Feature Article

The influence of fieldwork on the preferred future practice areas of final year occupational therapy students

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The student fieldwork experience has been recognised as an important influence on the areas of occupational therapy practice pursued by clinicians after graduation. The recruitment patterns of graduate occupational therapists is a key issue, especially in clinical areas such as rural practice and mental health. This study aimed to investigate the future practice preferences of 50 final year occupational therapy students from two occupational therapy schools in New South Wales, in relationship to their fieldwork experience, using a focus group and a survey. General physical dysfunction was the most popular area of future practice for this group. Results suggested that fieldwork influenced students through the programme content, the timing of placements, supervision, and students' personal responses to their experiences. The study also demonstrated that students use the fieldwork experience to guide their decision to enter an area of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Occupational therapy has diverse applications exemplified by the variety of settings in which an occupational therapist can work. In New South Wales, the vacancy rate for occupational therapy positions has been reported at 6.3%, and overall domestic demand is expected to exceed a projected growth rate of 80% over the next decade (Department of Employment, Education and Training — Economic and Policy Analysis Division, 1995; Fenton-Jones, 1996; O'Connor & Braithwaite, 1995). Specific issues relating to the Australian occupational therapy workforce include significant shortages of occupational therapists working in psychiatry (Arblaster *et al.*, 1998; Chamberlain, 1997; Ciolek, 1997). It has been reported that a student's decision to pursue a specific area of practice may be influenced by a variety of factors (Ezersky Havazelet, Scott & Zettler, 1989; Stine, Sheets & Calonge, 1992), but it is the fieldwork experience that is thought to be the key factor (Christie, Joyce & Moeller, 1985). It is therefore important to investigate what impacts on the practice preferences of final year students, so that the profession can respond to the consequent recruitment issues.

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Therefore, the aims of this study were to: (i) identify the factors that influence final year students' decision to choose a future practice area in occupational therapy; (ii) identify the importance of the fieldwork experience in relation to the development of practice preferences; and (iii) explore the specific elements of the fieldwork process that students perceive as being the most influential on practice preference.

Development of specialisation in occupational therapy practice

The decision to specialise in an area of practice may be influenced by a number of factors including an individual's values and personality, education and learning style, clinical fieldwork experiences, 'significant others' (such as family or peers), and the labour market (Christie *et al.*, 1985; Ezersky *et al.*, 1989; Stine *et al.*, 1992). The specific details of an occupational therapy position that make it attractive may also be influential (Borikar & Goodban, 1989; Gibson, 1996).

Individual personal values will inevitably be influential on occupational therapy career choices to some extent. Past studies (Holmstrom, 1975; Madigan, 1985; Madill, Macnab & Brintnell, 1989) have identified occupational therapy students as placing little value on job-related prestige and status. More recently, Rozier, Gilkeson and Hamilton (1992) argued that contemporary occupational therapy students place higher value on financial security, employment prospects and prestige. The role that peers play in the personality development and professional socialisation of occupational therapy students has also been identified (Posthuma & Posthuma, 1973; Sabari, 1985), along with the family (Shore, 1979; Swinehart & Feinberg, 1989). Brollier (1970) also believed personality types may influence specialty choice.

Past research has identified a link between learning style and specialty preference (Plovnick, 1975). Attitudes, personal bias towards practice areas and teaching styles of occupational therapy academic staff may have an influence on practice preference (Barris & Kielhofner, 1986). The perception of inadequate theoretical preparation in specific practice areas may also prevent graduates pursuing the same areas of occupational therapy practice on graduation (Christie *et al.*, 1985). It has also been suggested that psychiatric occupational therapy practice is not pursued by graduates because of a perceived reduced

status and ambiguity of the occupational therapy role in this setting (Ezersky *et al.*, 1989; Scott, 1990; Wittman, Swinehart, Cahill & St Michael, 1989). Regardless of specialty area, the professional issues of blurred job roles (Greensmith & Blumfield, 1989), poor recognition of occupational therapy services (Fleming & Piedmont, 1989) and a weak professional identity (Breines, 1987; Lycett, 1991) can impact on the practice preferences of clinicians.

Influence of fieldwork on specialisation in occupational therapy

The most important factor influencing health professional career decisions in general appears to be fieldwork (Christie *et al.*, 1985; Hays, 1993; Showers, 1992). Fieldwork enables students to experience different clinical settings and treatment modalities (Swinehart & Meyers, 1992). In doing so, students are more informed when choosing an area of future practice, and may decide to pursue an area in which they feel the greatest sense of competence (Bush, Powell & Herzberg, 1993). The main aspects of a fieldwork programme that influence students' specialty choices are positive and negative placement experiences, fieldwork supervisors, and the structure and timing of the fieldwork programme (Christie *et al.*, 1985; Ezersky *et al.*, 1989).

Positive and negative responses have been reported to be related to exposure to clients, casemix and the theoretical frame of reference adopted at a facility, as well as emotional responses to a client group (Christie *et al.*, 1985; Ezersky *et al.*, 1989; Wittman *et al.*, 1989). It is also evident that positive student experiences with specific client populations, or in a specific setting, can promote a positive attitude towards that group or environment (Russell, Clark & Barney, 1996; Swinehart & Feinberg, 1989; Wittman *et al.*, 1989).

Supervision can contribute to a positive or negative fieldwork experience for students. Christie *et al.* (1985) found that a high proportion of occupational therapists deemed fieldwork to have had the most influence on their practice preferences, especially their supervisors and the interpersonal environment. Certainly, the supervisory process and the student–supervisor relationship has been viewed as a key factor in determining the success of a fieldwork experience (Christie *et al.*, 1985; Gaiptman, 1986; Yuen, 1990). Conversely, poor supervisory practices, demands on supervisors such as limited time, staff and

resources, as well as pressures to supervise students, may contribute to a negative placement (Ebb & Haiman, 1990). Showers (1992) found that a positive fieldwork supervisory experience and a practice preference in the same area of practice on graduation were related in a study of social work students, although Ezersky *et al.* (1989) argued against this in a study of occupational therapy students.

It has been suggested that the timing of fieldwork experiences may influence specialty choices, as fieldwork experiences in the latter stages of an occupational therapy programme are the most important. At this time students possess less anxiety and a greater sense of effectiveness, maturity, confidence and professionalism by this stage in their education (Ezersky *et al.*, 1989; Fleming & Piedmont, 1989; Wittman *et al.*, 1989).

This review of the literature indicates that while there are a wide range of factors influencing a graduate's decision to apply for an occupational therapy position, the fieldwork experience will be a significant influence on the development of preferred practice areas. However, many of the studies about practice preference were conducted several years ago, and the more recent studies were conducted overseas with an emphasis on mental health practice. Given the trends in health care, changes in occupational therapy practice, recruitment needs and growing numbers of academic occupational therapy programmes, there is a need to look at the current practice preference among Australian occupational therapy students. Therefore, this study aimed to provide insights about the practice preferences expressed by final year students from two relatively new academic programmes.

METHOD

Research design

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was used to meet the study objectives. The first stage of the study involved the exploration of the relationship between fieldwork and practice preference, and a qualitative method using a focus group consisting of final year students was used to identify relevant themes. The findings from the focus group informed the second stage of the study, where themes were applied and tested in the form of a survey consisting of both closed and open questions. Ethical clearance was obtained from both universities and students gave their informed, voluntary consent to participate in the study.

Participants

The participants were 73 occupational therapy students who were in their final year of a four-year occupational therapy degree course at The University of Newcastle and Charles Sturt University, NSW. The two courses have similarities in the length of time since their commencement, enrolment size and fieldwork programmes, and an emphasis on providing occupational therapists to service rural populations (Zakrzewski, Mackenzie, Walker & McCluskey, 1996).

Phase 1 — Focus group

The focus group was conducted according to guidelines developed by Reiskin (1992). Prior to the focus group, a systematic review of the literature related to the research question was undertaken, and key topic questions with probes under each major topic were identified. These topics were the basis for discussion by the students about their experience of fieldwork, and how this affected their practice preferences in occupational therapy. The group began with an introduction to the purpose of the meeting and the first question posed for discussion was a general probe to encourage all members of the group to participate. Subsequent discussion allowed for topic areas to be addressed in depth. The group was facilitated in such a way that unanticipated contributions to the discussion were encouraged and accommodated. The main aim of the focus group was to generate a list of important issues that were then ranked in conjunction with the issues presented in the literature. This enabled priority items to be identified for inclusion into the questionnaire (Vaughnn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

Due to time and distance restraints, volunteer participants recruited for the focus group were from the University of Newcastle. Nine fourth year students volunteered to participate in the focus group held at the university, which lasted two hours. The discussion was audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed by grouping the major themes that emerged from the focus group discussion. Analysis of the focus group transcriptions revealed

support for issues related to the following three categories: (i) supervisors; (ii) students; and (iii) environmental factors.

Phase 2 — Questionnaire

Using the issues listed from the focus group discussion, the questionnaire was constructed. It featured questions that were both quantitative and qualitative in nature, and consisted of four sections: (i) demographic data; (ii) history of occupational therapy fieldwork experiences; (iii) attitudes, beliefs and feelings towards occupational therapy practice; and (iv) preferred future practice area and location.

To measure attitudes towards occupational therapy practice students were asked to rank 27 statements on a five point Likert-style scale (Fleming & Piedmont, 1989), ranging from 'strongly agree' (score = 5), to 'strongly disagree' (score = 1). The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha for this scale was 0.86, which indicates a high correlation between the items and also that the scale is measuring a common underlying dimension (Nunnally, 1978). To determine preferred areas of occupational therapy practice, students listed issues about fieldwork programme design, and factors that would influence their decisions to apply for their first position as an occupational therapist.

Students also identified and ranked areas of occupational therapy practice that they wanted to pursue, and their preferred future geographical location. In order to determine the overall cumulative ranking of practice and locality preference for the whole group, responses were allocated a weighted score according to the rank given by the student. Quality and internal validity of the questionnaire was enhanced by review by three practising occupational therapists, and by piloting with two fourth year occupational therapy students who were not included in the final sample. Data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for analysis on return (Norusis, 1988). Frequencies were obtained for nominal data, and means and standard deviations were calculated for descriptive variables. Qualitative data from responses to open questions on the survey were coded and listed in table format.

As the researcher was a potential member of the sample, steps were taken to eliminate bias. The literature was used as a basis for the focus group agenda, and all discussions were audio-taped. Field notes detailing the researcher's personal responses during the focus group were kept and reviewed during analysis of the data. Anonymity of questionnaires controlled for bias on behalf of all parties.

RESULTS

Respondents

Twenty-four students (86%) from the University of Newcastle, and 26 (58%) students from Charles Sturt University, completed and returned the questionnaire, giving an overall response rate of 68%. All students were aged under 30 years, and the mean ($\pm$ SD) age was 22 ± 1.6 years. Ninety-two per cent (46 students) had not had previous full time work. Although almost one quarter (12 students) had not indicated occupational therapy as their first choice of study, 100% (50 students) were still intending to practice as an occupational therapist on graduation.

Fieldwork history of students

The students had diverse fieldwork histories that covered a variety of clinical areas, in a number of localities. Overall, 42% (21 students) had experienced most of their fieldwork in a general physical setting. The clinical areas most experienced in junior (first and second year) and senior (third and fourth) years were calculated (Fig. 1). Sixty-six per cent (33 students) had experienced mostly general physical practice in the junior years of their course. The clinical areas that subjects had not experienced during their fieldwork programme were also identified (Fig. 2). Aged care and paediatrics had not been experienced by nine students (18%), while 22% (11 students) had not experienced mental health or occupational health. Sixty-eight per cent (34 students) had no experience of working in adult developmental disability.

Feelings, beliefs and attitudes towards occupational therapy practice

During the focus group, students identified their own perceived skill level, their experience of working with different client groups, positive or negative critical incidents, their emotional responses, and receiving positive feedback from clients as key issues affecting their practice preference. Reaction to fieldwork experiences perceived
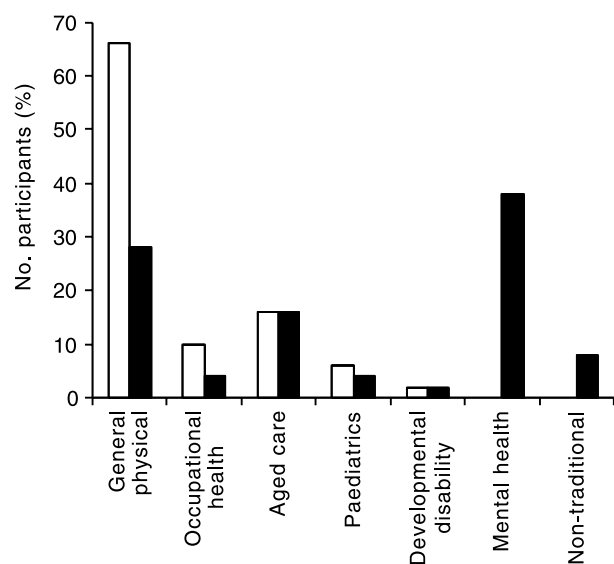
Figure 1.   Clinical areas of occupational therapy practice experienced by the participants in their junior (first and second, $n = 50$; □) and senior (third and fourth, $n = 50$; ■) years of study.
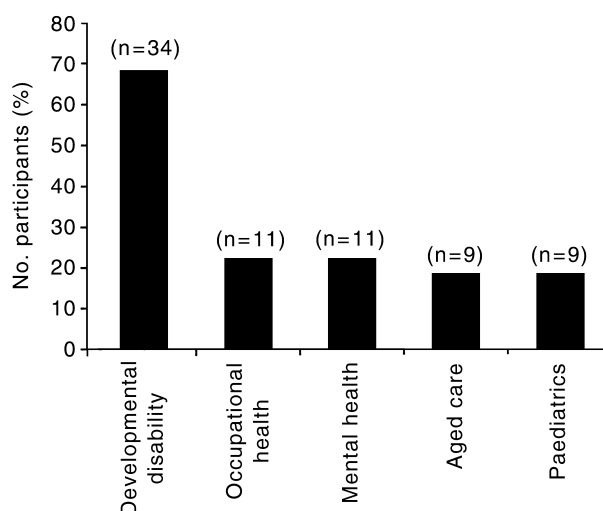

Figure 2.   Clinical areas of occupational therapy practice not experienced by the participants. Some participants had not experienced more than one area of practice.

by students as positive or negative was one of the major reasons given by students to pursue a clinical area. This was described by one focus group student:

> I was working in an acute paeds [paediatrics] ward with a young girl who was wheelchair bound due to a growth in her brain. At the hospital, we went through the whole developmental process with her and she left walking and starting to talk, totally independent … it was a truly positive experience.

Issues that were not prominent in the literature were discussed in the focus group. Students were focused on their professional behaviours to gain a sense of personal reward, and acknowledgement from others, in contrast to the more altruistic approach identified in the literature. The need for students to feel like they had made a difference was also viewed by focus group participants as important to their choice of practice area. This was illustrated by another participant:

> On my last prac you'd see young people with fractures, and in 6 weeks they'd be better. You'd give them equipment and they'd be grateful, and you'd really feel that you've helped that person right on track, rather than if someone's had a stroke, and you try to help them as much as you can.

From the survey, mean scores were calculated for each Likert item, and the 10 highest means were identified (Table 1). Responses to the 27 statements featured on the Likert scale indicated agreement that fieldwork experiences offering students a clear occupational therapy role; acknowledgement of occupational therapy skills; the opportunity for positive, rewarding experiences with clients; and enthusiasm and encouragement from clinicians were the most influential when selecting preferred areas of practice. Students indicated that a physical dysfunction practice setting was more likely to offer the experiences described above.

Nature of the fieldwork programme

Students provided qualitative data on the impact of the fieldwork programme on their choice of preferred practice area, and themes were identified using content analysis (Table 2). Students identified that wide, varied exposure to different areas of clinical practice, and the role of placements as a 'pre-work trial' were the key aspects of their fieldwork programme that were influential on their choice of practice preference. A small proportion of students did not indicate the fieldwork programme as influential in their choice of practice preference, and identified instead the availability of jobs, the academic programme and peers to be of greater importance.

Table 1.   Most positive responses generated from the Likert scale

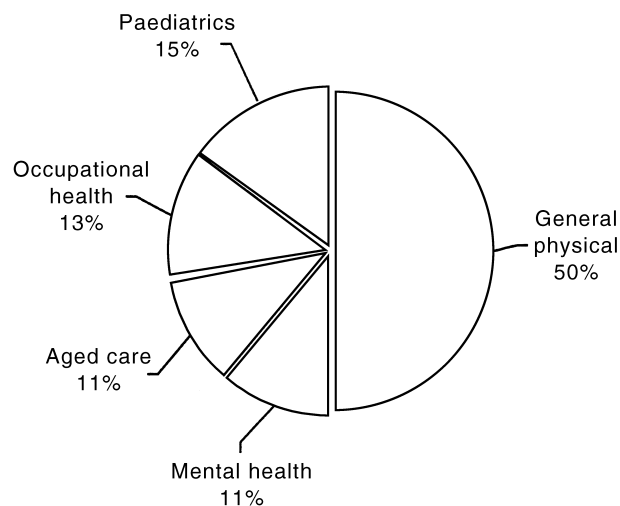| Statement	Mean	SD
Having experienced a positive experience during a fieldwork placement (e.g. a very successful or satisfying event) would attract me to that area of practice.	4.22	0.51
It's important for me to feel like I can make a difference as an occupational therapist in a practice area.	4.22	0.79
Positive encouragement from a supervisor would strongly influence me in selecting the same practice area.	4.04	0.78
An experience where fieldwork has been fun would attract me to that area of practice.	4.02	0.87
Knowing that my specific occupational therapy skills would be utilised is important when selecting a practice area.	3.96	0.86
Knowing occupational therapy is valued by others (e.g. doctors, clients, families) is important when selecting a practice area.	3.76	1.02
Experiencing a negative incident on fieldwork would discourage me from the same area of practice.	3.68	0.91
I am more likely to consider practising in a physical dysfunction area where the occupational therapy role is easily defined.	3.66	1.15
The attitude of my supervisors (towards their work/students) during past fieldwork placements is a strong influence on my choice of specialty.	3.62	1.09
Opinions held by supervisors and other clinicians throughout my fieldwork experiences regarding occupational therapy positions and practice areas will have a strong influence on my choice of practice.	3.47	0.86

Key to scoring — 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Uncertain, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree. A high mean score indicated a more positive response to that item. The maximum mean score value was 5.

Table 2.   Themes related to aspects of the fieldwork programme identified as influential on choice of practice preference

Consistent exposure to diverse selection of clinical practice areas throughout course (e.g. 'I'm glad we were able to experience a lot of areas to see what we're drawn to.')

Targeting specific areas of practice that are compulsory (e.g. 'I feel I am able to make an informed decision.', 'Exposure to mental health made me realise I don't want to work in that area.')

Opportunity to see areas of occupational therapy practice as 'pre-employment' trial (e.g. 'I know that a position that is highly structured would be best for my first job.')

Development of confidence (e.g. 'I have developed confidence in my later years of fieldwork as I have had past experience to look back on.')

Nature of elective fourth year placement (e.g. 'I'm glad I was able to choose it.', 'It was the first time I was given a lot of responsibility.')

Figure 3.   Preferred future practice areas.

Preferred future practice areas

The focus group participants identified important environmental factors, including the status of occupational therapy services and the location of employment, as influences on their practice preference. Using the questionnaire, the top three rankings identified by each of the students for their preferred practice areas were calculated. Half of the students (25 students) stated a preference to work in general physical practice. This category was over threefold as popular as paediatrics and occupational health, and fourfold more desirable than mental health or aged care (Fig. 3). Students identified that the primary influences on their decision to actually apply for their first occupational therapy position would include the locality of the position, their personal interest in the position, and their

Table 3. Primary influences on occupational therapy job applications identified by participants ($n = 50$)

Influence	No. responses
Location	38
(e.g. 'Where I want to live', 'Geographical location')	
Enjoy/Interested in clinical area	24
(e.g. 'Enjoying clients you work with')	
Feedback from fieldwork	18
(e.g. 'Positive feedback from clients and supervisors')	
Comfortable with necessary skills	16
(e.g. 'Whether I think I can do the work')	
Supportive working environment	15
(e.g. 'Support within the position')	
Future career opportunities	9
(e.g. 'Whether it'll fit my career path')	
Job design	8
(e.g. 'Grade of position', 'Size of department')	
Personality suits position	3
(e.g. 'Whether the work will be fulfilling')	
University programme content	2
(e.g. 'Elective subjects studied')	

perceived capabilities to undertake the position. Students assessed potential employment in terms of their own support needs and career plans. Feedback from past fieldwork experiences was also viewed as important. These findings are listed in order of frequency in Table 3.

Relationship of fieldwork experiences to preferred future practice area

Comments derived from the focus group indicated that clinical supervision was an important aspect of the fieldwork experience. Supervisors' ability to teach, their attitudes both to the student and their work, the level of support offered, positive feedback and advice offered to students on placement, and the opinions expressed by fieldwork supervisors were identified as influential in shaping perceptions about the future practice preference of the students. Attitudes modelled by supervisors were associated with the practice area, either positively or negatively. One student expressed this as:

> My supervisor was really miserable. She took off as many days as she could, and I'd spend a lot of time by myself.

She also told me she felt futile working in her position and only took the position for the location. It turned me right off, I never want to work in that area.

The interpersonal environment of the fieldwork setting was also significant to focus group participants, who placed a high value on advice offered from supervisors and other clinicians through informal networks (e.g. lunchtime chit-chat, staff room gossip), in their evaluation of future practice areas. Participants felt that this was a source of information they could trust, compared to more formal accounts of the practice area. One participant stated:

> You aren't going to find out what it's like to work at a place when you ring up the department manager. If they are understaffed, of course they're going to tell you how good it is. You really have to find out from others who have heard or know.

Using the survey data, cross tabulations using χ^2 analysis were calculated to identify significant relationships between variables hypothesised to be related to practice preference. The only statistically significant relationship found was between the localities most experienced during fieldwork and the localities students would prefer to select on graduation ($P \leq 0.01$). Mental health was not identified as a first preference by any student, but was selected as a second or third choice by 34% (17 students). This may be related to the finding that mental health was a practice area where a high proportion of students (76%, 36 students) had not experienced any mental health in the junior years of their course.

DISCUSSION

Preferred future practice areas

Overall, students intended to work in a general physical dysfunction setting. Personal interest in the clinical area, feedback from fieldwork experiences, and a feeling of comfort with the level of skill required appear to be the main reasons for this. From a pragmatic point of view, the geographical location, student knowledge of the specific work environment and available support for students would also influence this decision. This is consistent with findings of Borikar & Goodban (1989), and Gibson (1996) who suggested that these practical aspects of occupational therapy positions are important. However, these findings

indicated that the specific details of the position, student desired career path, personality and the university programme were not perceived as fundamental aspects of overall practice preference.

Clinical areas experienced in fieldwork

The proportion of students who stated their intention to work in a general physical dysfunction practice area on graduation was reflected by the high proportion of students who had experienced the majority of their fieldwork experience in this area. The lower numbers of students who expressed future preferences for aged care, paediatrics, and mental health, were also related to the lower proportion of students who had a predominance of fieldwork in those areas. This study also has implications for the development of occupational therapy in adult developmental disability services, as no one indicated a desire to work in this area, and fieldwork experiences in this area were rare. Furthermore, the findings suggest that students are unlikely to develop a preference for a clinical area in which they have had no fieldwork experience. They also suggest that students are more likely to work in a clinical area in which they have had the most fieldwork. The findings demonstrate the need for available fieldwork experiences to reflect areas of practice where the occupational therapy profession anticipates growth.

Reactions to positive and negative experiences in the fieldwork setting

Responses to positive and negative fieldwork experiences attracted strong responses on the Likert scale. A single positive or negative experience on fieldwork may be pivotal in a student's choice to pursue that area of practice. A 'fun' fieldwork placement also had strong implications for positive practice preferences. As placements give students a 'snap shot' of what it is like to work in that area (Haiman, 1990), the value placed on anecdotal experiences cannot be underestimated. Experiencing a positive event on fieldwork was one of the top reasons for a student to continue to pursue a clinical area.

What constitutes a 'positive', 'fun' or 'negative' fieldwork experience varies between students; therefore, it is difficult for supervisors to guarantee a positive experience on placement. However, a purely positive experience might be counter-productive to providing a realistic

fieldwork programme where a variety of skills can be developed (Tompson & Ryan, 1996). Experiencing an emotionally demanding or negative response to a client or client group on fieldwork was viewed by students as a factor that can contribute to a negative attitude to that practice area. Although a supervisor needs to be aware of particular experiences that may be distressing to students, they are still part of the learning process, regardless of how challenging they may be. The findings of this study, which indicate that practice preference is unlikely to develop in an area where there has been a negative experience, are confirmed by the findings of Christie *et al.* (1985).

Opportunity to develop own work values

The main work values expressed by the students were contrary to previous studies that defined occupational therapy students' attitude to practice as altruistic (Holmstrom, 1975; Madigan, 1985). The primary work values of the students were the pursuit of professional recognition, achieving a sense of personal reward, and acknowledgement from clients and peers.

Students also needed to feel that they could make a difference as an occupational therapist, although recognition of their specific occupational therapy skills was also deemed important when determining practice preference. This may account for findings by Fleming and Piedmont (1989), that indicated a high proportion of occupational therapists expressed a need to gain professional recognition from consumers and health professionals alike.

It has been acknowledged that fieldwork exposes students to the process of professional socialisation, and therefore also contributes to the change in work values expressed by students (Sabari, 1985). This may be a result of students having faced the experience of an underdeveloped professional identity of occupational therapy in some clinical settings (Breines, 1987; Lycett, 1991), or a response to changes within the health care sector (Poulden & Oke, 1990; Farrow, 1995).

Fieldwork environment

Students identified fieldwork supervisors as being influential on their practice preference. The three key aspects of supervision were: (i) those supervisors who provided encouragement; (ii) the supervisor's personal attitude to students; and (iii) attitudes to their own work. This

supports the findings of Yuen (1990) and Christie *et al.* (1985) who suggested that students can quickly assess the attitudes of the supervisor during fieldwork, and that this may affect the outcome of the whole placement and subsequently their practice preferences.

The value that students place on gossip, lunchtime chit-chat and informal discussions that take place on fieldwork was a major finding in this study. Personal opinions held by supervisors and other clinicians played a large role in the practice preference expressed by students. Students in the focus group underlined the significance of informal dialogue, viewing it as an opportunity to gain truthful information about occupational therapy positions, clinicians and department managers.

Nature of the fieldwork programme

The findings indicate that the design of a fieldwork programme can have a strong influence over practice preferences for some students. Fieldwork introduces students to a number of different practice areas in a variety of settings throughout a curriculum. It provides students with the chance to confirm their interest in a practice area and to gauge their level of clinical skill in relation to a position. Some students considered clinical areas, facility structure and working environment when deciding on occupational therapy positions that were the most appealing for them.

University experiences other than fieldwork did not feature strongly in the focus group discussions as relevant to practice preference. However, an important experience identified by students was the final year placement, as it was viewed as an opportunity to acquire greater responsibility and autonomy. Students indicated that the length of the placement, its timing in the academic programme, and having a choice of clinical area for fieldwork were important factors. This is consistent with the findings of Ezersky *et al.* (1989), Fleming and Piedmont (1989) and Wittman *et al.* (1989).

Pragmatic elements of job seeking

A primary finding of this study was that the location of a position was by far the strongest factor of influence identified by students, and was considered in terms of distance from family members and the work location of partners. It appears that eventually the decision to pursue an area of occupational therapy practice was governed by pragmatic

elements specific to each situation. The elements identified in the study were the availability of jobs, the location of a position, and feeling skilled enough to do the job.

Mental health

Recruitment of occupational therapists in mental health has been a long-standing issue for the profession (Ebb & Haiman, 1990; Ezersky *et al.*, 1989; Haiman, 1990; Scott, 1990; Wittman *et al.*, 1989) and the factors contributing to recruitment in mental health in Australia require further investigation (Ciolek, 1997). An important finding in the present study was that students expressed very definite views about whether they would consider mental health as a practice area. Despite the emphasis of mental health in the University of Newcastle programme (Zakrzewski *et al.*, 1996), a higher number of students from Charles Sturt University expressed interest in psychiatry as a practice area. This finding is of concern, as mental health was identified as one practice area where the amount of fieldwork exposure did not have a relationship with the preferences students expressed about working in this area. The reasons for this need further exploration.

Limitations

One criticism of the methodology is that contamination may have occurred, as members of the focus group also completed the questionnaire. However, as the intention was for the focus group data to inform the survey construction, the assumption that participant responses would be consistent across the two methods is justified. The specific definitions of 'clinical specialty areas' remains a difficult concept to accurately and comprehensively describe, and results depended on the student's interpretation of the terms used on the questionnaire. The study looked at the relationship between practice preference and first job only, from a current cohort of occupational therapy students, from two occupational therapy schools. Therefore, the application of these findings to other students or to long-term trends within the profession is limited. Furthermore, the study only included students who were speculating about what practice areas they preferred, rather than exploring what practice areas they actually were employed in on graduation. A study of new graduates might shed more light on the strength of the factors associated with practice preference found within a student population.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Elements of fieldwork were found to be influential on the practice preferences of students in this study. In addition, students' personal responses to fieldwork experiences, their work values and attitudes to occupational therapy practice and pragmatic concerns about job seeking were very important. Despite these issues being unique to each student, participating in a fieldwork programme enabled students to identify areas of occupational therapy practice that they would like to pursue upon graduation.

The study findings suggest that in addition to keeping their options open about their future practice area, graduates need to foster greater confidence about their occupational therapy contributions to the broad health sector. Clinical supervisors also need to be aware of the aspects of fieldwork that students perceive as influential on their practice preference. If fieldwork does shape student views about their future occupational therapy practice, clinical supervisors may have an indirect but important role in recruiting new graduates to their areas of practice by offering fieldwork opportunities in the first instance, and also in developing positive mentoring relationships with students during fieldwork. This is especially important given the proposed need to recruit therapists who are willing to work in the variety of alternative clinical settings that are anticipated in the future (Backman, 1994; Royeen, 1990).

Further research into practice preference among students could investigate the contribution of the integration of fieldwork experiences with academic curricula, preparation for fieldwork offered by academic staff, and the relationship between admission procedures or selection criteria for occupational therapy programmes and graduate specialty patterns. Qualitative research methods would allow the study of student attitudes, and other factors such as socioeconomic and cultural issues affecting student practice preference in more depth than has been possible during this study.

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