

2023

## Perceptions of Skill Development Among Occupational Therapy Students Who Participated in Virtual Fieldwork: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

Spencer G. Morris  
*Saginaw Valley State University*

Kasia Smith  
*Saginaw Valley State University*

Benjamin Poirier  
*Saginaw Valley State University*

Shay L. Riker  
*Saginaw Valley State University*

Ellen Herlache-Pretzer  
*Saginaw Valley State University*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/jote>



Part of the [Occupational Therapy Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Morris, S. G., Smith, K., Poirier, B., Riker, S. L., Herlache-Pretzer, E., Webster, S., & Prast, J. (2023). Perceptions of Skill Development Among Occupational Therapy Students Who Participated in Virtual Fieldwork: A Qualitative Descriptive Study. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 7 (2). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2023.070211>

This Original Research is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Occupational Therapy Education by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [laura.edwards@eku.edu](mailto:laura.edwards@eku.edu).

---

# Perceptions of Skill Development Among Occupational Therapy Students Who Participated in Virtual Fieldwork: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

## Abstract

Occupational therapy fieldwork helps students refine their professional and technical skills to achieve competency required of entry-level occupational therapists. While fieldwork is traditionally completed in an in-person setting, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in some students completing fieldwork in a virtual format. Yet, minimal research has explored perceptions of skill development among students who complete virtual fieldwork placements. This qualitative descriptive study examined the perceptions of skill development among graduate-level occupational therapy students and graduates who participated in a virtual fieldwork placement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight participants from 3 different states completed semi-structured interviews of no longer than 60 minutes duration via Microsoft Teams. Verbatim interview transcriptions were analyzed by the researchers using a constant-comparative data analysis approach. Four key themes emerged: participants initially experienced uncertainty and had concerns regarding the development of their professional and technical skills; professional and technical skills improved during virtual fieldwork but skill development was perceived to be more difficult to accomplish; communication, peer support, online resources, and utilization of their fieldwork educator were primary strategies for facilitating skills development during virtual fieldwork; and virtual fieldwork provides valuable lessons that are applicable to future practice, but students did not recommend it for other occupational therapy students. The results of this study suggest that while virtual fieldwork placements may be valuable in some situations, educators must carefully consider the benefits and drawbacks before placing students in virtual fieldwork placements in the future and ensure that proper support is provided before and during the placement.

## Keywords

Occupational therapy, occupational therapy education, virtual, fieldwork, skill development

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Acknowledgements

Our research team would like to thank Dr. Donald Earley and Kadie Schultz for their peer revision of interview questions and assistance with participant recruitment. Their contributions were valuable to the research process.

## Authors

Spencer G. Morris, Kasia Smith, Benjamin Poirier, Shay L. Riker, Ellen Herlache-Pretzer, Stacey Webster, and Jean Prast

---

## Perceptions of Skill Development Among Occupational Therapy Students Who Participated in Virtual Fieldwork: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

---

Spencer Morris, MS, OTR/L; Kasia Smith, MS, OTR/L;  
Benjamin Poirier, MS, OTR/L; Shay Riker, MS, OTR/L;  
Ellen Herlache-Pretzer, Ed.D., MA, OTRL, CPDT-KA;  
Stacey Webster, OTD, OTRL; and Jean Prast, OTD, MSOT, OTRL, CHSE  
Saginaw Valley State University  
United States

---

### ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy fieldwork helps students refine their professional and technical skills to achieve competency required of entry-level occupational therapists. While fieldwork is traditionally completed in an in-person setting, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in some students completing fieldwork in a virtual format. Yet, minimal research has explored perceptions of skill development among students who complete virtual fieldwork placements. This qualitative descriptive study examined the perceptions of skill development among graduate-level occupational therapy students and graduates who participated in a virtual fieldwork placement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight participants from 3 different states completed semi-structured interviews of no longer than 60 minutes duration via Microsoft Teams. Verbatim interview transcriptions were analyzed by the researchers using a constant-comparative data analysis approach. Four key themes emerged: participants initially experienced uncertainty and had concerns regarding the development of their professional and technical skills; professional and technical skills improved during virtual fieldwork but skill development was perceived to be more difficult to accomplish; communication, peer support, online resources, and utilization of their fieldwork educator were primary strategies for facilitating skills development during virtual fieldwork; and virtual fieldwork provides valuable lessons that are applicable to future practice, but students did not recommend it for other occupational therapy students. The results of this study suggest that while virtual fieldwork placements may be valuable in some situations, educators must carefully consider the benefits and drawbacks before placing students in virtual fieldwork placements in the future and ensure that proper support is provided before and during the placement.

---

## **Introduction**

Occupational therapy fieldwork is an educational experience that provides students the opportunity to learn the professional roles, skills, and responsibilities of an occupational therapist while treating clients with a variety of conditions. Level I and Level II fieldwork allows students to apply their academic knowledge and clinical reasoning in clinical settings under the supervision of an experienced professional (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education [ACOTE], 2018). Fieldwork is normally done in-person, on-site in a variety of settings such as acute care hospitals, outpatient rehabilitation clinics, geriatric care settings (including nursing homes), mental health facilities, and school settings (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], n.d.). However, when the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic became a public safety concern in the spring of 2020, over 50 percent of occupational therapy students in the United States had their fieldwork placements canceled (AOTA, 2020). Additionally, in the ensuing semesters, a significant number of fieldwork placements occurred virtually through various telecommunication platforms (including Microsoft [MS] Teams, Zoom, and Skype; Stamm et al., 2021).

According to ACOTE, fieldwork should enrich academic coursework through direct observation and provide the student a chance to participate in the therapy process (ACOTE, 2018). Fieldwork is a mechanism of education and skill development for occupational therapy students. During the pandemic, fieldwork was modified with professional skills (including interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and decision making; Brown et al., 2016; Kasar & Muscari, 2000; Strong et al., 2003; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 2001) and technical skills (including assessment administration, physical client assessment, and intervention implementation; Mason et al., 2020) being taught in a virtual format. Development of both professional and technical skills is important, as they allow therapists to effectively collaborate with, and provide skilled intervention services to, clients (Brown et al., 2016; Kasar & Muscari, 2000; Mason et al., 2020; Strong et al., 2003; Tryssenaar & Perkins, 2001).

The cancelation of in-person fieldwork placements resulted in students completing fieldwork in virtual formats that still met the revised fieldwork objective standards created by ACOTE (Payne & Saunders-Newton, 2021). However, while the virtual format met ACOTE standards, it is unknown how the completion of fieldwork virtually affected the development of professional and technical skills during the fieldwork experience. For the purposes of this study, the virtual format of fieldwork, which is allowed by ACOTE as an acceptable form of both Level I and Level II fieldwork, was referred to as a virtual fieldwork placement. The researchers defined virtual fieldwork as an educational experience where students developed and applied their professional and technical skills through synchronous online attendance with an educator who may or may not be providing telehealth services.

### **Literature Review**

A limited amount of research has explored the efficacy of virtual education and virtual fieldwork placements for occupational therapy students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stamm et al. (2021) conducted a study in which students were taught hands-on lab skills through e-learning methods during the pandemic. After experiencing e-learning methods for technical skill development, participants stated they lacked confidence in their abilities, and felt distance learning did not meet their hands-on learning needs; they came away from the experiences with negative feelings and perspectives related to online learning. Results suggested that participants could not translate their learning to client care without actual hands-on experiences. It is important to recognize that the research participants in this study were self-identified kinesthetic learners.

However, other research has shown that virtual methods can be effective for skill development. The findings of a study by Eglseder and Littleton (2021) demonstrated that some of the pedagogical changes made in response to the transition to virtual coursework produced positive changes in clinical reasoning and breadth of thinking (as reported by occupational therapy students). Additionally, in response to COVID-related Level II fieldwork cancellations, Payne and Saunders-Newton (2021) structured a virtual Level II fieldwork placement using the revised ACOTE standards for virtual fieldwork. In this virtual setting, site-specific objectives were created to align with the AOTA developed Fieldwork Performance Evaluation (FWPE) (AOTA, 2020). Students indicated they were able to build upon professional skills, including clinical reasoning, within the virtual setting (Payne & Saunders-Newton, 2021). Results suggest a virtual fieldwork format is capable of meeting objectives outlined with the FWPE and participants find value in the virtual format in regard to the development of professional skills.

While virtual fieldwork was implemented as a safety precaution as a result of the pandemic, it may have increased applicability in the post-pandemic future. Additional research is needed to explore the outcomes of virtual fieldwork as it relates to the development of professional and technical skills within the field of occupational therapy and to help guide fieldwork educators and coordinators regarding if, when, where, and how virtual fieldwork placements can be used appropriately to help facilitate development of professional and technical skills among occupational therapy students.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative descriptive approach was implemented to explore graduate level occupational therapy students' and graduates' perceptions of the impacts of virtual fieldwork placements (Level I and Level II) on their achievement of professional skills (specifically communication, problem-solving, decision-making) and technical skills (specifically verbal assessment, intervention implementation, observation, and documentation). Semi-structured interviews were conducted through the use of a video platform (MS Teams) and/or telephone interview. Open-ended questions were utilized

to allow participants to expand upon their thoughts regarding their perceived skill development. The study was approved by the university institutional review board. All participants were informed that, by participating in the interviews, they were giving their consent to participate in the study.

### **Recruitment**

Researchers used convenience sampling to recruit participants as they became available. The targeted sample size was eight to ten participants. As this was a qualitative descriptive study, a smaller sample size was more appropriate (Patten & Newhart, 2018). An informational recruitment flyer containing information about the study and contact information for a member of the research team was posted at the researchers' university. Additionally, the flyer and a recruitment script were posted to the occupational therapy fieldwork course site in the university's online learning platform. An informational recruitment email (with the flyer attached) was also sent to the department chairs of ACOTE-accredited graduate-level occupational therapy programs located in states in close proximity to the researchers' university (in the midwestern United States). Finally, the flyer and an informational script were also posted on occupational therapy-related social media platforms (after obtaining permission from page administrators).

### **Participants**

In order to participate in the study, individuals had to be 18 years of age or older and have completed a Level I and/or Level II virtual fieldwork rotation for a minimum of four weeks (combined or continuous) within the past 24 months prior to the start of the study. They must have also completed at least two (Level I or Level II) fieldwork rotations. Lastly, individuals had to be enrolled in, or graduated from, an ACOTE-accredited graduate occupational therapy program in the United States at the time of the study. Eight participants met the inclusion criteria and completed interviews. Please refer to Table 1 for participant demographic information.

### **Data Collection**

All participants contacted the principal investigator expressing interest regarding participation in the study. After it was determined the individuals met inclusion criteria, interviews were scheduled and completed. The informed consent process was completed immediately prior to each interview. Semi-structured interviews of up to an hour in duration took place via MS Teams or over the telephone, at a location that promoted confidentiality. Interviews were conducted with one participant and two researchers present. During the interviews, the researchers remained in a private location that ensured participant confidentiality. One researcher asked the participant questions, while the other researcher documented field notes and operated an external recording device.

Data was gathered using a researcher-designed interview schedule. Interview questions focused on expectations before starting a virtual fieldwork placement, perceived development of participants' professional and technical skills, strategies for professional and technical skill development, and possible value and lessons learned from the virtual fieldwork experience. Questions were peer-reviewed by occupational therapy faculty within the researchers' university and revised as appropriate based upon feedback. As interviews were completed, they were transcribed fully into a typed document using MS Word.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Information*

| Participant number | Age | Self-Identified gender | Experience with virtual placement | Setting of virtual placement   | State (location of academic institution) |
|--------------------|-----|------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| 1                  | 23  | Female                 | Level I                           | Psychosocial conditions (school-based)   | MI                                       |
| 2                  | 23  | Female                 | Level II                          | Psychosocial conditions (adult developmental center)                           | NY                                       |
| 3                  | 23  | Female                 | Level I                           | Physical conditions and psychosocial conditions                                | NY                                       |
| 4                  | 39  | Female                 | Level II                          | Psychosocial conditions (community-based adults with traumatic brain injuries) | MA                                       |
| 5                  | 29  | Male                   | Level II                          | Psychosocial conditions (leadership & advocacy)                                | NY                                       |
| 6                  | 21  | Female                 | Level II                          | Physical conditions (senior community center)                                  | NY                                       |
| 7                  | 23  | Female                 | Level I                           | Physical conditions and psychosocial conditions                                | NY                                       |
| 8                  | 22  | Female                 | Level I                           | Psychosocial conditions (school-based)   | MI                                       |

## **Data Analysis**

Field notes and transcriptions were organized and reviewed by all researchers to ensure familiarity with content. Once all interviews were transcribed fully, the researchers worked in pairs to complete open, axial, and selective coding through a constant-comparative approach to identify themes (as described by Patten & Newhart, 2018). Open coding established the initial themes through identification of important and/or common statements, ideas, or expressions made by the participants. Open coding generated initial labels for each category of themes using terms that were expressed by the participants. Axial coding was then performed to reorganize the data based on similarity of responses and to reduce the number of overlapping themes. Axial coding helped the researchers combine themes into a smaller number of more encompassing categories. Finally, selective coding was performed to condense the categories into four main themes. The coding process allowed the researchers to interpret and make meaning from the data by identifying themes focused on how participants perceived virtual fieldwork experience impacted their development of professional and technical skills.

The researchers utilized multiple approaches to enhance trustworthiness. All coding and recoding procedures (completed two weeks after the initial coding process) were completed in pairs; results from each coding pair were compared and if differences arose during the coding process, the team members discussed the differences until a common theme or agreement was established with all researchers. Additionally, an audit trail was documented throughout the course of the research process, by recording procedures and decisions made when recruiting, conducting interviews, and analyzing data.

## **Results**

After analyzing data collected from all eight interviews, four major themes were identified by the researchers:

- Participants initially experienced uncertainty and had concerns regarding the development of their professional and technical skills during virtual fieldwork;
- Professional and technical skills improved during virtual fieldwork, but skill development was perceived to be more difficult to accomplish;
- Communication, peer support, online resources, and utilization of their fieldwork educator were primary strategies for facilitating skills development during virtual fieldwork; and
- Virtual fieldwork provided valuable lessons that are applicable to future practice, but participants do not recommend it for other occupational therapy students.

The sections that follow provide further insight into the major themes established through the data analysis process.



### **Feelings of Uncertainty and Concern Regarding the Development of Professional and Technical Skills**

Participants felt worried, concerned, and had an overall sense of uncertainty when they initially were informed their fieldwork placement would occur through a virtual format. An initial concern voiced by participants was their lack of preparation for a virtual fieldwork setting. Participants were also concerned about an inability to apply academic material in a virtual context, and the lack of opportunity to learn the hands-on skills needed to achieve competency as an entry level therapist. Participant 2, who completed a virtual Level II fieldwork within an adult developmental center setting, stated:

To be honest, it's a little disheartening because, as OTs, like we love working hands-on with people. For me, I really felt like I wasn't going to be able to see the skills that I would really need to be like a very good therapist.

Overall, participants reported that they were worried that virtual fieldwork may not be beneficial because they would not be applying their technical skills or gaining technical skills for future practice. Participant 6, who completed a virtual Level II fieldwork in a senior community center setting, stated that her fieldwork educator was concerned about the ability of virtual fieldwork to properly prepare occupational therapy students:

In terms of the skills, it [virtual fieldwork] is very different, and even my supervisor was saying that "you know this Zoom, whatever you guys are doing is not going to prepare you for the real world, like for interacting with patients because it's just not the same."

### **Professional and Technical Skills Improved During Virtual Fieldwork, but Skill Development Was Perceived to Be More Difficult**

Participants voiced that some professional and technical skills changed and improved during participation in virtual fieldwork, and others did not. Positive changes in professional skills were noted in the areas of communication and problem-solving. Communication skill development occurred as participants were challenged to utilize their written communication skills and be articulate in their explanations of technology use. Participant 8, who completed a Level I fieldwork within a school setting, specifically noted communication grew through opportunities for enhanced communication and engagement with the parent(s) of clients. Specific to problem solving, participants learned from the challenge of adapting and developing creative ways to implement therapeutic services virtually. Growth also occurred in the technical skills of client assessment and intervention implementation. Participants were able to better develop their assessment skills through verbal interactions with clients during assessment administration and completion of the AOTA Occupational Profile.

However, mixed responses were provided when discussing perceived skill development in the areas of decision making, physical client assessment, and observation skills. Interestingly, most participants felt they made no positive changes in regard to their documentation skills. No matter if they completed a Level I or Level II virtual fieldwork, multiple participants felt the virtual fieldwork setting did not provide adequate

opportunities for documentation, resulting in no positive changes to their documentation skills. Participant 3, who completed a Level I fieldwork rotation that addressed both physical and psychosocial conditions, stated “I didn't do a whole lot documentation during virtual, so I feel like we were a little cheated out on that 'cause documentation is such a crucial thing.” Participant 2 stated “a lot of our sessions were pretty much the same every time, which wasn't great...So the documentation was pretty much word for word, give or take a sentence or two. So, I wouldn't necessarily say my documentation improved.”

Additionally, while the majority of participants did mention a change in overall skill development as a result of a virtual fieldwork placement, some participants felt professional and technical skills were more difficult to learn in a virtual setting than an in-person setting. Specifically, client assessment and observation skills were both noted to be more difficult to develop in the virtual setting, with the small camera view provided by a webcam being a barrier to development of these skills. Participant 2 found it “crazy hard to look at those physical assessment skills over the visual platforms...I honestly didn't feel like I really gained a lot of visual assessment skills from the virtual platform.”

Furthermore, multiple participants noted that skill development was negatively influenced by an inability to connect with clients and establish rapport in a virtual setting. Whether because of technical difficulties, disruptions, or the lack of face-to-face engagement, participants overall expressed that the difficulty in developing student-client relationships influenced their perceived skill development. Participant 1, who completed a Level I fieldwork in person within the school setting, stated “I just feel like you're able to communicate easier with them in person... I got more of a rapport with them [the client] and was able to create that connection.” The importance of communication in virtual fieldwork placements, and potential negative impacts of virtual placements on the development and use of communication skills, were present throughout participant responses related to the development of professional and technical skills.

### **Strategies That Aided in Development of Skills During Virtual Fieldwork**

Participants identified a number of strategies they employed to develop professional and technical skills in a virtual setting. Communication, whether interprofessional, with clients, with their educator, or with peers, emerged as a primary strategy for skill development. Communication as a tool to promote skill development included both verbal and nonverbal forms (i.e., written). Participants recognized that good communication helped them develop skills in verbal client assessment, problem solving, decision making, and general professional skills. Participants also noted they relied on support from peers and their fieldwork educators to develop skills. Peer support strategies included group chats and group meetings that offered moral support, opportunities to discuss and preview ideas, and opportunities to brainstorm solutions for different problems. Students used interaction with their fieldwork educator as a learning strategy by asking questions, observing, receiving feedback, and conversing with them to create treatment plans. Participant 2 stated:

I relied a lot on my supervisor for those technical skills of being able to properly tell a staff member, “oh, you should be moving their arm this way, or bending it that way.” So, getting the vernacular from my supervisor was the way I learned the technical skills... because virtually you can't really perform those hands-on skills, which is pretty much a lot of what OT is.

Participants stated that online resources were frequently used to help them develop professional and technical skills. These online resources were used for increasing participant education and finding unique treatment activities. In particular, participants noted that online resources were helpful sources of interventions that were friendly for virtual settings. Different online resources identified included the AOTA website, Teachers Pay Teachers, Pinterest, and Boom Cards. Additionally, participants recognized these same resources were helpful in keeping treatments engaging and client centered.

### **Participants Learned Valuable Lessons but Would Not Recommend a Virtual Placement to Other Occupational Therapy Students**

All participants stated they learned valuable lessons during their virtual fieldwork experiences, including how to be self-motivated, flexible, adaptable, and an effective communicator. They also became more understanding of struggles that people were dealing with during the pandemic. The lessons they learned varied based on the placement site and overall experience at the virtual placement. Participant 2 stated that “virtual base [platform] taught me a lot about just adapting, and just figuring out how to do something differently.”

While these lessons were described as important and applicable for future practice as occupational therapists, the majority of participants would not recommend a virtual fieldwork placement to other students. Participant 4, who completed a virtual Level II fieldwork within a community-based setting for adults with traumatic brain injuries, noted it could be useful for the right student (described as someone with good time management skills and who does not need a lot of communication/feedback) but generally would not recommend it. Participant 3 stated, “I would say no [to using virtual placements in the future]...virtual fieldwork, it does help you with learning how to adapt, but I don't recommend it. I don't think you get your full learning.” Participants stated they would not recommend a virtual fieldwork placement because of the lack of hands-on experience, which resulted in participants feeling unprepared for their next fieldwork experience.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study provide new insight into the perceptions of skill development of occupational therapy students who have completed a virtual fieldwork placement. The virtual format of fieldwork deviates from the traditional format, as fieldwork usually occurs in realistic learning contexts and offers students learning opportunities within the context of authentic practice settings (AOTA, 2016; Bada, 2015). Because factors such as site location, setting, and environment influence fieldwork experiences and the

transition into practice (Evenson et al., 2015; Patterson & D'Amico, 2020), it is important to learn how virtual fieldwork placements may impact student outcomes. Specifically, an understanding of student perspectives is critical for shaping and structuring fieldwork placements in the future (Grenier, 2015).

Upon completion of virtual fieldwork placement(s), participants felt they lacked confidence and were unprepared for either their next fieldwork experience or clinical practice due to a lack of hands-on opportunities for client interaction. These findings align with the results of other research studies such as Stamm et al. (2021), in which students were taught technical skills through distance learning methods. Similar to the present study, the participants in the Stamm et al. study stated they lacked confidence in their abilities, felt distance learning did not meet their needs in regard to hands-on learning, and left them with negative feelings and perspectives related to distance learning. It is important to note that although participants in the present study struggled to develop technical skills during virtual fieldwork, they still felt they were able to develop important professional skills in the virtual setting. The value of developing professional skills is highlighted in the AOTA FWPE form (AOTA, 2020). Participants' perceived development of professional skills during a virtual fieldwork placement in the present study is consistent with past research in which Payne and Saunders-Newton constructed a virtual fieldwork placement that resulted in students being able to "apply relevant occupational therapy knowledge" (Payne & Saunders-Newton, 2021, p. 27).

Participants reported they relied on good communication skills, peer support, online resources, and their fieldwork educator to facilitate skills development during their virtual fieldwork placements. Interestingly, these strategies are similar to those utilized by students in non-virtual fieldwork placements. Grenier (2015) surveyed occupational therapy students to explore facilitators and barriers to learning during fieldwork experiences. Respondents (occupational therapy students) noted that fieldwork educators with "well-developed interpersonal skills" created supportive environments in which students could ask questions, engage in learning activities, and safely reflect on outcomes, which assisted in the development of professional skills. Similarly, fieldwork sites that had supportive team members and provided access to learning resources (including internet-based resources) promoted enhanced student learning. This suggests that no matter the type of placement (virtual or non-virtual), it is important to ensure that fieldwork sites provide students with opportunities to access supportive educators and peers, as well as various educational resources, to promote learning and application of new knowledge to clinical experiences (Grenier, 2015).

Adaptability and flexibility were identified as valuable skills developed through virtual fieldwork participation, which would be applicable to future practice. Adaptation was used by the participants not only as a strategy for skill development during the virtual fieldwork experience, but also as a skill to better fit the needs of the client in the virtual setting. While not specifically noted on the AOTA FWPE tool, adaptability and flexibility are pertinent to future practice, and are one value offered by a virtual fieldwork placement. Research indicates that occupational therapy fieldwork students find value

and benefit in fieldwork experiences that provide skills that are applicable to future practice (e.g., adaptability and flexibility; Honey & Penman, 2020). Additionally, adaptability and flexibility are valued by healthcare employers (Murphy, 2023), and promote resilience in the face of challenging work experiences (Matheson et al., 2016).

Finally, it is important to note that for the participants in the present study, virtual fieldwork placements were planned and implemented quickly, with minimal advance planning, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, students were still able to experience some positive outcomes in terms of skill development. It is possible that virtual fieldwork experiences that are carefully planned and structured to meet student needs could be even more valuable in helping students develop these important skills.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. First, the study consisted of a small sample of participants from the Midwestern United States who were primarily women, which limits generalizability to people from other diverse groups. The study used semi-structured interviews which relied on the participants' subjective feelings and perceptions to learn about skill development. There is a chance that individual perceptions of level of skill development may be different from that which would be objectively observed. Additionally, the participants' fieldwork placements took place in a variety of settings, making some interview questions non-applicable to some participants. It is also important to note that participants were not asked to discuss their educators' prior experience with providing virtual/telehealth occupational therapy services or fieldwork education. It is possible that participants' virtual fieldwork experiences could have been influenced by their educators' level of knowledge and prior experience in this area.

Furthermore, this study included students who had done virtual Level I and/or Level II placements. As there are distinct goals and outcomes for Level I versus Level II placements, it is possible that the overall experiences differed slightly for participants based upon the level of their placement. Future research could include objective assessment of skills attainment in students before and after virtual fieldwork placements for both Level I and Level II placements to provide additional information about the impacts of virtual fieldwork on skills development.

### **Implications for Occupational Therapy Education**

Though the COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst for transitioning a large number of occupational therapy fieldwork placements to an online format, it is important to continue to learn about experiences with virtual placements as technology continues to evolve and telehealth becomes more available. Occupational therapy is centered around providing clients with the best, client-centered care possible, and if students are not developing the skills needed to become competent entry-level therapists through their fieldwork rotations, then clients may be at risk. Findings from this study provide positive and negative perspectives relating to perceived skill development in a virtual environment, which allows educators the opportunity to make the necessary adjustments to virtual fieldwork placements if and when they are necessary for future

students. It is important to note that a virtual format can provide potential benefits for clients who have fixed schedules, live in rural areas, and/or for occupational therapy students who may have difficulties relocating for fieldwork (Grenier, 2015). When asked about recommending a virtual fieldwork placement, participant 5, who completed a virtual Level II fieldwork rotation in leadership and advocacy, stated:

It's been giving people [occupational therapy students], like if they are in a really remote part of the state or they are somewhere that doesn't have a lot of fieldwork placements...an opportunity to still go through fieldwork, still pass their courses, and go on to graduate. So, in that sense, it's been really nice that it's kind of brought in the horizon for people [students].

If virtual fieldwork is to be utilized in the future, students may require supplemental hands-on training or experiences in order to complete the rotation with a feeling of confidence and competence in their utilization of technical skills in the field. For example, participants recognized a lack of development in documentation skills, indicating that additional opportunities to practice documenting evaluation and treatment provided in virtual sessions would further support the viability of virtual fieldwork. Future research should be conducted to further explore the impacts of virtual fieldwork placements, with an emphasis on investigating methods for enhancing technical skill development in a virtual setting.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides information regarding the experiences occupational therapy students had in a virtual fieldwork placement in regard to professional and technical skill development. The findings suggest that students may have qualms regarding their abilities to develop necessary skills during virtual fieldwork placements and may demonstrate deficits in development of some skills. Additional support from fieldwork educators, occupational therapy faculty, and peers may be necessary to help students master technical and professional skills in these placements. Further research related to this specific topic should explore if and how occupational therapy fieldwork educators can provide virtual experiences for Level I and Level II students that will satisfy their learning needs. It is possible that virtual fieldwork may be best used as a supplemental fieldwork option for occupational therapy students. While students were able to develop valuable professional skills through virtual fieldwork, they also demonstrated decreased confidence and perceived ability to perform technical skills. Based upon these findings, it appears that future applications of virtual fieldwork models as an approach to facilitate placements should include plans (such as supplemental in-person teaching and learning activities) to ensure student confidence and competence in professional and technical skill development upon completion of the placement.

---

## References

- Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education. (2018). 2018 Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) standards and interpretive guide (EFFECTIVE July 31, 2020). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72(Supplement\_2), 7212410005. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2018.72S217>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (n.d.). *Site-specific objectives*. <https://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Fieldwork/SiteObj.aspx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2016). Occupational therapy fieldwork education: Value and purpose. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(Suppl. 2), 7012410060. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2016.706S06>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2017). *Level I fieldwork competency evaluation for OT and OTA students*. <https://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/Educators/Fieldwork/LevelI/Level-I-Fieldwork-Competency-Evaluation-for-ot-and-ota-students.pdf>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2020). *Fieldwork Performance Evaluation (FWPE) for the Occupational Therapy Student* (Revised in 2020). <https://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/Fieldwork/Fieldwork-Performance-Evaluation-Occupational-Therapy-Student.pdf>
- Bada, S. O. (2015). Constructivism learning theory: A paradigm for teaching and learning. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 6(1), 66–70. <https://doi.org/10.9790/7388-05616670>
- Brown, T., Williams, B., & Etherington, J. (2016). Emotional intelligence and personality traits as predictors of occupational therapy students' practice education performance: A cross sectional study. *Occupational Therapy International*, 23, 412–424. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oti.1443>
- Eglseder, K., & Littleton, A. (2021). Teaching clinical skills online: Techniques, student feedback, and lesson learned. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2021.050211>
- Evenson, M., Roberts, M., Kaldenberg, J., Barnes, M., & Ozelie, R. (2015). National survey of fieldwork educators: Implications for occupational therapy education. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69, 6912350020p1. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.019265>
- Grenier, M. L. (2015). Facilitators and barriers to learning in occupational therapy fieldwork education: Student perspectives. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69(2). <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.015180>
- Honey, A., & Penman, M. (2020). “You actually see what occupational therapists do in real life”: Outcomes and critical features of first-year practice education placements. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 83(10), 638–647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308022620920535>
- Kasar, J., & Muscari, M. (2000). A conceptual model for the development of professional behaviours in occupational therapists. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 67(1), 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000841740006700107>

- Mason, J., Hayden, C. L., & Causey-Upton, R. (2020). Fieldwork educators' expectations of Level II occupational therapy students' professional and technical skills. *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 8(3), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1649>
- Matheson, C., Robertson, H.D., Elliott, A.M., Iversen, L., & Murchie, P. (2016). Resilience of primary healthcare professionals working in challenging environments: A focus group study. *British Journal of General Practice*, 66(648). <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp16X685285>
- Murphy, H. (2023). *The importance of “soft” skills in nursing and healthcare professions*. Elsevier Education. <https://evolve.elsevier.com/education/expertise/faculty-development/the-importance-of-soft-skills-in-healthcare-professions/>
- Patten, M. L., & Newhart, M. (2018). *Understanding research methods: An overview of the essentials*. (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Routledge.
- Patterson, B., & D'Amico, M. (2020). What does the evidence say about student, fieldwork educator, and new occupational therapy practitioner perceptions of successful level II fieldwork and transition to practice? A scoping review. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2020.040210>
- Payne, K. & Saunders-Newton, C. (2021). COVID-19: Building a role-emerging level II pediatric fieldwork on Zoom. *Occupational Therapy Practice*, 26(2), 25-28.
- Stamm, M., Francetic, K., Reilly, R., Tharp, A., Thompson, N., & Weidenhamer, R. (2021). Kinesthetic learners during the COVID-19 pandemic: Occupational therapy students' perspective on e-learning. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 5 (2). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2021.050203>
- Strong, S., Baptiste, S., & Salvatori, P. (2003). Learning from today's clinicians in vocational practice to educate tomorrow's therapists. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(1), 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000841740307000103>
- Tryssenaar, J., & Perkins, J. (2001). From student to therapist: Exploring the first year of practice. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 55, 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.55.1.19>