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Mapping Review of Fieldwork Education Literature

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ABSTRACT

Fieldwork is an integral phase of occupational therapy education, bolstered by a small but growing evidence base. A broad understanding of the state of that evidence base is necessary to inform the directions for future growth. The purpose of this work was to establish the current state of occupational therapy fieldwork literature, map that literature to recognized criteria for educational research, and identify gaps in the existing literature. Authors followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines to conduct a mapping review of articles with a primary focus on fieldwork education of occupational therapy (OT) or occupational therapy assistant (OTA) students in United States (Accreditation for Occupational Therapy Education)-based programs. Mapping criteria included level of education [OT, OTA], level of fieldwork [Level I, Level II], and categories of the AOTA *Education Research Agenda - Revised* (2018). Sources included four databases (Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, PubMed) and one additional journal (*Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*). A total of 1,619 articles were identified, with 67 articles meeting inclusion

criteria. The 67 included articles disproportionately focused on Level II OT fieldwork (53%, n=36), with sparse representation of Level I OTA fieldwork (1.5%, n=1), and addressed only two categories of the Education Research Agenda (2018; 80%, n=54). Level I fieldwork, occupational therapy assistant programs, and large swaths of the association's Education Research Agenda (2018) were dramatically (or completely) underrepresented in fieldwork education research, suggesting important priorities for the immediate future of occupational therapy fieldwork education.

Introduction

Entry-level occupational therapy education in the United States has two important and intricately tied components - didactic and fieldwork education. Fieldwork education plays a crucial role in transforming the occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) student from classroom learner to a competent entry-level generalist practitioner (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education [ACOTE], 2018). The contexts for didactic education are primarily in the classroom - through lectures and labs. Alternatively, fieldwork experiences, both Level I and Level II, occur in varied environments such as clinical settings, faculty practices, simulated environments, and other practical "hands-on" environments. These differing and at times unpredictable settings are unique educational experiences. Although there have been descriptive studies of different fieldwork models and student experiences, there is still much to understand about fieldwork education. For example, further research is needed regarding methods for supporting clinical reasoning development and the carryover of best practice ideals learned in academic education to the fieldwork sector. An international systematic mapping review of fieldwork identified the need for fieldwork research scholarship to expand the topics, conceptual frameworks, methods, outcomes, and levels of impact considered (Roberts et al., 2015).

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) convened the Academic Fieldwork Coordinators Academic Leadership Council (AFWC – ALC) in 2018. The AFWC – ALC subsequently appointed the Research Promotion ad hoc committee with a charge to evaluate the current state of fieldwork-related literature and to make recommendations for future coordinated scholarship into fieldwork practice. The committee set out to update Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWC) and researchers on the state of the literature. This manuscript represents the findings of that effort.

Current State of the Fieldwork Literature

Roberts et al. (2015) completed an international systematic mapping review of fieldwork education in occupational therapy. That paper was the first organized attempt at outlining and characterizing the fieldwork literature. The authors used as their mapping framework a set of five broad research questions inherited from a larger study of occupational therapy educational research (Hooper et al., 2013). Of the 124 publications reviewed by Roberts et al. (2015), the majority represented the primary topics of "curriculum" or "student."

Articles focused on the curriculum included how fieldwork experiences were designed, implemented, and evaluated. Articles that were student-focused explored student perceptions of innovative fieldwork experiences and their perceptions of the skills acquired through fieldwork. Other focus areas included faculty, teaching, assessment, and learning environment. The topics of teaching, learning, and the influence of the learning environment accounted for only 10 percent of the papers reviewed. Seventy-five of the articles reviewed were classified as research and 40 qualified as an educational intervention involving faculty, students, or both. Most articles explored Level II fieldwork and involved descriptions of single and local learning situations. Structural challenges in fieldwork were the main rationale cited for the research conducted. The authors recommended the establishment a broader rationale and conceptual framework for fieldwork research scholarship that would link studies to larger professional issues and discourses, thus expanding the topics, conceptual frameworks, methods, outcomes, and levels of impact of fieldwork education research (Roberts et al., 2015).

The AOTA Occupational Therapy Education Research Agenda - Revised

The AOTA Occupational Therapy Education Research Agenda - Revised (2018) identified seven goals and priorities for occupational therapy education research: (1) theory building, (2) signature pedagogies, (3) instructional methods, (4) learner characteristics and competencies, (5) socialization to the profession, (6) faculty development and resources, and (7) the promotion of diversity, inclusion, and equity throughout the education pipeline and curricula. Sample research questions provided for each research priority include examples for both academic and fieldwork education (AOTA, 2018).

The intent of the AOTA Education Research Agenda (2018) was to organize and drive research in occupational therapy education in a systematic manner. The Education Research Agenda (2018) has the power and potential to help guide those invested in fieldwork education scholarship, such as the AFWC-ALC, toward research topics that directly contribute to evidence-based practice for fieldwork education. For this reason, the Research Promotion ad hoc committee utilized the AOTA Research Agenda (2018) to map the fieldwork literature.

Research Questions

The formation of the AFWC-ALC was serendipitously well-timed to build on the example set by Roberts, the creation and revision of the Education Research Agenda (2018), and the rapid growth of the body of fieldwork literature since 2015. The authors formulated three research questions against which to evaluate the existing literature on fieldwork education.

1. What is the current state of fieldwork literature over the last 30 years?
2. How does the current fieldwork literature map to the AOTA *Occupational Therapy Education Research Agenda - Revised* (2018), levels of education [occupational therapy, OTA], and levels of fieldwork [Level I, Level II]?
3. What gaps are present in the existing fieldwork literature?

Methods

The ad hoc committee began by conducting a cursory review of the literature, including *An international systematic mapping review of fieldwork education in occupational therapy* (Roberts et al., 2015). The cursory review revealed that the volume of articles published since the Roberts work warranted an updated review. Further, the publication of the Education Research Agenda (2018) provided an accepted mapping tool that had not been available at the time of the Roberts et al. work. The ad hoc committee engaged a research librarian (Olson) to guide the selection of and adherence to the most appropriate review format and methods.

Among the myriad review options available (Grant & Booth, 2009), the authors ultimately decided that a mapping review remained the most appropriate approach, as in Roberts et al. (2015). The authors set three mapping axes: (1) the priority categories established in the AOTA Education Research Agenda – Revised (2018), (2) level of education (i.e.: occupational therapy, OTA), and (3) level of fieldwork (i.e.: Level I, Level II).

Data Sources and Literature Searching

We searched four bibliographic databases for articles: Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), CINAHL (EBSCO), Eric (EBSCO), and PubMed. We also searched the *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education* (via the journal website) with strategy adapted from our database searches, as it was not indexed by the bibliographic databases at the time of the search.

Search Strategy

Our search terms were developed based on the research question and included synonyms for the concepts of “occupational therapy” and “fieldwork education”, structured with search syntax tailored to each database and the single journal (see Table 1). The *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education* was searched manually via the journal’s website. Searches were carried out initially on March 26th and 27th of 2019, and then subsequently updated with secondary searches of the same databases using the same search strategies on October 22, 2020.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included in this review if they met the following criteria: research was conducted in the United States, and articles were published in the English language between 1989 and 2019 (a time period which was subsequently expanded to October 22, 2020, following delay due to COVID-19). The inclusion criteria were intended to address several related concerns. Only United States-based research was considered because the Research Advancement ad hoc committee is a subset of the AFWC-ALC, whose members all represent occupational therapy and OTA programs in the United States. Further, education level and fieldwork format in other countries do not consistently match the mapping criteria used in the United States, precluding their inclusion. The date range was intended to capture current and recent fieldwork literature. The authors intended to capture all current and recent fieldwork literature, regardless of whether it had been captured in the previous Roberts et al. (2015) review.

Table 1*Search Strategy*

Database	Search Terms
Academic Search Premier (EBSCO)	(intern OR "fieldwork student" OR (DE "APPRENTICES") OR ("students" AND (DE "WORK experience (Employment)")) OR "job experience") OR (DE "PRACTICUM supervision") OR (DE "MEDICAL preceptorship") OR ("fieldwork coordinator" OR "site coordinator" OR "clinical coordinator" OR "director* of clinical education" OR "academic fieldwork coordinator" OR "experiential coordinator") OR (DE "APPRENTICESHIP programs") OR (DE "FIELDWORK (Educational method)") OR (DE "FIELD work (Research)" AND ((DE "OCCUPATIONAL therapy education") OR (DE "OCCUPATIONAL therapy"))
CINAHL (EBSCO)	((intern OR (MH "Fieldwork") OR (student AND ((MH "Work Experiences") OR (MH "Job Experience")) OR ("fieldwork preceptors" OR (MH "Clinical Supervision")) OR ("fieldwork coordinator" OR "clinical coordinator" OR "directors of clinical education" OR "academic fieldwork coordinator") OR ("practice placement" OR "practicum" OR "clinical experience" OR (MH "Education, Clinical") OR (MH "Learning Environment, Clinical") OR (MH "Teaching Methods, Clinical") OR (MH "Teaching Materials, Clinical") OR "socialization to the profession")) AND ((MH "Occupational Therapy") OR (MH "Education, Occupational Therapy") OR (MH "Students, Occupational Therapy") OR (MH "Occupational Therapy Practice"))
Eric (EBSCO)	(intern OR "fieldwork student" OR (student AND ("work experiences" OR (DE "Employment Experience")))) OR ("fieldwork preceptor" OR "fieldwork educator" OR "site educator" OR "clinical supervisor" OR "clinical instructor" OR "clinical educator" OR "fieldwork supervisor" OR (DE "Practicum Supervision")) OR ("fieldwork coordinator" OR "site coordinator" OR "clinical coordinator" OR "director* of clinical education" OR "academic fieldwork coordinator" OR "experiential coordinator") OR ((DE "Field Experience Programs") OR (DE "Student Placement") OR (DE "Competency Based Education") OR (DE "Field Instruction") OR (DE "Clinical Experience") OR (DE "Practicums")) AND (DE "Occupational Therapy")
PubMed	((intern OR "fieldwork student" OR ("work experience" OR "job experience") AND ("Students"[Mesh])) OR ("fieldwork preceptors" OR ("Preceptorship"[Mesh])) OR ("fieldwork coordinator" OR "clinical coordinator" OR "director* of clinical education" OR "academic fieldwork coordinator") OR (fieldwork OR internship OR "socialization to the profession" OR ("Clinical Clerkship"[Mesh]) OR "practice placement" OR "practicum" OR "clinical experience")) AND

	("Occupational Therapy"[Mesh]))
Journal of Occupational Therapy Education	(intern OR fieldwork OR preceptor OR clinical OR "site experience" OR practicum OR "socialization to the profession" OR "work-integrated learning")[OD3] [OD4]

Abstract Screening

A standardized review protocol was developed but was not registered for public retrieval. A data extraction tool was developed in Redcap (Harris et al., 2009, 2019). Two reviewers independently screened each abstract for adherence to inclusion criteria. Abstracts were also preliminarily mapped by Education Research Agenda – Revised (2018) category, level of education, and level of fieldwork. Each abstract was screened by two independent reviewers via the Redcap platform. Redcap data were then extracted to an Excel spreadsheet to test for agreement between reviewers. For all criteria, any decisions on which reviewers agreed were accepted. When reviewer dyads disagreed on any criteria, they met by telephone or videoconference to confer. If the reviewer dyad came to agreement, they updated their findings in the Redcap platform. When reviewer dyads could not reach agreement, they brought the abstract to a meeting of the full committee. The full committee made final decisions on any remaining discrepancies.

Article Retrieval

Eight authors, with varying institutional access to full-text sources, attempted to retrieve articles that passed abstract screening. Retrieved full-text articles were saved to a shared online repository.

Full-Text Eligibility Assessment and Mapping

Articles that passed abstract screening and could be retrieved were distributed evenly among pairs of reviewers. A new data extraction tool was created and pre-populated with findings from the abstract review. Reviewers then followed the same sequence as during abstract review: independent review, test for agreement, pairwise discrepancy resolution, and full-committee discrepancy resolution. Reviewers read each assigned article and verified or updated each variable in the data extraction tool. For each article, reviewers determined whether fieldwork was the focus of the article and whether research (including quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) was conducted. The full data extraction tool is available from the authors upon request.

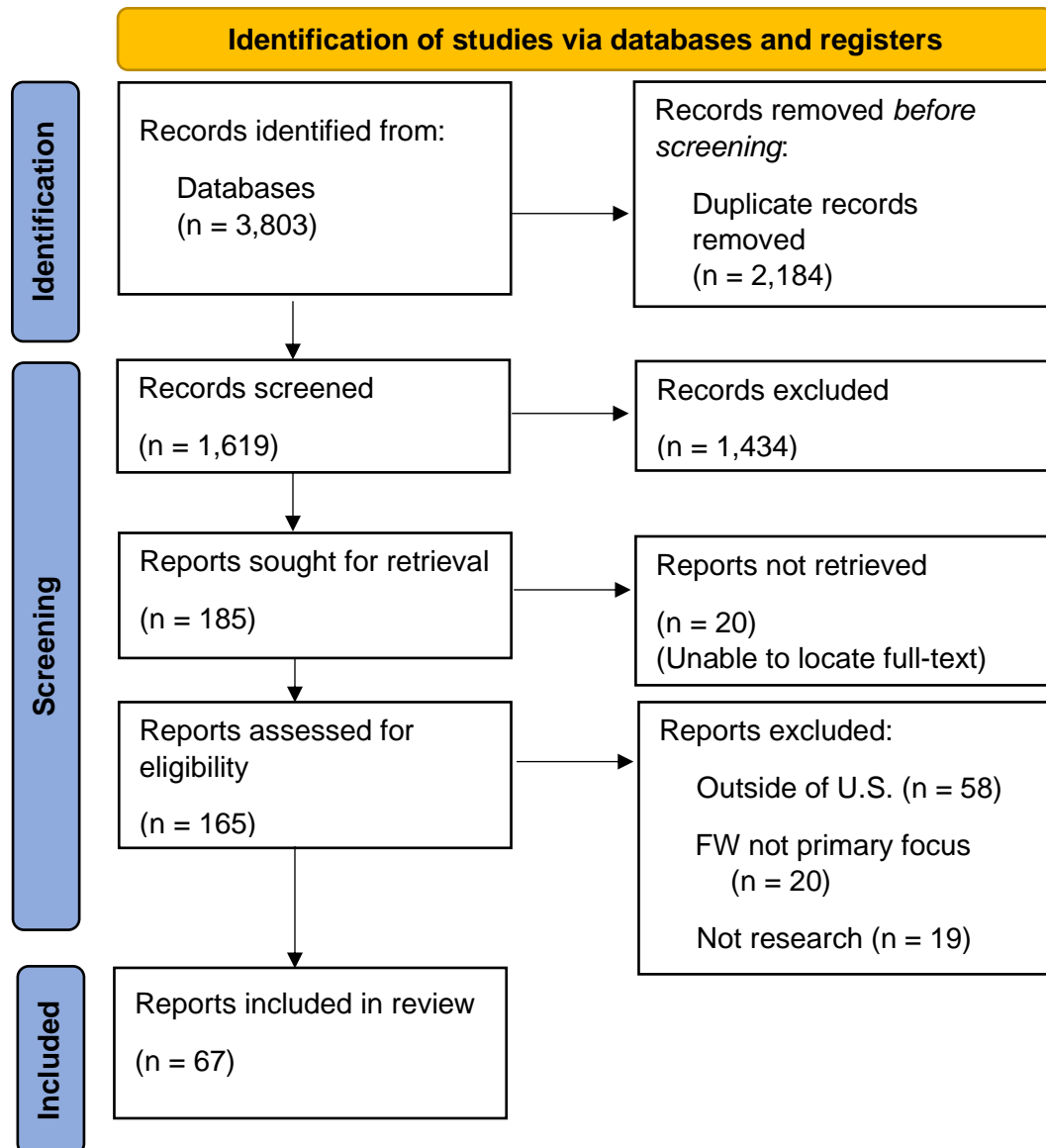
During full-text review, level of education and level of fieldwork were subjected to further interrogation. These two variables were frequently extracted as “unspecified,” as original authors often made no explicit mention of either in their manuscripts. In those cases, a committee member contacted the first author of the manuscript to request clarification. When authors could not be reached, the items were left as “unspecified.”

Results

The initial search yielded 1,619 articles. Of those, 1,434 were excluded based on abstract screening. Full-text reviews were conducted on 165 articles, yielding 67 that met eligibility for final inclusion. The full PRISMA flow diagram for article selection is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Prisma Flow Diagram



Note: Adapted from Page et al. (2021).

A detailed mapping of the level of education, level of fieldwork, and Education Research Agenda (2018) category is provided in Table 2. A list of the 67 included articles, sorted by mapping, is available as Appendix A. Of the 67 included articles, 55 focused exclusively on occupational therapy fieldwork experiences, five on a mixture of occupational therapy and OTA, and only one exclusively on OTA (with six additional unspecified). Level of fieldwork was also unevenly represented; 46 articles focused exclusively on Level II fieldwork, five on a combination of Level I and Level II, and 16 exclusively on Level I. Four categories of the Education Research Agenda (2018) were represented in the literature: *Instructional Methods* (n=23), *Learner characteristics and competencies* (n=31), *Socialization to the profession* (n=6), and *Faculty development and resources* (n=3). Four additional articles could not be mapped to the Education Research Agenda (2018). No articles were mapped to the categories of *Theory building*, *Signature pedagogies*, or *Promotion of diversity, inclusion, and equity throughout the education pipeline and curricula*.

The balance of the literature disproportionately focused on Level II occupational therapy fieldwork (36 of 67 papers; 53%), virtually ignores Level I OTA fieldwork (1 of 67 papers; 1.5%), and predominantly addresses only two categories of the Education Research Agenda (2018; 23 and 31 of 67 papers on *Instructional methods* and *Learner characteristics and competencies*, respectively; 80%).

Table 2*Fieldwork Literature Mapping Results by Program Type and Fieldwork Level*

Category	OT			OTA			Both OT + OTA			Unspecified OT or OTA		
	I	II	Unknown/ Combined	I	II	Unknown/ Combined	I	II	Unknown/ Combined	I	II	Unknown/ Combined
Instructional methods	10	11	1								1	
Learner characteristics and competencies	3	20	1		1		1	3			2	
Socialization to the profession	1	3						1			1	
Faculty development and resources		1									1	1
None of the above	1	1	2								0	
SUM	15	36	4	0	1	0	1	4	0	0	5	1

Notes. For the purpose of this table, “Category” refers to categories of the Education Research Agenda (2018). “I” refers to Level I fieldwork; “II” refers to Level II fieldwork; “Unknown/Combined” includes articles for which Level I vs Level II status was undetermined of which included elements of both. Education Research Agenda (2018) Categories to which no articles were mapped are omitted from the table.

Discussion

The purposes of this article were to provide AFWCs and occupational therapy practitioners with an updated state of fieldwork literature from the last 30 years and to facilitate a gap analysis of the literature as mapped to the *American Occupational Therapy Association Occupational Therapy Education Research Agenda – Revised* (2018), levels of education, and levels of fieldwork.

The results show a continued paucity of literature addressing critical areas of occupational therapy fieldwork education. Level I fieldwork and OTA programs remain dramatically underrepresented in the literature. Conversely, *Instructional methods* and *Learner characteristics and competencies* have been consistently overrepresented, particularly in the context of Level II fieldwork for occupational therapy students. The results of this mapping approach complement the prior findings of Roberts et al. (2015) and suggest that the same trends observed in 2015 continue today (see Table 3). Roberts et al. (2015) proposed three recommendations for future fieldwork research. Two of those three recommendations map directly to categories of the Education Research Agenda (2018) which remain completely unrepresented in the current review (see Table 4). When research has focused on OTA programs (either alone or with OT programs), the focus has been exclusively on *Learner characteristics and competencies* or *Socialization to the profession*. Research on Level I Fieldwork focuses primarily on *Instructional methods*. This typically involves reporting on the effectiveness of a novel approach to Level I education. Research on Level II Fieldwork is relatively more diverse, though a plurality of those papers focus on a single area: *Learner characteristics and competencies*. This is perhaps understandable, as competency is the primary outcome measure of fieldwork. It is both the most important and the most consistently documented variable for Fieldwork education.

Table 3

The Three Most Commonly Identified Primary Topics and Subcategories in Roberts et al. (2015) Correspond to the Most Commonly Identified Education Research Agenda (2018) Categories in the Current Review

Roberts et al. (2015): Proportion of papers addressing primary topics and subcategories		Current review: Proportion of papers addressing Education Research Agenda (2018) Categories	
Primary Topic	Subcategory		Category
Curriculum (41%)	Fieldwork design (68%)	→	Instructional methods (34%)
Students (26%)	Student perspectives on their own learning (66%)	→	Learner characteristics & competencies (46%)
	Personal development / professional behavior (55%)	→	Socialization to the profession (9%)

Notes: Adapted from Roberts et al. (2015), page 110. Percentages do not total 100% as these represent only the three most commonly identified subcategories.

Table 4

Recommendations Made by Roberts et al. (2015) and Categories of the Education Research Agenda – Revised (2018) Not Identified in the Literature Through 2021

Roberts et al. (2015)	Current Review
“[R]ecommendations for bolstering fieldwork scholarship”	Education Research Agenda (2018) categories not identified in the literature
1. Strengthen Research Procedures for Studying Particular Fieldwork Experiences	→ Promotion of diversity, inclusion, and equity throughout the education pipeline and curricula
2. Broaden Rationales for Conducting Fieldwork Scholarship	→ Theory building
3. Grow Research on Fieldwork as Pedagogy in an Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Context	→ Signature pedagogies

Note: Adapted from Roberts et al. (2015), pages 113-115.

Limitations

The mapping review format itself may be viewed as a limitation. Mapping reviews do not, by definition, include quality assessment of the reviewed articles. The full-text data extraction tool included many variables which are not reported on in this manuscript, as they fall outside the purview of a mapping review. The authors invite future researchers to make use of these additional data for subsequent analyses.

Mapping fieldwork literature to AOTA's *Education Research Agenda – Revised* (2018) categories proved difficult. Though the categories identified in the agenda were clearly descriptive of and relevant to didactic education, they were less consistently compatible with fieldwork education. During the initial abstract review process, a pilot test for agreement revealed unacceptably high disagreement on mapping to the agenda. The Committee conferred with two authors of the *Education Research Agenda – Revised* (2018; Grajo, personal communication, and Taff, personal communication) to refine our understanding of operational definitions and how to identify categories in the literature. Although reviewers eventually reached consensus, several articles were classified as not mapped to any agenda categories. At the same time, no articles were mapped to several categories. We do not propose the unmapped categories as evidence that the agenda is a poor mapping criterion; rather, they suggest a paucity of evidence in important areas of fieldwork education research.

It is also important to note that fieldwork level (I or II) is inconsistently described in the literature. Many of the excluded articles focused on scholarship of teaching and learning in applied contexts but did not clearly state whether the activities described constituted Level I fieldwork, in-class activities, or some other form of experiential learning. Indeed, the very definition of Level I fieldwork has evolved over the period under consideration (ACOTE, 2018), meaning that much of the excluded work may have met inclusion criteria if it had been identified as such in the original writing.

Additionally, the authors excluded descriptive articles that did not include a research question and the so-called gray literature, comprised of non-peer-reviewed articles, posters, conference presentations, and theses. Although many of these works explicitly addressed fieldwork education, this review was an attempt at mapping the rigorous, peer-reviewed study of fieldwork education.

While Roberts et al. (2015) conducted an international review of fieldwork literature, the current authors excluded any literature based on fieldwork experiences in programs outside of the United States. Two rationale drove this decision. First, the authors undertook the project as a subcommittee of the AOTA AFWC – ALC. Second, different educational standards around the world preclude cleanly mapping those experiences to ACOTE-defined Level I and Level II fieldwork. Because the results of this review are to inform future collaborative work of members of the AOTA AFWC – ALC, we limited our scope to within the constraints under which that future work will occur.

Finally, by the time of publication, the mapping review search will have been conducted nearly three years prior (2019-2020). The bulk of this work was conducted during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the majority of the authors were AFWCs at the time, analysis and publication was delayed as the authors worked to ensure Level I and Level II students' success. We recognize that additional research has been published subsequent to this review.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

These results highlight the need for fieldwork researchers to shift their collective focus toward underexplored concepts. While gaps are numerous, we will highlight potential avenues for such work that feature all three mapping criteria. As fieldwork itself is arguably a signature pedagogy of occupational therapy education, no articles were mapped to the construct of *Signature pedagogies*. One line of inquiry could explore the correlation between established signature pedagogies such as active engagement, transformative learning, or constructivism to fieldwork education (Deluliis, 2017). This approach would welcome other faculty members into the work by highlighting their contributions and efforts for bridging the classroom and clinic. Moreover, the use of these signature pedagogies could be further explicated across numerous gap areas. One potential area of study could be to explore the relative value of a transformative learning approach over the timespans of Level I vs. Level II fieldwork. Another would be to explore the impact of a constructivist approach on the clinical reasoning of occupational therapy and OTA students in a collaborative fieldwork experience.

AFWCs cannot do this work alone. AFWCs have complex educational and administrative responsibilities, while also being expected to complete professional scholarship activities comparable to same-ranked faculty members and colleagues (Stutz-Tanenbaum et al., 2015), resulting in well-documented role strain (Barton et al., 2013; Deluliis et al., 2021; Dickerson, 2004; Stutz-Tanenbaum et al., 2015; Stutz-Tanenbaum et al., 2017). This work will necessitate collaboration not only between educational institutions, but between groups of stakeholders. The AFWC is often identified as the link between didactic and fieldwork education and in a direct position to support the process of fieldwork education through scholarship and research (Stutz-Tanenbaum et al., 2017). A team science approach (Liu et al., 2020) involving AFWCs, research faculty, fieldwork educators, other occupational therapy practitioners, students, and occupational therapy consumers would allow each contributor to focus on their own area of expertise, expanding the potential for effective, evidence-based fieldwork education.

The authors also propose that fieldwork should be formally included in future revisions to the *AOTA Education Research Agenda*. Such inclusion will support both the evidence-based practice of fieldwork and the ACOTE-required integration of fieldwork into the broader scope of occupational therapy curricula (ACOTE, 2018). Future iterations of the *AOTA Education Research Agenda* may consider categories specific to fieldwork education or the embedding of fieldwork-specific examples into existing

categories. This approach could further guide fieldwork research, encouraging academic programs to conduct much more evidence-based and data-driven program evaluations that link classroom and clinic in experiential learning opportunities.

Conclusion

This work updates our understanding of the state of fieldwork literature. Fieldwork research over the past 30 years has focused disproportionately on instructional methods and learner characteristics and competencies in OT Level II fieldwork. Although the category definitions in the *Occupational Therapy Education Research Agenda – Revised* (2018) are not particularly well-suited to describing fieldwork education, they are an effective mapping tool and confirm ongoing gaps in the literature. Specific gaps in the literature include: OTA fieldwork experiences, Level I fieldwork experiences, and research into the *Education Research Agenda – Revised* (2018) categories of theory building, signature pedagogies, socialization to the profession, faculty development and resources, and the promotion of diversity, inclusion, and equity throughout the education pipeline and curricula. Addressing these gaps will require a concerted, collaborative effort involving a broad coalition of fieldwork stakeholders.

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APPENDIX A

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL: REVIEWED REFERENCE LIST, SORTED BY LEVEL OF OT EDUCATION, LEVEL OF FIELDWORK, AND EDUCATION RESEARCH AGENDA CATEGORY

Occupational Therapy Level I

Instructional Methods (10)

- Chapleau, A., & Harrison, J. (2015). Fieldwork I program evaluation of student learning using goal attainment scaling. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.018325>
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Occupational Therapy Level II

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OTA Level II

Learner Characteristics and Competencies (1)

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Occupational Therapy Multiple / Other / Unspecified

Instructional Methods (1)

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