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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if school-based occupational therapists who participated in a series of online professional development modules on the topic of fieldwork education reported increased feelings of self-efficacy regarding the ability to fulfill the role of fieldwork educator. In this single-group design, participants completed a series of six online professional development modules. Each module consisted of a narrated slideshow presentation, case study activity, and online discussion board. Participants completed a self-efficacy survey before and after completing the series of modules. Results indicated a significant increase in self-efficacy related to fieldwork education following completion of the online professional development course. An online professional development course on the topic of fieldwork education can improve self-efficacy in potential fieldwork educators.

Keywords

Single group design, survey, online modules

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Using Online Professional Development to Increase Self-Efficacy in School-Based Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Educators

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if school-based occupational therapists who participated in a series of online professional development modules on the topic of fieldwork education reported increased feelings of self-efficacy regarding the ability to fulfill the role of fieldwork educator. In this single-group design, participants completed a series of six online professional development modules. Each module consisted of a narrated slideshow presentation, case study activity, and online discussion board. Participants completed a self-efficacy survey before and after completing the series of modules. Results indicated a significant increase in self-efficacy related to fieldwork education following completion of the online professional development course. An online professional development course on the topic of fieldwork education can improve self-efficacy in potential fieldwork educators.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately one of every four occupational therapists in the United States practice in schools or early intervention (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2010). Although this makes the public schools one of the largest practice areas in occupational therapy, many occupational therapists report that their formal education did not adequately prepare them for practice in schools (Brandenburger-Shasby, 2005; Burtner, McMain, & Crowe, 2002; Nielsen & Hektner, 2014). In a survey of occupational therapists working in school-based practice, Brandenburger-Shasby (2005) found that only 13% completed a course on school-based practice in their entry-level education, while 41% of recent graduates reported completing a Level II fieldwork experience in school-based practice. Students who do not feel adequately prepared by their coursework in school-based practice may rely on their fieldwork educator to supplement their knowledge, skills, and clinical judgment in this practice setting.

Potential fieldwork educators often face barriers such as insufficient knowledge, lack of preparation, and low self-efficacy (Hanson, 2011; Hunt & Kennedy-Jones, 2010; Maloney, Stagnitti, & Schoo, 2013). Novice fieldwork educators have reported various challenges to participation in fieldwork education, including developing their own emerging clinical skills, identifying student learning needs, structuring the fieldwork experience, assessing performance, and providing adequate feedback to fieldwork students (Hunt & Kennedy-Jones, 2010). Both recent graduates and experienced fieldwork educators have reported challenges with time management (Hanson, 2011; Higgs & McAllister, 2005; Hunt & Kennedy-Jones, 2010) and working with underprepared or potentially failing students (Hanson, 2011; Hunt & Kennedy-Jones, 2010; Ilott, 1995). Coping with the emotional and professional consequences of working with struggling students can also be problematic for fieldwork educators (Higgs & McAllister, 2005; Ilott, 1995).

Professional development for fieldwork educators is broadly recommended as a method for improving the fieldwork experience for fieldwork students and fieldwork educators (Barton et al., 2013; Hills, Ryan, Smith, & Warren-Forward, 2012; Kirke, Layton, & Sim, 2007; Lewis, 2005). Although fieldwork education is a uniquely challenging element of professional practice, therapists report a lack of professional development in this area (Hanson, 2011; Hunt & Kennedy-Jones, 2010; Ilott, 1995). Although AOTA offers the Fieldwork Educator Certificate Program (Johnson & Stutz-Tanenbaum, 2009), many fieldwork educators have not completed this program, and most report that they are not aware of the online AOTA resources for fieldwork education (Evenson, Roberts, Kaldenberg, Barnes, & Ozelie, 2015). Practicing clinicians have reported the need for professional development opportunities that reduce scheduling constraints and provide easily accessible resources such as handouts and digital resources (Bjornestad, Johnson, Hittner, & Paulson, 2014; Hook & Lawson-Porter, 2003). Participants who engage in professional development focused on fieldwork education or clinical supervision report increased knowledge and insight into their role (Collins & Mowder-Tinney, 2012; Hook & Lawson-Porter, 2003; Ilott, 1995; McMahon & Simmons, 2004). Professional development specifically focused on clinical / fieldwork education for practitioners in the field of education has been found to increase self-efficacy (Bjornestad et al., 2014; DeKruyf & Pehrsson, 2011; Gareis & Grant, 2014). In a study of occupational therapists, Ilott (1995), found that specific professional development on strategies for working with struggling or failing fieldwork students increased participants' confidence for confronting this issue in fieldwork education. Students paired with trained clinical instructors have also shown greater improvement over time (Housel & Gandy, 2008) and report higher satisfaction with their clinical/ fieldwork instructors (Housel, Gandy, & Edmondson, 2010).

Although many of the professional development programs described in the literature are conducted on-site (Collins & Mowder-Tinney, 2012; Gareis & Grant, 2014; Hook & Lawson-Porter, 2013; Ilott, 1995; McMahon & Simons, 2004), electronic educational technology also has strong support in the literature as a method for delivering professional development for related-health providers (Bjornestad et al., 2014; Hollenbeck, 2010; Manzanares et al., 2004). In a study of occupational therapists in

school-based practice, Hollenbeck (2010) found that 100% of participants found a web-based resource useful and informative. Bjornestad et al. (2014) found that participants who completed a series of networking sessions and online modules reported significantly higher self-efficacy in the supervisory role. In a qualitative study on the use of computer-based training for counselors on the topic of student supervision, participants reported that the use of technology made the content easy to access (Manzanares et al., 2004).

Fieldwork educators are a vital educational support for occupational therapy students interested in school-based practice. However, the literature indicates that this population of occupational therapists may be in need of professional development that addresses fieldwork education in the public school setting. To address this issue, the following guiding question was developed: Does participation in a series of online professional development modules increase self-efficacy in fieldwork education for school-based occupational therapists? The hypothesis was that participants who completed a series of online professional development modules on fieldwork education would demonstrate increased self-efficacy for the role of fieldwork educator in a school-based setting.

METHODS

A series of six online modules were created by the first author focused on fieldwork education in the school setting based upon the best available published literature on the topic. Two school districts in suburbs of a major metropolitan Midwest city were approached and provided permission to recruit occupational therapists employed in the school districts. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Chatham University. All recruited participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Participants

Experience of participants. Eighteen participants consented to participate in this study. Seventeen participants completed the study, and one participant withdrew due to illness. On average, participants had 12 years of experience as occupational therapists in school-based practice. Participants reported experience in school-based practice ranging from 1 to 23 years (See Figure 1: Participants' Years of Experience in School-Based Occupational Therapy). Eleven of the 17 participants reported having no experience as a Level II fieldwork educator in the past 5 years (See Figure 2: Level II Fieldwork Educator Experience).

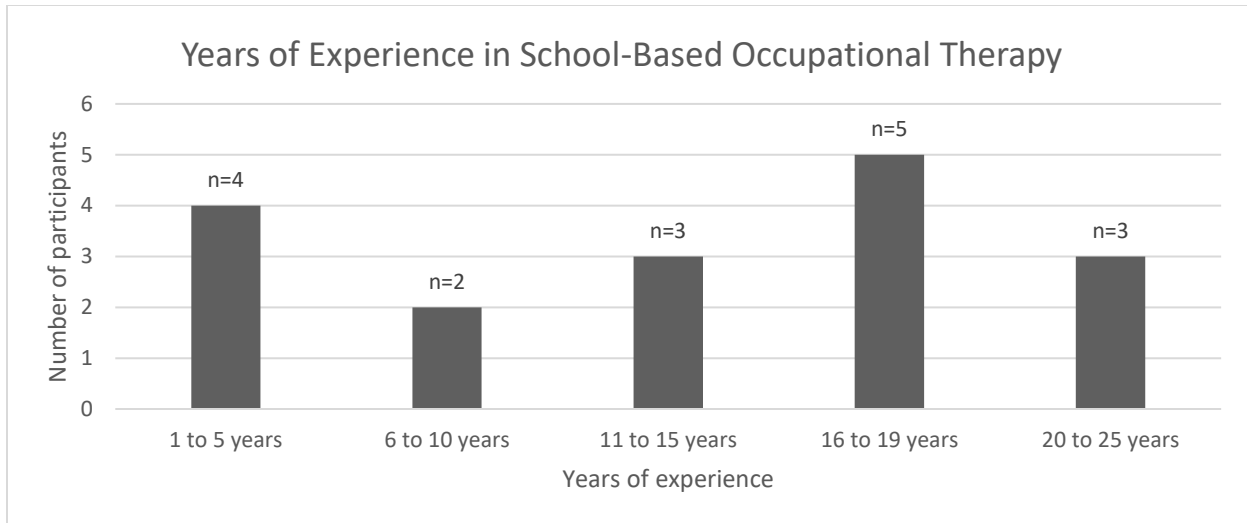


Figure 1. Participants' years of experience in school-based occupational therapy (N=17).

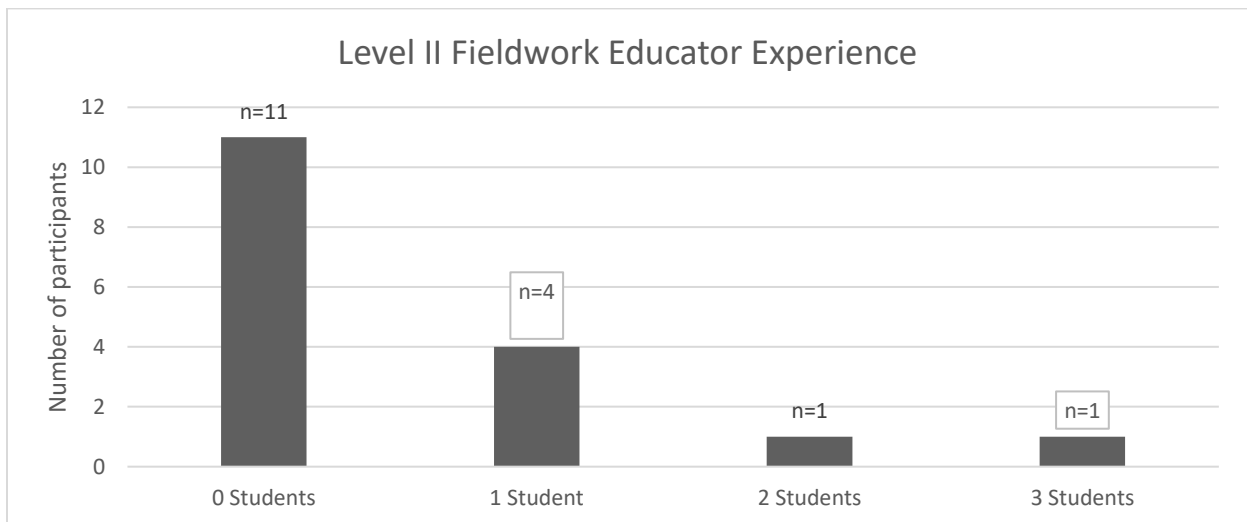


Figure 2. Level II fieldwork education experience of participants over the past 5 years (N=17).

Relevant demographics of participants. Each of the 17 participants were female. Participants identified their highest level of education in the field of occupational therapy; nine reported completing the master's degree and eight reported completing the bachelor's degree. One participant with an initial entry level bachelor's had also completed a master's degree in educational technology.

Previous professional development of participants. Participants reported an average of 2.6 hours of professional development in the area of fieldwork education in the past 5 years. The amount of professional development reported ranged from 0 to 12 hours. Most participants reported having 0 hours of professional development (See Figure 3: Previous Professional Development).

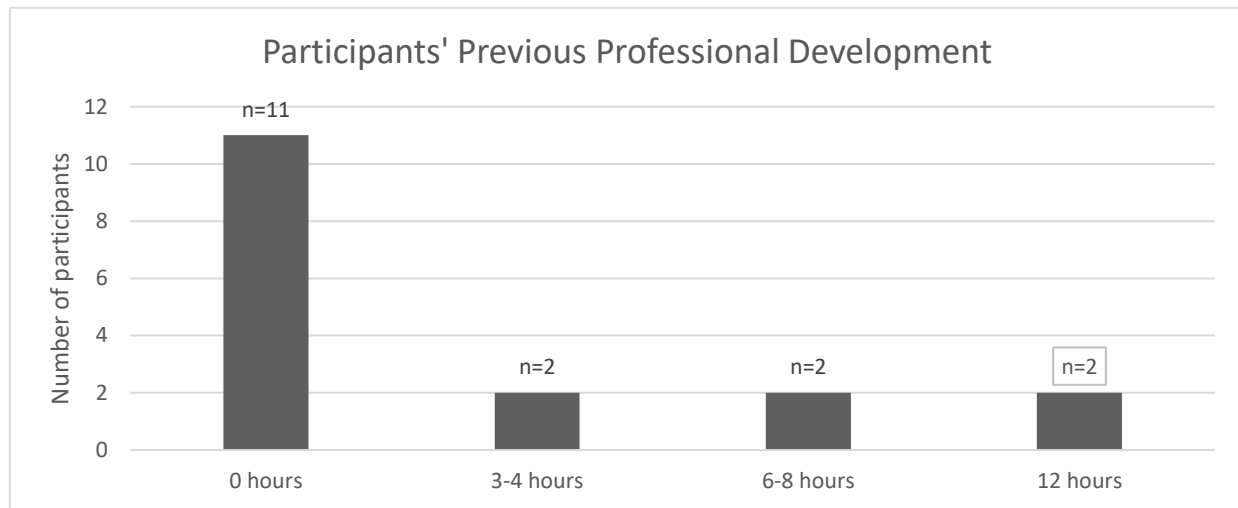


Figure 3. Individual participants' hours of participation in previous professional development in the area of fieldwork education over the past 5 years ($N=17$).

Procedure

Qualitative data for this study was gathered from statements made by participants on the online message boards and post-course self-efficacy survey, which were analyzed and coded by the first author and reviewed by the second author. Quantitative data was gathered via online survey. Participants were asked to complete a self-efficacy questionnaire prior to participating in the professional development online course, and again after completion of the final module. The first author designed the self-efficacy questionnaire specifically for this project. The questionnaire included 6 demographic questions and 15 efficacy statements that participants rated on Likert scale. To create the questionnaire, the author used a 100-point scale, which has been found to be psychometrically stronger than a 10 point Likert scale in self-efficacy questionnaires (Bandura, 2006; Pajares, Hartley, & Valiante, 2001). The items for the questionnaire were based on select elements of fieldwork education identified in the Self-Assessment Tool for Fieldwork Educator Competency (AOTA, 2009) as well as the project implementer's knowledge of school-based practice. Two additional school-based occupational therapists reviewed and provided feedback on the questionnaire as part of the development process.

Participants completed a series of six online professional development modules over a six-week period from September to October 2015. Each module consisted of an online narrated slideshow presentation, case study activity, and online forum for comments and discussion. The links to access the modules were delivered to participants weekly via email. Modules addressed a number of topics related to fieldwork education,

including the fieldwork process, documentation requirements, resources, defining entry-level practice, developing site-specific learning objectives, learning styles, giving and accepting feedback, dealing with conflict, generational differences, working with struggling fieldwork students, and working with advanced fieldwork students.

Description of Implementation

The format of each of the six modules was identical each week. This allowed the participants to anticipate the format and become familiar with the time needed to complete the assignment. The author sent an email including a link to an online presentation created using the Panopto™ educational software (Panopto, 2018; See Figure 4: Panopto™ Presentation). Each Panopto™ presentation included a video-narrated slideshow, links to online resources related to the presentation topic, a link to the case study activity, and a link to the online discussion board hosted by Padlet™. Padlet™ is an internet application that allows groups of people to anonymously share content such as messages, links, and pictures using an online learning platform (What is Padlet™?, n.d.) (See Figure 5: Padlet™). As pictured below, the learner sees the instructor and the content material similar to if in a classroom setting. While the material presented is pre-recorded, the learner can post questions and comments using the Padlet™ discussion board feature where the instructor can answer individualized questions. Since the learner is not identified specifically, he or she may be more inclined to ask questions.

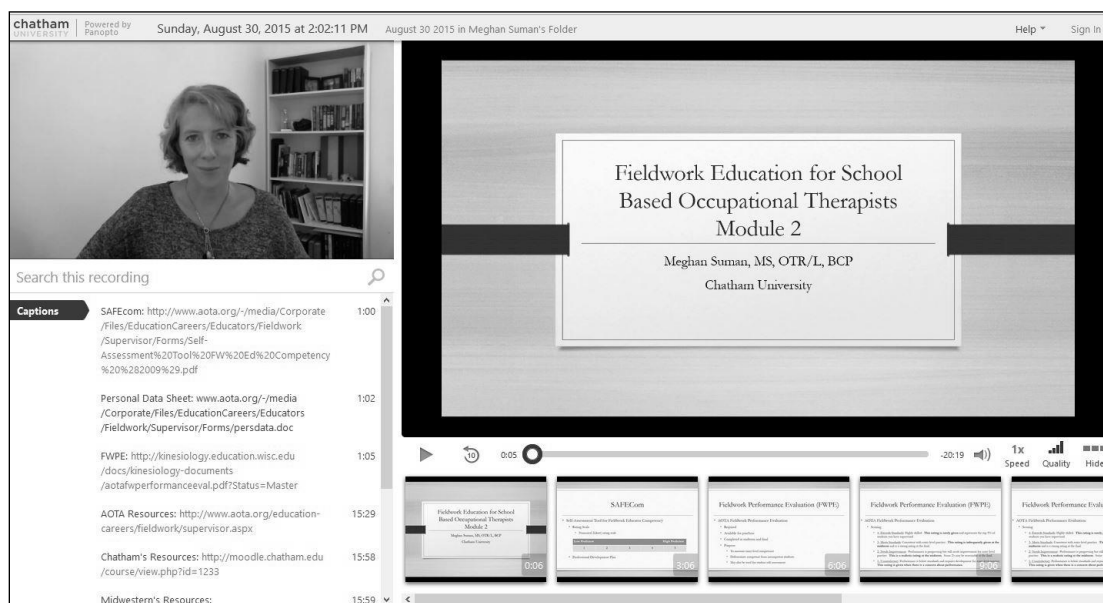


Figure 4. A screen shot demonstrating the format of a Panopto™ presentation, with a video of the instructor in the top left corner, a list of relevant links and captions listed below, and a slideshow presentation on the right side of the screen.

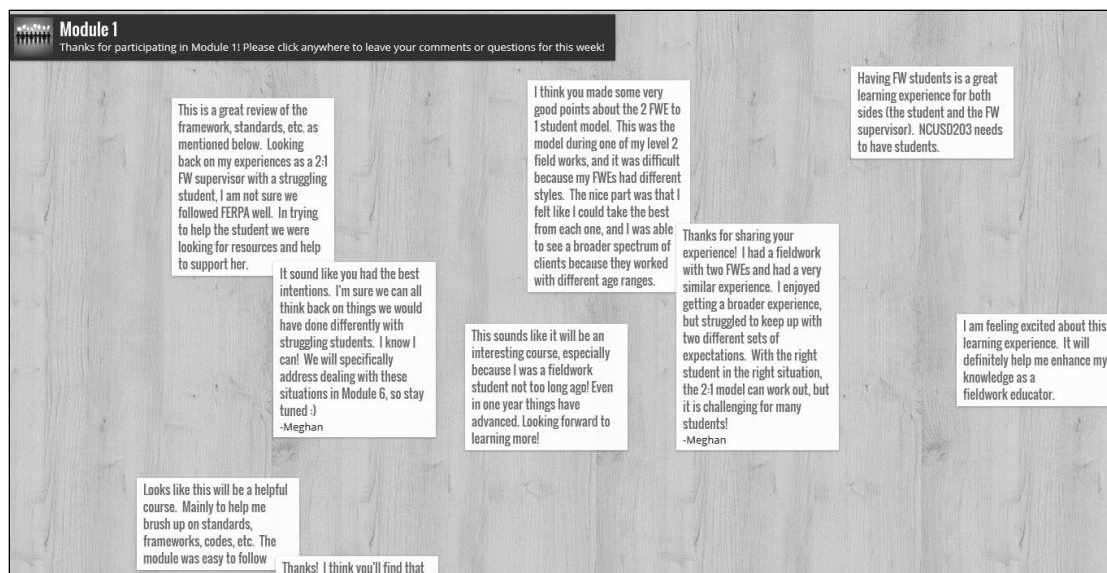


Figure 5. A screen shot demonstrating the format of the Padlet™ online discussion board. The discussion board was available only to participants who accessed the link through the Panopto™ presentation. Participants added content to the board by clicking and typing. Content added to the board is immediately visible to all participants.

RESULTS

Quantitative Outcomes

The average self-efficacy score on the pre-course assessment questionnaire was 65 points on a 100-point scale where a score of 0 indicates “I cannot do this at all,” 50 indicates, “Moderately certain I can do this,” and 100 indicates, “Highly certain I can do this.” The average self-efficacy score on the post-course assessment questionnaire increased 22 points to 87 on the same 100-point scale. A paired-samples t-test was used to compare the average scores on the pre-course assessment questionnaire with the average scores on the post-course assessment questionnaire. There was a significant difference in the scores on the pre-course assessment questionnaire ($M=65$, $SD=5.7$) compared to the post-course assessment questionnaire ($M=87$, $SD=1.8$); $t(14)=2.145$, $p<.001$. These results indicate that participation in this professional development course resulted in a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy among participants.

Individual and average scores indicated an improvement in every item on the questionnaire (See Figure 6: Average Self-Efficacy Scores). The greatest average improvement in self-efficacy was in the area of collaboratively developing fieldwork student learning contracts, which was the item with the lowest average score on the pre-course assessment questionnaire. The item with the smallest average improvement in self-efficacy was in the area of demonstrating sensitivity to student learning style, which was the item with the highest average score on the pre-course assessment questionnaire.

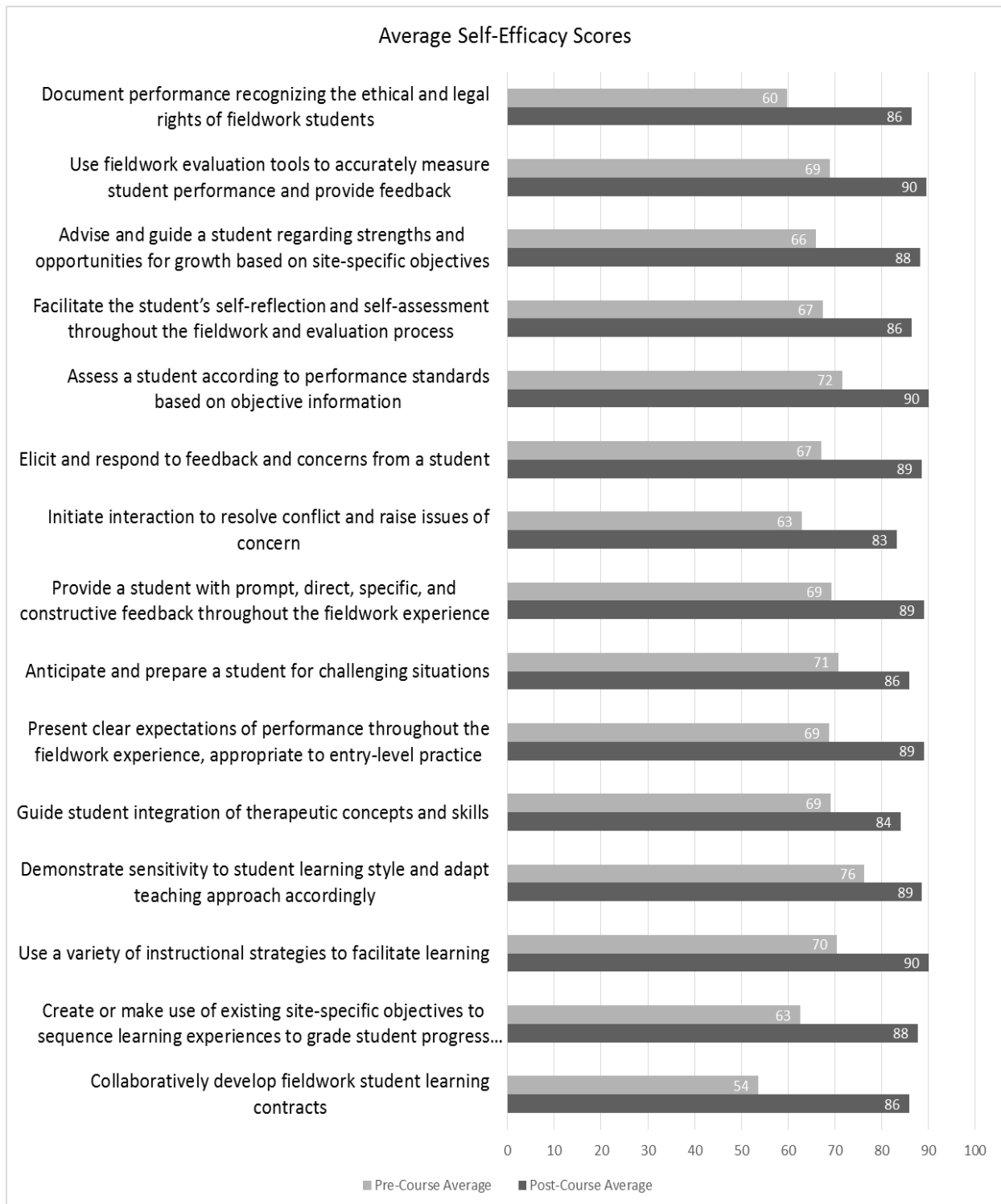


Figure 6. Average self-efficacy scores on the pre-course and post-course assessment questionnaires.

Qualitative Outcomes

In the post-course assessment survey and on the final Padlet™ discussion board, participants were asked to reflect on their thoughts and feelings regarding fieldwork education. Fifteen participants shared comments in the post-course assessment questionnaire and eight anonymous comments were added to the Padlet™ discussion board. A selection of participant responses is included in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Comments about Fieldwork Education after Completing all Six Modules of this Professional Development Course

Venue	Response
Discussion Board	I have been a fieldwork supervisor many times and feel that this will really help me to be more targeted in my approach. Better for me and of course better for my student.
Discussion Board	I feel like really learned a lot. I wish I had learned more about being a fieldwork supervisor before I was one! It does give you more confidence in your skills. Supervisors and students both benefit.
Discussion Board	In my fieldwork supervising career, I had 2 students. I would feel more confident dealing with the poor performing student after taking this course. I did feel little lost dealing with the situation. I will definitely feel more confident dealing with similar situations in the future.
Discussion Board	I really liked this course! I thought it was well organized, and especially liked the "just a click away" resources included with each module.
Discussion Board	I hope we get to the next phase of having fieldwork students in our school district.
Post-Course Survey	My feelings [about fieldwork education] have not changed much. I wish my work setting would allow students.
Post-Course Survey	I feel more confident in dealing with a challenging fieldwork student, be it because of personalities or a student that may be struggling in their fieldwork.
Post-Course Survey	I feel more educated and prepared to supervise a student and prepare them to become an entry level OT.

Venue	Response
Post-Course Survey	I realize that being a fieldwork educator involved different skills based on the occupational therapist's setting. It is important for all school-based therapists to learn more about the responsibilities and expectations of the role of educator prior to taking a student.
Post-Course Survey	I realized there is way more involved in the grading process. I also feel more comfortable with teaching styles based on personality or learning of the unique student.
Post-Course Survey	I have gained confidence in my ability to handle a variety of OT students.
Post-Course Survey	I feel like I have much more knowledge about what needs to be considered and what actions need to be taken when guiding a student through fieldwork.
Post-Course Survey	I feel more prepared and have a better understanding of the learning styles and process of this generation of students
Post-Course Survey	I feel more confident addressing a variety of challenging fieldwork issues.
Post-Course Survey	I feel more aware of the students' possible needs and how to deal with problems more effectively.
Post-Course Survey	I am much more confident. I have also learned many strategies to implement throughout the fieldwork experience.

DISCUSSION

The guiding research question was: Does participation in a series of online professional development modules increase self-efficacy in fieldwork education for school-based occupational therapists? The outcome of this study reveals that self-efficacy was improved and this answer is consistent with the available literature (Bjornestad et al., 2014; DeKruyf & Pehrsson, 2011; Gareis & Grant, 2014; Illott, 1995). Participants demonstrated statistically significant improvements in self-efficacy following participation in a series of professional development modules focused specifically on fieldwork education.

Analysis of the qualitative outcomes reveal three main themes: feelings of self-efficacy, the use of technology, and dealing with challenges. These themes were identified by content review of the comments and questions on the Padlet™ discussion boards associated with the individual modules and from the participants' comments on the open ended questions contained on the post-course self-efficacy survey. Overall, these themes are consistent with the expected outcomes based on a review of the research literature (Bjornestad et al., 2014; DeKruyf & Pehrsson, 2011; Gareis & Grant, 2014; Hollenbeck, 2010; Illott, 1995; Manzanares et al., 2004).

Effect of Participation on Self-Efficacy

The most prominent theme identified in the qualitative outcomes is an increase in feelings of self-efficacy among participants. One of many comments related to self-efficacy was, "I feel more educated and prepared to supervise a student and prepare them to become an entry level OT." The qualitative outcomes were consistent with the outcomes on the quantitative measure. In the quantitative outcomes, each participant reported a higher score on each of the 15 questions of the post-course self-efficacy assessment questionnaire (See Figure 6: Average Self-Efficacy Scores). A review of the research literature revealed that professional development on clinical / fieldwork education for practitioners in the fields of education and healthcare has been found to increase self-efficacy (Bjornestad et al., 2014; DeKruyf & Pehrsson, 2011; Gareis & Grant, 2014). The outcomes of this study in the area of self-efficacy were consistent with these findings.

Use of Technology

Another theme identified in the qualitative outcomes of this course was a positive response to the use of technology. Previous studies in the fields of healthcare and education found technology to be an effective delivery method for clinical educators (Bjornestad et al., 2014; Hollenbeck, 2010; Manzanares et al., 2004). However, in some studies, participants' ability to access the technology was found to be a barrier to participation (Manzanares et al., 2004). For the purposes of this study, the author selected technology that was web-based and easily accessible from a variety of devices (e.g. laptop, tablet, phone, etc.). Content was provided by emailing participants a clickable link that did not require additional steps to log in or download content. In this study, no participants reported difficulty accessing the technology. One participant commented on the Padlet™ discussion board, "I really liked this course! I thought it was well organized, and especially liked the "just a click away" resources included with each module."

Dealing with Challenges

The final theme drawn from the qualitative outcomes is an increased comfort in dealing with challenges, including struggling fieldwork students. Participant comments that highlight this theme include, "I would feel more confident dealing with the poor performing student after taking this course," and "I feel more aware of the students' possible needs and how to deal with problems more effectively." In this area, the outcomes of this study were consistent with Illott's (1995) finding that specific professional development on the topic of struggling or failing fieldwork students has

been demonstrated to increase confidence for confronting this issue in occupational therapists.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included a small sample size and limited diversity among participants, and non-standardized outcome measure. This course was offered in only two suburban school districts. Seventeen of the 18 original participants completed the professional development course. The demographics of this population was similar to the overall demographics of the staff in these school districts, but lack of diversity may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. The use of a non-standardized outcome measure was also a limitation. No standardized questionnaire is currently available to assess fieldwork educator self-efficacy. The author designed the self-efficacy questionnaire specifically for this study.

Implications for Practice

This professional development online course series was successful in increasing self-efficacy among potential occupational therapy fieldwork educators practicing in the public schools. In the future, this course could be implemented in other school districts or adapted to meet the needs of potential fieldwork educators in other occupational therapy practice settings. The course could also be expanded to include an ongoing online forum to support participants as they take on the role of fieldwork educator in the future.

Participants' interest in this course highlights the need for professional development for fieldwork educators. For some school-based occupational therapists, the cost, time, and travel required may prohibit their attendance at on-site professional development programs. This course may serve as a model for effective, low cost, accessible, and flexible professional development that provides content focused on the learner's practice area.

This study is a small step toward better supporting potential fieldwork educators. Additional research is needed to determine how this type of professional development influences the willingness of potential fieldwork educators to accept students. Research on how professional development for fieldwork educators influences student learning and satisfaction would also be a potential future area of focus to help determine the need for continued development of programming for fieldwork educators.

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