to the acknowledgment of students' need to be oriented to the facility and the fieldwork experience. Several factors may have contributed to this ranking. First, orientation has been a recommended component of fieldwork education since 1977 (AOTA, Commission on Education, 1977). Second, fieldwork supervisors are able to develop an orientation plan that can be applied efficiently and effectively to all students. Third, fieldwork supervisors may reflect on their own experiences as students and recognize the effect of the orientation process on their anxiety level.

It is encouraging to find a number of highly ranked statements related to attitudes and assumptions about students and student supervision. These rankings indicate that attitudes that facilitate learning and have a positive effect on the teaching–learning process are in place. Supervisors respect and value students' feelings, ideas, interests, skills, and experience. In contrast, the five lowest ranked items represent specific activities and methods related to either individualization of the learning experience or student–supervisor collaboration. Several authors have provided methods of individualization in the fieldwork experience, including the examination of students' and supervisors' learning styles (Gaitpman, 1986; Stafford, 1986), use of learning contracts (Widom, 1982), and strategies for the development of clinical reasoning skills (Cohn, 1989).

Although the occupational therapy literature related to fieldwork education strongly supports a col-
laborative supervisory relationship (AOTA, Commission on Education, 1977, 1984). Findings from the present study indicate that in actual practice the existence of collaborative supervision may not be widespread. Retaining control of the fieldwork experience is a major issue for new supervisors (Christie et al., 1985b). Power and control may become central issues when fieldwork supervisors either are unwilling to allow students to function as active participants in the learning process or lack knowledge and skill in implementing a collaborative relationship. Insecurity and limited opportunities to observe role models of collaborative supervision appear to be the bases for this behavior (Christie et al., 1985b). As supervisors become more comfortable with their roles, however, they realize that it is healthy and growth promoting for students to take responsibility for their own learning (Christie et al., 1985b). Thus, topics for further investigation must focus on methods to accelerate and support this developmental process, because by helping fieldwork educators improve their supervisory skills, we benefit both traditional and adult students.

Conclusion

Although the survey findings in the present study indicate that fieldwork supervisors agree on the value of Knowles’s (1980) principles of teaching adults for fieldwork education, it cannot be assumed that these principles are being applied appropriately. The survey results show that the greatest need for information is in methods to individualize fieldwork and involve students in planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning experience.

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References


