Fieldwork education is situated in two arenas that have experienced ongoing and dramatic changes within the past 2 decades. In the academic arena, a proliferation of new occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs has led to a greater demand for fieldwork placements (AWP Research, 1999). In the health care arena, fiscal concerns have resulted in diminishing reimbursement rates, hospital closings, mergers, and personnel reductions (Foto, 1997; Meyers, 1995). Moreover, cost-conscious administrators have called attention to the perceived financial impact of training future health care professionals (Boex et al., 2000). Consequently, many institutions have reduced or eliminated professional training programs from their missions (Foto, 1997; Meyers, 1995).

For some time, concerns about the costs and benefits of fieldwork education have received attention within occupational therapy (Leonardelli & Caruso, 1986; Meyers, 1995; Shalik, 1987). These concerns have made some occupational therapy fieldwork educators hesitant to provide fieldwork experiences (Leonardelli & Caruso, 1986; Meyers, 1995). Furthermore, stress has been identified as the primary nonmonetary cost to both fieldwork educators and students (Meyers, 1995; Tyrrell & Smith, 1996). The fieldwork educators in Meyers's (1995) study identified feeling stressed by the additional time and workload demands created by supervising students in a health care climate that emphasizes accountability for productivity. Their stress was compounded when student performance decreased as a result of stress from a variety of causes. Increasing stress on fieldwork educators coupled with increased demand from educational programs has challenged academic fieldwork coordinators to locate sufficient numbers of fieldwork placements (Crist, 1993; Hamlin, MacRae, & DeBrakeleer, 1995; Kautzmann, 1987).

Despite these challenges, the occupational therapy profession continues to value fieldwork education as an essential component of the preparation for future practitioners (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1996). The revision of educational standards (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy, 2000) may provide fieldwork educators with the flexibility needed to respond to changing demands.
Education [ACOTE, 1999] explicitly states, “Fieldwork education is a crucial part of the preparation” (p. 581) of the occupational therapist. The Standards further state:

The goal of Level I fieldwork is to introduce students to the fieldwork experience and develop a basic comfort level with and understanding of the needs of clients...through directed observation and participation in selected aspects of the occupational therapy process. (p. 581)

Because the goal of Level I fieldwork is broad, academic programs exercise discretion in designing Level I experiences to meet the needs of their curriculum.

In contrast, the purpose and format of Level II fieldwork is specific. According to the Standards, “The goal of Level II fieldwork is to develop competent, entry-level, generalist occupational therapists” (ACOTE, 1999, p. 581). Through exposure to a variety of clients of varying ages and in a variety of settings, Level II fieldwork is intended to focus on the application of purposeful and meaningful occupation and the promotion of clinical reasoning and reflective practice (ACOTE, 1999).

New Fieldwork Models

In an attempt to address the goals of fieldwork education in a dynamic health care environment, various approaches to expand Level I and Level II fieldwork beyond the medical model have been developed (Cohn & Crist, 1995; Neistadt & Cohn, 1990). For example, students have been placed in community settings to lead independent living skills groups (Neistadt & Cohn, 1990). Approaches to Level II fieldwork have included part-time fieldwork placements (Adelstein, Cohn, Baker, & Barnes, 1990), a 12-month paid internship model (Phillips & Legaspi, 1995), and collaborative fieldwork models (Hengel & Romeo, 1995; Nolinske, 1995). Although these approaches have addressed specific needs in the profession, none have addressed explicitly the stress experienced by educators and students related to fieldwork. The strategies students use to cope with fieldwork-related stress have been documented (Mitchell & Kampfe, 1990, 1993); however, fieldwork models designed to address stress associated with fieldwork have not been described.

Thirty years ago, Butler (1972) described the stress associated with student roles. She argued that when students feel overstimulated, an “orientation response” may be triggered that “can result in an adaptive physiological reaction which in turn can drain the body’s energy supply and effect body chemistry” (p. 404). In addition, “information overload” can interfere with the student’s ability to think...individuals seem to fall into maladaptive behavior, first displaying confusion, then tension, and finally withdrawal” (p. 404). More recently, Garrett and Schkade (1995) documented that even when students’ behaviors are mature, they may show a temporary regression when faced with situations they perceive as too difficult or too unfamiliar. Unrelieved stress, tension, and anxiety can lead to burnout, a psychological condition that can impair a person’s physical and mental health as well as his or her ability to perform school and work tasks (Haack, 1987, 1988).

The Same Site Model (SSM), where students complete one Level I and one Level II fieldwork in the same setting, not necessarily with the same fieldwork educator, was developed for students in a 2-year entry-level master’s degree program in a suburban university outside Boston, Massachusetts. Students also complete four additional Level I fieldwork experiences at different sites and another Level II fieldwork during the 2 years of professional preparation. To fulfill the SSM Level I requirement, students spend between 16 and 24 hours (in a condensed, 1-week format completed mid-semester) observing occupational therapy practice with limited participation in related occupational therapy roles, such as providing intervention, documenting service delivery, or attending team meetings. Students are given the option to complete their first Level II fieldwork experience during the summer months between the 1st and 2nd years of their academic program. Therefore, students return to the same setting 3 to 15 months later to begin the Level II fieldwork in which they are expected to develop entry-level competencies.

One major aim of the SSM is to provide a Level I experience that minimizes stress for all stakeholders involved. Additional goals of the model are to provide continuity between Level I and Level II fieldwork, decrease student stress associated with multiple transitions, provide familiarity with the expectations of the specific fieldwork settings for Level II fieldwork, increase the number of fieldwork placements available to students, and streamline administrative tasks for all stakeholders. This article describes fieldwork educator and student perceptions of the SSM. Understanding fieldwork educators’ and students’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of the SSM may enable stakeholders to begin to assess the model and identify important issues for further study.

SSM Evaluation

A pilot survey consisting of 6 open-ended questions and 21 forced-choice questions was mailed to 36 fieldwork educators and 48 students immediately following their participation in the SSM during 1995 through 1997. The open-ended questions focused on the benefits and drawbacks of the model and its perceived impact on Level I and Level II fieldwork experiences. On the basis of the feedback from students and fieldwork educators who had piloted the SSM, the fieldwork coordinators from the university’s occupational therapy program developed the forced-choice survey items, which focused on perceived effect of prior orientation to the fieldwork setting at the time of Level II fieldwork, introduction to Level II fieldwork objectives and requirements during Level I fieldwork, and student anxiety at the beginning of Level II fieldwork. Other items addressed were the perceived effects of gaining familiarity with the client population, the physical facilities, and the site’s policies and procedures during Level I fieldwork. The items were ranked on a 4-point scale (not useful, uncertain, somewhat useful, very useful).

Respondents to the survey were 29 fieldwork educators and 33 entry-level master’s degree students who participated in the SSM during the summer and fall fieldwork rotations in facilities throughout the greater Boston area. Response rates were 80% for the fieldwork educators and 69% for the...
students. Fieldwork educators and students completed the surveys immediately on conclusion of the students’ SSM Level II fieldwork.

For the open-ended questions, recurring themes were identified, labeled, and counted by master’s degree students as part of a research course. None of the students analyzing the data had participated in the SSM at the time of data analysis. Percentages for the forced-choice item responses were calculated. The percentage of responses in the somewhat useful and very useful categories were combined and given an overall rating of at least somewhat useful.

Benefits
The most frequent responses to the open-ended question regarding the benefits of the SSM from both fieldwork educators and students were gaining familiarity with the fieldwork setting, an increase in comfort and decrease in anxiety, and preparation for Level II fieldwork. Although the perceived drawbacks identified in this section of the survey were few in number, the major drawback both groups perceived was decreased opportunity to observe various practice settings (see Table 1). Three students and one fieldwork educator identified increased anxiety as a possible result of a negative Level I experience.

Fieldwork educators’ and students’ responses to the forced-choice questions related to perceptions of potential benefits of the SSM were compared. All fieldwork educators and most of the students identified reducing student anxiety as a benefit. Many respondents believed that the SSM facilitated orientation to Level II fieldwork and allowed them to assess whether the match between the student and the fieldwork site was conducive to learning. Additionally, many of the fieldwork educators and students rated perceived benefits of the SSM as related to the student gaining familiarity with various aspects of the setting.

In general, the majority of fieldwork educators and students perceived the SSM to be beneficial and at least somewhat useful in response to the forced-choice survey items. Given that researchers have documented that students perceive fieldwork to be a source of anxiety and a stressful experience (Mitchell & Kampfe, 1990; Yuen, 1990), the major finding that the SSM is perceived to reduce anxiety is noteworthy. Factors contributing to the stress experienced in fieldwork are the transition from one setting to the next and the transition from the student role to the practitioner role (Everly, Poff, Lamport, Hamant, & Alvey, 1994; Meyers, 1995; Tyrrell & Smith, 1996). Fieldwork education requires that students learn to combine new attitudes, new ways of responding to situations, standards of professional behavior, and new values and norms with “a vast amount of new knowledge and specialized skills...all within a relatively short time” (Butler, 1972, p. 401). Thus, that students perceive fieldwork as stressful is not surprising. In a study examining occupational therapy students’ coping strategies during fieldwork, Mitchell and Kampfe (1990) found that most of the students perceived the fieldwork as “important, controllable, and stressful” (p. 543).

Student perceptions of the impact of the SSM on their fieldwork experiences indicated that they, in general, felt increased comfort and confidence on their Level II fieldwork as a result of participating in the model. The presumption is that students’ familiarity with the setting gained during the Level I fieldwork experience reduced their anxiety about their subsequent Level II experience. However, the possibility of a negative Level I fieldwork experience leading to increased anxiety exists. If a student identifies feeling increased stress and anxiety as a result of participating in the SSM, this awareness may provide the student opportunity to share his or her concerns with fieldwork coordinators and academic program faculty members as well as with fieldwork educators at the fieldwork site. This process of reflection may help the student develop strategies to support his or her learning and coping during Level II fieldwork.

Drawbacks
Many of the students and more than half of the fieldwork educators perceived the lack of exposure to a variety of practice settings as a drawback of the SSM. This drawback was a curious finding because the SSM Level I experience is situated in an educational program context that includes four other Level I fieldwork experiences. In the context of four other Level I experiences, the implications of a perceived drawback of lack of exposure requires further examination. This finding implies that the uncertainty about the purpose of Level I fieldwork, as identified by Kautzmann (1987), may persist. These perceptions highlight the need for all stakeholders to continue to communicate clearly the expectations regarding Level I fieldwork.

The respondents identified observation of occupational therapy roles and exposure to settings as the primary purpose of Level I fieldwork. Because the goal of Level I fieldwork is to help students develop a “basic comfort level with...clients” (ACOTE, 1999, p. 581), the SSM appears to support this learning objective. Moreover, Cohn (1989) proposed that clinical reasoning may be facilitated when students have repeated interactions with clients so that patterns can be discerned and students learn to compare and contrast. The design of the SSM affords students the opportunity to gain comfort with client populations during Level I fieldwork and, therefore, is intended to support and facilitate their continued learning during Level II fieldwork.

Table 1. Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of the Same Site Model of Fieldwork

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Benefit or Drawback</th>
<th>Fieldwork Educators</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with site</td>
<td>21 (72)</td>
<td>25 (76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased comfort and decreased anxiety</td>
<td>9 (31)</td>
<td>17 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for Level II fieldwork</td>
<td>14 (48)</td>
<td>16 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased exposure to field</td>
<td>17 (59)</td>
<td>28 (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No drawbacks</td>
<td>6 (21)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Level I increases anxiety</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>3 (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 29 for fieldwork educators; n = 33 for students.

*Per open-ended survey questions.
Conclusions

Limitations of this pilot study are the use of an untested instrument and the lack of a control or comparison group. The survey did not explore academic fieldwork coordinators’ perspectives; however, a number of fieldwork educators informally reported that it was easier to invest in Level I students when they knew that the student would return for Level II fieldwork.

Ultimately, more rigorous examination of the Same Site Model is indicated. Such an examination may explore any differences among students who return to the site within 3 months versus within 15 months of completing their Level I fieldwork in the same setting. It would be useful to know or to understand the extent to which student anxiety interferes with student performance during fieldwork and to what extent the SSM may mitigate this anxiety.

In summary, the SSM was developed to minimize stress and administrative tasks for stakeholders and to provide continuity for students. Although preliminary data suggest that these goals were accomplished, controlled study of the SSM is warranted.

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References


