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Abstract

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Keywords

Burnout, psychosocial well-being, protective factor, self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence fieldwork educator support has on stress, burnout, and self-efficacy, and examine how both students and fieldwork educators support student psychosocial well-being and protective factors during Level II fieldwork (FWII). An explanatory sequential mixed method design was used, including a student cross-sectional survey (n=129) followed by one student (n=5) and two fieldwork educator focus groups (n=12). Outcome measures utilized for the cross-sectional survey included the Perceived Stress Scale, self-developed Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Questionnaire, Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, and New General Self-Efficacy Scale. Results showed that statistically significant correlations existed among perceived fieldwork educator support and the following: stress (r=-0.443, p<.01), self-efficacy (r=0.221, p<.05), and burnout (r=-0.468, p<.01). Findings of this study demonstrate that greater perceived fieldwork educator support was linked to lower stress, lower burnout, and greater self-efficacy. Themes identified included factors that influenced fieldwork student well-being during FWII; roles perceptions and expectations affected experiential education success; communication was key for promoting student well-being and collaborative relationships; and opportunities to improve experiential education. Protective factors preventing the development of stress and burnout for students included high self-efficacy and perceived fieldwork educator support. Results from this study can assist fieldwork coordinators and fieldwork sites with program development that promotes student psychosocial well-being and supportive relationship building between students and fieldwork educators during FWII.

Introduction

Most occupational therapy students experience moderate to high levels of stress and burnout during their academic programs (Cunningham et al., 2023; Grab et al., 2021; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2019). Concerningly, 20% of students reported severe stress that impacted their ability to engage in their meaningful, everyday activities (Chang et al., 2017). The condition of stress develops as an individual's perceived response to internal or external stressors, including unpredictable or challenging situations, such as participation in an occupational therapy practitioner educational program, and causes changes to an individual's physical and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2018b). Occupational therapy students contend with many internal stressors, such as self-expectations for success or high academic achievement, and external stressors, such as time limitations, intensity of program curriculum, and high financial burden of tuition and other course fees (Grab et al., 2021). Furthermore, when stress is present for long periods of time without management, the risk of burnout increases (Demerouti et al., 2001). Burnout is a syndrome caused by inefficiently managed prolonged stressors, leading to exhaustion and emotional disengagement from work (Demerouti et al., 2001). Healthcare professions that require frequent human contact, such as occupational therapy, are at an increased risk for stress and burnout even before entering the workforce (Olvera Alvarez et al., 2019).

High levels of burnout during the final year of study for healthcare professional students, such as occupational therapy, is a key predictor to future early career burnout (Robins et al., 2018). Burnout can compromise patient safety, professional behaviors, and quality of care provided (Dyrbye & Shanafelt, 2016; Garcia et al., 2019). Additionally, stress is often identified as the primary reason for changing jobs during the first two years post-graduation in nursing students (Olvera Alvarez et al., 2019). For occupational therapy, stress and burnout negatively impact student physical health, psychosocial well-being, academic performance, occupational balance, social participation, and professional development (Bullock et al., 2017; Dyrbye & Shanafelt, 2016; Grab et al., 2021; Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Pfeifer et al., 2008; Thomas-Davis, 2020). Psychosocial well-being is a complex psychosocial construct that encompasses efficient psychological functioning, feelings of happiness and pleasure, life satisfaction, emotion regulation, self-mastery, positive relationships, and sense of purpose (Burns, 2017; Huppert, 2009; Ryff & Singer, 1996; Tang et al., 2019). Occupational therapy students with greater psychosocial well-being and mental health demonstrate more proficient professional behaviors during experiential learning (Brown et al., 2022).

Level II fieldwork (FWII) is the experiential portion of the occupational therapy curriculum, where students develop the skills necessary to transition to entry-level practitioners (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2016). Occupational therapy students must complete at least 24 weeks full-time of FWII and occupational therapy assistant students need to complete a minimum of 16 weeks full-time (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2023). Students are expected to achieve entry-level competency by the end of their FWII in fundamental skills of occupational

therapy practice, including meeting high ethical, safety, intervention planning/implementation, and professional standards. Occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant students experience unique stressors during the FWII experience including challenges with building confidence in abilities, establishing a work life balance, high workload, difficulty with documentation, specific factors of their fieldwork setting, and developing the relationship with their fieldwork educator (Thomure, 2023).

While stress and burnout are common during clinical education and internship in healthcare disciplines, some psychosocial protective factors can help prevent and protect against the development of stress and burnout and support psychosocial well-being (Alfakeh et al., 2022; Al-Zayyat & Al-Gamal., 2014; Kinney et al., 2020; Popova et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2022).These psychosocial protective factors, or *protective factors,* include use of coping strategies, resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional support (American Psychological Association, 2018a; Kinney et al., 2020). Despite the importance of student psychosocial well-being, limited research has been conducted on protective factors during FWII. Because burnout and stress are pervasive barriers to psychosocial well-being for occupational therapy students, there is a need to explore student protective factors during FWII.

Occupational therapy students utilize a variety of protective factors during their occupational therapy program to mitigate stress and burnout (Govender et al., 2015; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; Patterson & D'Amico, 2020; Popova et al., 2023). Common coping strategies utilized include social/emotional support, exercise, problem-solving, relaxation/meditation, leisure engagement, and lifestyle management (Govender et al., 2015; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; Patterson & D'Amico, 2020; Popova et al., 2023; Thomure, 2023). However, most of these findings are not specific to the FWII experience. One study suggested occupational therapy students use informal and formal strategies for stress management during FWII including socialization, engagement in preferred recreational activities, meeting with a mental health therapist, or speaking to one's fieldwork educator or coordinator (Thomure, 2023). For nursing students during clinical education, cognitive restructuring, reframing, religion, problem-solving, active coping, and social support were common strategies utilized to support their psychosocial well-being (Ab Latif & Mat Nor, 2019; Berdida et al., 2023; Onieva-Zafra et al., 2020). Fieldwork educators, being in direct contact with students for a minimum of eight hours a week over the duration of their FWII, are uniquely positioned as a potential source of social support for FWII students (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2023).

Fieldwork educators are licensed occupational therapy practitioners who provide direct supervision and support during FWII to promote student entry-level clinical skill development (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2023). Fieldwork educators can strongly influence students' perceptions of the FWII learning experience (Brown et al., 2013). Additionally, fieldwork educator supervision can influence the students' perceived self-efficacy (Andonian, 2017). Self-efficacy refers to an individuals' belief in their capability, their confidence to act in a way that will affect

their lives, and to persist in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1994; Reitz, 2014; Smith et al., 2006). In undergraduate students, self-efficacy acts as a protective factor against academic stress, stress responses, and academic burnout (Fariborz et al., 2019). Self-efficacy can also positively support confidence in decision-making when transitioning from fieldwork education to entry-level practice, which is a key component to educating the next generation of occupational therapy practitioners (Patterson & D-Amico, 2020). However, it is unclear what aspects of the fieldwork educator supervision supported an increase in student self-efficacy.

Findings from a study with medical students suggested that the supervisory relationship can significantly influence the learning environment and the development of burnout and depression (Dyrbye, & Shanafelt, 2016; Papaefstathiou et al., 2019; Shah, 2021). Current studies related to fieldwork educator supervision have primarily focused on the effective educator behaviors needed for successful student performance and learning (Dunn et al., 2020; Koski et al., 2013; Rodger et al., 2014). Research from other healthcare disciplines found that clinical educators who are loving, open, encouraging, communicate effectively, respond productively, lessen the hierarchy between student and supervisor, and acknowledge student rights can support student resilience and psychosocial well-being (Froneman et al., 2016; McClintock et al., 2022). This highlights the need to explore the student-fieldwork educator relationship and strategies educators can utilize to promote student psychosocial well-being and protective factor development for a successful experiential learning experience.

As the incidence of stress and burnout for occupational therapy students is high, there is a pressing need to identify and study modifiable factors to support student psychosocial well-being. Because emotional support can act as a protective factor, we hypothesized that perceived positive support from the fieldwork educator would strongly influence the experience of stress, burnout, and self-efficacy in FWII students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the protective factors that affect fieldwork student psychosocial well-being and examine how both students and fieldwork educators support student psychosocial well-being during FWII. The research questions were:

- What correlations exist among perceived student burnout, stress, self-efficacy, and fieldwork educator support during the FWII experience?
- How do the students' perceptions of fieldwork educator support influence student burnout, stress, and self-efficacy during FWII?
- How do students and fieldwork educators address student psychosocial well-being and protective factors during the FWII experience?

Methodology

Research Design

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed method design utilizing a cross-sectional survey (Phase 1) followed by a broad qualitative approach (Phase 2; Thomas, 2006) utilizing focus groups. Focus group questions were developed following Phase 1 survey data analysis to strengthen the validity of the Phase 1 results and expand on the initial findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Fieldwork students participated in both

Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this study and fieldwork educators participated in Phase 2. For Phase 2, one fieldwork student focus group and two fieldwork educator focus groups were conducted. Creighton University's Institutional Review Board approved this study, and all participants provided consent.

Participants

Fieldwork Students

Fieldwork student participants for Phases 1 and 2 met the following inclusion criteria: (1) were at least 19 years old, and (2) had completed at least six weeks of a FWII rotation or have completed a FWII rotation within the past year from an occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program. Exclusion criteria were (1) on academic probation, or (2) repeating or extending a fieldwork rotation. Utilizing convenience sampling, the investigators emailed a study information letter to students forwarded from 28 occupational therapy programs across the United States for Phase I recruitment. After participants completed the electronic survey, they could elect to share their contact information for the Phase II focus group. Maximum variation purposeful sampling was used to increase participant variation of (1) experiential learning settings and (2) degree program of study for Phase II.

Fieldwork Educators

Phase 2 fieldwork educators focus group participants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) were an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant and (2) had experience being a fieldwork educator to at least one fieldwork student. Phase 2 participants were recruited from healthcare systems within the western United States. Respondents to an email inquiry from the investigators were selected to participate in the fieldwork educator focus group using maximum variation purposeful sampling based on primary practice setting, to increase participant variation of practice setting and credentials.

Measurement and Outcomes

Phase 1-Cross-Sectional Survey

The electronic survey included six demographic questions about gender, age, degree of study, fieldwork completion/placement, fieldwork setting, and estimated debt. Following the demographic questions students participated in a novel Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Questionnaire (PFWES-Q), and the following standardized assessments: the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Demerouti, & Bakker, 2008), the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSE Scale; Chen et al., 2001), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983).

PFWES-Q. The self-developed PFWES-Q is a 10-question, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire that measures perceptions of fieldwork educator support and the experience of protective factors in fieldwork students. Researchers developed the PFWES-Q through extensive literature review and clinical expertise, as no survey tool to study the perception of fieldwork educator support existed. Four questions were

developed with reverse wording to decrease response bias and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student perception of fieldwork educator support. Preliminary content validity was established through a content expert review from experienced researchers (*n*=2) and piloting with occupational therapy students (*n*=2), with feedback integrated into the final questionnaire. Refer to Appendix A.

OLBI. The OLBI is an 8 item, 4-point Likert scale questionnaire, where questions are rated from strongly agree to strongly disagree, that measures burnout through the constructs of exhaustion (physical, cognitive, and affective aspects) and disengagement from work (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). Questions are divided into a disengagement and exhaustion subscale, with half of the total questions being reverse scored. The OLBI has acceptable reliability as determined by test/retest reliability of (r =.51, p <.001, for exhaustion; r =.34, p <.01, for disengagement) and internal consistency range of α = .74-.87 (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). Example questions include "I feel more and more engaged in my work" and "After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary".

NGSE Scale. The NGSE scale is an 8 item, 5-point Likert scale, where questions are rated from strongly agree to strongly disagree, that assesses self-efficacy, or how much people believe they can achieve their goals despite difficulties (Chen et al., 2001). The NGSE scale is both highly reliable, with a test-retest coefficient of r = .67, and unidimensional, as the survey items included have little variance (Chen et al., 2001). Example questions include "I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind" and "Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well".

PSS-10. The PSS-10 is a 10-item, 5-point Likert scale that measures perception of stress, including how unpredictable, uncontrollable, or overloaded respondents feel about their lives (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Questions are frequency rated from never to very often with four of the questions being reverse scored. Scores are reported as a total value. The PSS-10 has established internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha score of 0.74-0.91), and established criterion and content validity (Cohen et al., 1983; Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Lee, 2012). Example questions include "How often have you been able to control irritations in your life?" and "How often have you felt that you were on top of things?".

Phase 2- Focus Groups

Questionnaires. The fieldwork student and fieldwork educator focus group questionnaires were developed based on the literature review findings, and data analysis conducted in Phase 1. Questions explored fieldwork students' and fieldwork educators' experience of psychosocial well-being as well as protective factors, and provided a deeper understanding of survey results. The fieldwork student focus group questionnaire included two demographics questions and eight open-ended questions. Some examples of student open-ended questions included: "Describe how you personally managed your wellness during your FWII experience." and "Describe factors around the fieldwork experience that influence well-being. What are they and how

significant are they?" Fieldwork educator focus groups were asked three demographic questions and seven open-ended questions. An example of the fieldwork educator open-ended questions included "Survey respondents with low self-efficacy were more likely to identify that their FWE provided unproductive feedback regarding their work performance. How do you think unproductive feedback impacts student well-being and self-efficacy?"

Data Collection

Phase 1

Student participants accessed, consented, and completed the online survey through QualtricsXM software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Participants were required to agree to a statement that they met inclusion criteria for this study, including that they had completed a FWII rotation within the last year. Survey participants were instructed to answer questions about their most recent FWII placement in responding to demographics and Likert-scale based questions and surveys. Data was exported in SPSS Statistics v28 for analyses.

Phase 2

The fieldwork student and fieldwork educator focus groups were led by an investigator, lasted approximately one-hour and followed a semi-structured interview approach. The fieldwork student virtual focus group was conducted over Zoom video conference. The video conference was recorded and transcribed by Zoom. The two fieldwork educator focus groups were conducted in-person in two states in the western part of the United States in either a conference room or therapy gym. Both fieldwork educator focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Consistency across the fieldwork educator focus groups was achieved by utilizing the same open-ended questions, guidelines for discussion, and selection criteria for participants.

Data Analysis

Phase 1

Phase 1 data was analyzed in SPSS Statistics v28 software for descriptive and inferential statistics. Non-parametric inferential statistics of a Spearman's Correlation Coefficient was conducted to evaluate the association between PFWES-Q responses and the OLBI, the PSS-10, and the NGSE scale responses. Individual survey response items were analyzed using a chi-square test of independence to examine the relations between concepts, such as comparisons of fieldwork setting, debt, and other demographic characteristics. An independent sample t-test with a confidence interval of 95% or a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U, as appropriate, was conducted to investigate if there were differences in concepts of interest between low and high groups of OLBI exhaustion, between high and low groups of OLBI disengagement, and between high and low groups of NGSE scale responses. OLBI responses were grouped in high and low groups for exhaustion and disengagement according to a cut-off score of ≥2.25 for exhaustion and ≥2.1 for disengagement (Peterson et al., 2008, & Sanil et

al., 2021). NGSE scale responses were grouped into high (≥32) and low (<32) self-efficacy to explore what fieldwork educator behaviors affect fieldwork student self-efficacy. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the differences in means of concepts of interest between PSS-10 low stress (0-13), moderate stress (14-26), and high stress (27-40) groups (Shah et al., 2021).

Phase 2

Following Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, the first and second authors first immersed themselves in the data by reading each manuscript entirely prior to coding. The first two authors then coded and searched for initial themes individually. The investigators then reconvened to discuss initial findings and create a thematic table of the initial themes. Themes were then refined to determine and identify final themes and descriptions. The fourth and fifth author then provided peer debriefing to ensure validity of results. Findings from the individual fieldwork student and fieldwork educators focus groups were synthesized together due to continuity of initial codes.

Space, researcher, and method triangulation was utilized to establish trustworthiness by conducting the fieldwork educator groups in different locations, having the investigators complete the initial thematic analysis independently, and utilizing a mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). To ensure credibility and accuracy, an audit trail was developed, peer-debriefing was conducted, and member-checking was completed by emailing each participant the final themes and descriptions (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). No participants provided feedback or suggested revisions.

Results

Phase 1

Survey results included responses from 129 participants, with demographic information in Table 1. Most participants were female (92.2%), in their second FWII rotation (51.9%), and were enrolled in a master's degree program in occupational therapy (54.3%). Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2 for stress, burnout, self-efficacy, and perceived fieldwork educator support.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Fieldwork Student Survey Participants (N=129)

Characteristic	*n (%)*
Gender Identity	
Female	119 (92.2)
Male	9 (7.0)
Other	1 (0.8)
Degree of Study	
OTA Associate	2 (1.6)
OTA Baccalaureate	1 (0.8)
OT Masters	67 (51.9)
OT Doctorate	59 (45.7)
FW II Placement Status	
Currently in first FWII placement	8 (6.2)
Currently in second FWII placement	70 (54.3)
In between FWII placements	13 (10.1)
Completed both FWII placements	38 (29.5)
Age	
19-26 years	92 (71.3)
26-35 years	28 (21.7)
35+ years	9 (7.0)
FWII Practice Setting	
Pediatric	58 (45.0)
Acute Care	47 (36.4)
Inpatient Rehabilitation	28 (21.7)
Skilled Nursing Facility	12 (9.3)
Outpatient	53 (41.1)
Home Health	6 (4.7)
Long Term Care	1 (0.8)
School-based	12 (14.7)
Community Health	4 (3.1)
Mental Health	5 (3.9)
Other	13 (10.1)

Estimated Student Loan Debt	
$0.00-$10,000	25 (19.4)
$10,000-$50,000	24 (18.6)
$50,000-$100,000	34 (26.4)
$100,000-$150,000	24 (18.6)
$150,000+	22 (17.1)

Note. OTA= Occupational Therapy Assistant; OT= Occupational Therapy; FWII= Level II Fieldwork

Table 2

Burnout, Perceived Stress, Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Among Fieldwork Students

Scale	***n* (%)**
OLBI	
Exhaustion (*n*=129), *M (SD)*	2.7 (0.4)
Disengagement (*n*=125), *M (SD)*	2.3 (0.5)
Low Exhaustion (<2.25)	12 (9.3)
High Exhaustion (≥2.25)	117 (90.7)
Low Disengagement (<2.1)	37 (29.6)
High Disengagement (≥2.1)	88 (70.4)
PSS-10 (Total) (*n*=119), *M (SD)*	19.8 (6.8)
Low (0-13)	23 (19.3)
Moderate (14-26)	76 (63.9)
High (27-40)	20 (16.8)
NGSE Scale (Total) (*n*=121), *M (SD)*	30.5 (5.6)
PFWES-Q (Total) (*n*=114), *M (SD)*	37.4 (9.6)

Note. OLBI = Oldenburg Burnout Inventory; PSS-10 = Perceived Stress Scale; NGSE scale = New General Self-Efficacy Scale; PFWES-Q = Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Questionnaire

Statistically significant correlations existed among all measures of perceived support, stress, self-efficacy, and burnout (see Table 3). Students in the low self-efficacy group were more likely to report a higher frequency of requests to complete *unachievable challenges* and of *unproductive feedback* given by the fieldwork educator, as determined by Mann-Whitney U test results comparing the high and low self-efficacy groups for responses to questions 8 (p=0.002) and 10 (p=0.049) respectively on the PFWES-Q. There was no significant relationship between fieldwork students' debt and PSS-10 scores, p=0.46. However, 50% of fieldwork students with perceived high stress (PSS-10 of ≥27, n=10) had a debt over $100,000. Fewer fieldwork students with low (34.8%, n=8) and moderate stress (34.2%, n=26) had a debt over $100,000.

Table 3

Correlations of Survey Measures

1st Measure	2nd Measure	Correlation Coefficient	*p*-value
PFWES-Q	OLBI	-0.468	<.01
PFWES-Q	NGSE	0.221	<.05
PFWES-Q	PSS-10	-0.443	<.01
OBLI	NGSE	-0.256	<.01
PSS-10	NGSE	-0.284	<.01

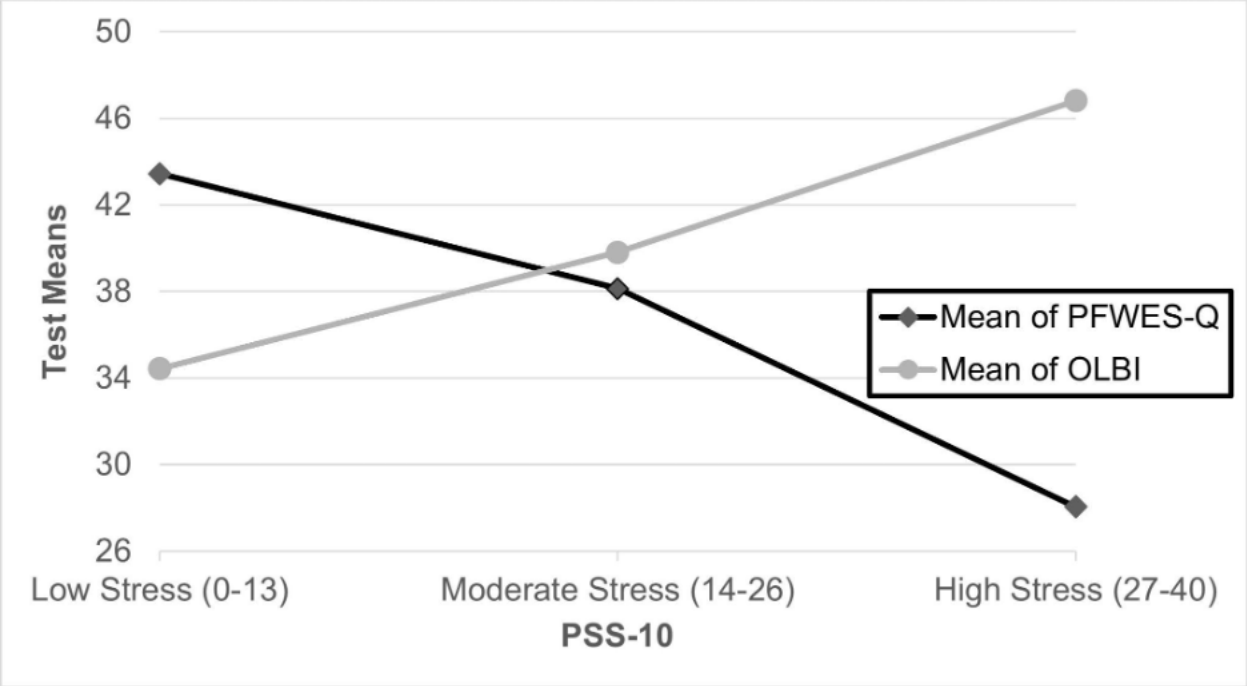
Note. PFWES-Q = Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support; OLBI = Oldenburg Burnout Inventory; NGSE scale = New General Self-Efficacy Scale; PSS-10 = Perceived Stress Scale

One-way ANOVAs were performed to compare the effect of fieldwork educator support on fieldwork student stress, burnout, and self-efficacy. A one-way ANOVA and following post hoc pair comparisons revealed significant differences between each pair comparison (p <.001) in PFWES-Q scores between low stress *43.4 (5.0)*, moderate stress *38.1 (8.7)*, and high stress *28.1 (10.1)* groups. A second one-way ANOVA comparing OLBI scores between low stress *34.4 (3.1),* moderate stress *39.8 (5.5)*, and high stress *46.8 (6.0)* groups, also indicated statistically significant differences between all three groups (p <.001). There were no significant differences of NGSE scale between low, moderate, and high stress groups (p=0.069).

Each group mean of PFWES-Q and OLBI by PSS-10 stress level is visually represented in Figure 1. High PFWES-Q scores *43.4 (*5.0*)* are associated with low burnout *34.4 (3.1)* in the low stress group (19.3%, n=23). No significant correlations were found between fieldwork setting and stress (p= .07), and fieldwork setting and burnout (p=.426).

Figure 1

Perceived Stress versus Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support and Burnout



Note. PFWES-Q = Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support; OLBI = Oldenburg Burnout Inventory

Phase 2

Focus group participants included five fieldwork students and 12 fieldwork educators. All fieldwork students had completed both FWII placements in a variety of settings and were enrolled in a master's (n=3) or doctoral (n=2) occupational therapy program. The fieldwork educators included an occupational therapy assistant (n=1) and occupational therapists (n=11), half had completed formal training for fieldwork educators, and approximately 53% had experience supervising fieldwork students in an inpatient rehabilitation setting. Four themes were identified from the focus groups: factors that influence fieldwork student well-being during FWII; roles perceptions and expectations affect experiential education success; communication is key for promoting student well-being and collaborative relationships; and opportunities to improve experiential education.

Factors that Influence Fieldwork Student Psychosocial Well-being During FWII

Both fieldwork students and fieldwork educators reported '*risk factors'* that negatively influenced fieldwork student psychosocial well-being during FWII. Some risk factors were external, such as the physical or social environment. These included fieldwork educator support, proximity to social support, type of FWII setting, time to attend to self-care, accessibility to self-care/medical resources, and pandemic limitations. Student 1 stated, "*I feel like I… didn't prioritize my health… as much as I needed to, because… even though we're supposed to only have 40 hours a week, I was definitely there more*

than [that]," which highlighted their limited time to attend to self-care and coping strategies. Internal risk factors included perfectionism, anxiety, fear of making a mistake or causing harm, and comparison. Student 1 also expressed how her perfectionism influenced her creativity and ability to challenge herself during FWII, stating: "*And I feel like I got into my own head… because I was so focused on what I was doing, and not wanting to mess up… And so I found myself really just like recycling a lot of treatments that I was seeing because I wanted the idea to be perfect.*"

Protective factors identified by fieldwork students included fieldwork educator support, adaptability, resiliency, self-efficacy, coping, self-regulation, taking initiative, abandoning perfectionism, and the utilization of available environmental and psychosocial supports. For instance, Student 5 expressed that a supportive fieldwork educator and a supportive work environment protected her well-being despite having a lack of self-care time, "*I didn't get to do as much "me" things, but my mental health was really good, because I was in a good setting, and I felt very supported*." This theme also highlights the strategies utilized by fieldwork educators to facilitate the development of protective factors in their fieldwork students. These included promoting self-efficacy through practice, providing the just right challenge, fostering social participation, encouraging self-reflection, developing insight into abilities, and assisting with identifying coping strategies. For example, Fieldwork Educator 4 discussed the importance of tailoring the experience to the student based on their individual needs, *"I think understanding where they're coming from, how much experience they have had, how many classes they have had, how comfortable they feel—that is going to affect their well-being and being aware of that.. tells me how I need to kind of support them; they might need a little more coaching."*

Role Perceptions and Expectations Affect Experiential Education Success

Both fieldwork student and fieldwork educator perceptions of their roles and expectations influenced the educator-student relationship and fieldwork student psychosocial well-being. Some fieldwork students perceived that the student role needed to be prioritized over everything else, sometimes at the cost of their psychosocial well-being. Some felt like they were unable to meet their personal needs, manage their self-care, or advocate for themselves because they were 'only' a student. For example, Student 3 shared, "*It was just my internal like dialogue with myself and my thought process of like I'm a student. So I'm like below the lowest level of even like people that get paid to work there.*" Additionally, most fieldwork students expressed experiencing conflicting roles with a desire for independence, however still being a student under supervision. For example, Student 5 stated that FWII *"was really mentally… exhausting… I have my CI's caseload, but they're still his clients… they're not mine yet."*

Fieldwork educators were often perceived as taking the role of an 'evaluator' or an 'educator.' Evaluator fieldwork educators appeared to utilize a more strict, authoritative teaching style. Fieldwork students with an evaluator fieldwork educator felt they had to prove themselves to their educator and reported increased fear of making mistakes, which impacted their ability to learn. For example, Student 4 expressed, "*it was hard*

because I felt that the first [FWII rotation] wasn't so much academic learning, I was… trying to please my [fieldwork educator]." Fieldwork educators who viewed their role as 'educator' approached their fieldwork students like a client, with the goal of establishing a trusting, reciprocal relationship by being student-centered and flexible. For example, Fieldwork Educator 8 expressed, *"As an educator… I believe that our passion comes with nurturing students and wanting them to… be excited and they're going out into this world and I don't want them to be scared and I want them to feel supported and excited because they're going to be taking care of people, other people. So it's our responsibility as educators to show them that."*

Communication is Key for Promoting Student Well-being and Collaborative Relationships

Both verbal and non-verbal communication between fieldwork student and fieldwork educator was foundational for relationship building, fieldwork student psychosocial well-being, and protective factor development. Feedback was a key element of communication. This included the type and amount of feedback from fieldwork educators that either supported or hindered fieldwork student psychosocial well-being and self-efficacy. Elements of effective feedback included balanced feedback that addresses both strengths and opportunities for improvement, offered at regular intervals (preferably daily), and established clear expectations for performance. Fieldwork Educator 11 highlighted the importance of providing balanced feedback stating, *"I give positive and the negative feedback, but I made them feel like [the] negative feedback is a positive thing."* Elements of unproductive feedback included using a condescending tone and providing unbalanced, vague, infrequent, or inconsistent feedback. For example, Student 5 shared the impact of receiving vague feedback, stating "*[the fieldwork educator] was like oh, 'that was great! And oh, you guys pivoted so nicely'…So that was good, but I was like, 'I don't know how I can get better'."*

Opportunities to Improve Experiential Education

Fieldwork students and fieldwork educators provided recommendations on how to improve the FWII experience to promote student psychosocial well-being. Specific recommendations to prepare for FWII included students receiving more clinical experience and communication training prior to FWII. For instance, Student 1 shared lack of experience influenced her self-efficacy, "*I feel like I didn't have as much confidence going into my second placement in the sensory clinic with children, because I would even verbalize I feel like I have.. a lack of hands-on experience practicing with children.*" Additional recommendations included interviewing fieldwork educators to determine fitness as an educator and disclosing pertinent learning or disability information to the fieldwork educator. Lastly, Fieldwork Educator 12 expressed "*facilities also should have somebody overseeing the CI [clinical instructor] program… because most people that work in the facility they know the therapist that should be getting students, and the therapist that should not be getting [students].*"

Discussion

This mixed methods study explored the influence protective factors have on student psychosocial well-being during FWII. Findings of this study demonstrate the significant relationship between student self-efficacy, burnout, stress, and perceived support, where greater perceived fieldwork educator support is linked to lower stress, lower burnout, and greater self-efficacy. These findings are supportive of our hypothesis that emotional support from the fieldwork educator can act as a protective factor against the experience of stress and burnout, while supporting higher self-efficacy in FWII students. This correlation was enhanced by the focus group findings, as both student and fieldwork educators identified fieldwork educator support as a key factor that influenced student psychosocial well-being during FWII. These findings are consistent with medical school research, showcasing the student-supervisory relationship can significantly influence student psychosocial well-being and the development of stress and burnout (Dyrbye & Shanafelt, 2016; Papaefstathiou et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2021). Previous literature also demonstrates the essential role fieldwork educators play in fostering a supportive educational environment (Dunn et al., 2020; Grenier, 2015; Patterson & D'Amico, 2020). Qualitative findings of this study determined that integral components of the student-educator relationship included communication, role expectations, and how protective factors were utilized and promoted by both students and educators.

As in similar studies of healthcare professional student stress and burnout, most study participants experienced moderate to severe stress and burnout (Bullock et al., 2017; Chang et al., 2017; Dyrbye & Shanafelt, 2016; Grab et al., 2021; Morales-Rodriquez et al., 2019). While the cause of stress and burnout was not specifically explored in this study, confounding factors that may influence the incidence of stress and burnout such as debt and fieldwork setting were studied. Survey data of measured stress or burnout was not significantly linked to anticipated debt load. This is in contrast to a previous study of health professions graduate students conducted by Dickson et al. (2020), where survey respondents were asked about their perceptions of stress as a result of debt, in which greater self-reported stress was significantly linked to greater debt. This discrepancy between study results could be related to subjective bias of participants to perceive their stress as greater when not taking a standardized assessment of stress, such as the PSS-10, which was utilized in this study. This assumption was reinforced by qualitative results in which focus group students reported mixed feelings regarding debt, stating they were concerned about debt but did not feel significant stress at this time as they were not yet responsible for repayment. Focus group participants reported perceptions that certain FWII locations were more stressful than others, however there was no significant relationship between stress, burnout, and FWII location. This finding is in alignment with the results from a prior study of burnout and quality of life of occupational therapy practitioners where location of practice was not significantly linked to burnout (Chen, 2020). Focus group participants attributed the lack of statistically significant correlation to the greater influence of support from the fieldwork educator. These qualitative findings strengthen the quantitative results that perceived fieldwork educator support does significantly influence the incidence of stress and burnout in FWII students, while promoting student self-efficacy.

Student perceived fieldwork educator support is influenced by the role dynamics and communication within the educator-student relationship. Fieldwork educators who adopt the role of 'educator' versus 'evaluator' can promote student psychosocial well-being and be a protective factor for students through creating a collaborative, open relationship. These findings are consistent with medical school research that found a lessened hierarchy between clinical teacher and student can promote student perceived support and psychosocial safety during their clinical rotation (McClintock et al., 2022). A significant component to developing this supportive environment is through effective communication. Strong communication skills, such as identifying clear expectations and providing productive and consistent feedback were identified as critical for success and development of self-efficacy. Feedback specifically is a vital form of communication that shapes student self-efficacy and perceived support during FWII. Survey data demonstrated that self-efficacy and frequency of unproductive feedback received are negatively correlated, which is indicative of the significant influence fieldwork educator communication has on student perception of ability. This was an expected finding as previous studies found that fieldwork educators who provide productive feedback and have strong interpersonal skills are critical for student learning and self-efficacy during the FWII experience (Andonian, 2017; Brown et al., 2022; Dunn et al., 2020; Grenier, 2015).

Fieldwork educators can adopt strategies to promote student psychosocial well-being and protective factors during FWII. Findings demonstrate that students who are frequently posed 'unachievable challenges' by their fieldwork educator were more likely to experience low self-efficacy. Qualitative findings support this correlation as focus groups participants advocate for providing students with the just right challenge, tailor the learning experience to the individual, and frequently check in on their students to support psychosocial well-being. These findings are consistent with previous literature that demonstrates the essential role fieldwork educators play in fostering a supportive educational environment through adapting to individual learning styles and tailoring challenges to elicit learning (Patterson & D'Amico, 2020; Rodger et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of creating the just right challenge and individualizing the learning experience for students to foster protective factors during FWII.

Students also play a crucial role in promoting their psychosocial well-being through utilizing protective factors during FWII, such as integrating various coping strategies, leaning on social supports, being adaptable, and displaying resilience. These findings are similar with previous occupational therapy literature that found students throughout their program utilize a variety of coping strategies to mitigate stress including active coping, social/emotional support, exercise, leisure engagement, resilience, and lifestyle management (Govender et al., 2015; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; Patterson & D'Amico, 2020; Popova et al., 2023). Both the student and educator can promote the use of student coping strategies, which can encourage student psychosocial well-being during the FWII experience.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Fieldwork educators and fieldwork students should be aware of correlations between self-efficacy, burnout, stress, and perceived fieldwork educator support. Fieldwork educators and fieldwork sites should make efforts to increase fieldwork student perception of support in FWII through improved communication strategies, implementation of the just right challenge, and adopting a supportive “educator” role. The novel PFWES-Q from this study could be utilized as a time effective way for educators or fieldwork coordinators to survey student perceptions of support and provide intervention as needed. Additionally, fieldwork educators and fieldwork students would benefit from specific programming, training, and resources designed to support effective communication in preparation for FWII. Programming should include information on how to provide and receive feedback, discuss expectations, tailor learning activities to the individual student, manage conflict, and the development/use of protective factors. Open and warm communication with a fieldwork educator improves student confidence and self-efficacy (Andonian, 2017). Due to the specific stressors associated with FWII education, fieldwork students would also benefit from training and interventions targeting coping strategies and protective factors to utilize during FWII (Thourne, 2023). Pilot programming suggests mindfulness training and adaptive coping strategy education could be beneficial for promoting occupational therapy student well-being (Rodriguez & Provident, 2018; Stew, 2011). Additional programming addressing well-being and burnout management should be developed and implemented in occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant curriculum to prepare students for FWII. Academic and clinical site fieldwork coordinators could play an instrumental role in developing and providing training programs to support both students and educators during FWII. Other considerations for occupational therapy practice include interviewing fieldwork educators to ensure educator competency and providing students additional opportunities for hands-on experience prior to FWII.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this study. Due to utilizing non-probability sampling in both phases of this study, results may not accurately represent the target population. This survey utilized self-reported measures, increasing the risk for recall bias with participant responses. Survey participants were expected to self-identify as meeting inclusion criteria in the study, with the expectation that they had participated in a FWII placement ‘within the past year’. Because of the potential duration of time between FWII and study participation data lag could exist and have skewed results. A small sample size of occupational therapy assistant students and practitioners were represented in both the survey (n=3) and focus groups (n=1), impacting the ability to generalize these results to the occupational therapy assistant fieldwork student experience. All fieldwork focus group participants had completed both FWII rotations by the time of the focus group, limiting transferability of results to different FWII phases. Fieldwork educator focus group participants disproportionately worked in the inpatient rehabilitation setting, which may have skewed the results to overrepresent the fieldwork educator experience in that setting. Investigators attempted to mitigate these limitations by recruiting from a large sample size of students across multiple nationwide occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs.

Areas of Future Research

The novel PFWES-Q was developed for the purposes of this study. Because the novel PFWES-Q, measuring perceived fieldwork educator support, was significantly correlated to burnout, stress, and self-efficacy, future research is needed to establish its psychometric properties, as it could be a beneficial feedback tool for fieldwork educators and occupational therapy programs. Further study comparing the results of the PFWES-Q and the Student Evaluation of the Fieldwork Experience (SEFWE) could provide useful information for future FWII placement and planning, as the SEFWE is currently the main tool used by programs to assess fitness of fieldwork educators and placement sites. Future research should explore what fieldwork educator actions and behaviors increase student perception of support. This information can be used for program and resource development for fieldwork educators and fieldwork students prior to FWII placement. From this, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of these resources and novel programming.

Conclusion

FWII is an essential component of the occupational therapy curriculum to prepare students for entry-level practice. As fieldwork students report moderate to severe levels of burnout and stress, it is important to understand the protective and risk factors that may be influencing student psychosocial well-being. Findings from this study indicate that higher levels of perceived fieldwork educator support are correlated to decreased burnout and stress and increased self-efficacy, which is indicative of how important fieldwork educator support is in FWII education. Both fieldwork educators and students can mitigate risk factors through promoting a collaborative relationship and student protective factors during FWII. Insights gained through this study can inform practice guidelines for fieldwork educator and student collaboration and psychosocial well-being management.

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Appendix A

The Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Questionnaire (PFWES-Q)

By: Grace Perry, OTD, MS, OTR/L, BCPR and Katherine Fischer Varughese OTD, OTR/L

Purpose: Occupational therapy students experience significant stress and burnout throughout their educational programs, which negatively affects their psychosocial well-being. Students completing their experiential learning during fieldwork often face additional challenges to their psychosocial well-being, such as decreased access to emotional support from friends or family and the novel challenge of clinical work. Support from clinical educators has been found in other healthcare disciplines to support psychosocial well-being. Results from this questionnaire can be used to measure, track, and foster discussions on perceived fieldwork educator support. This information can be used to develop more effective student-educator relationships, thus supporting student psychosocial well-being.

Use: The Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Questionnaire (PFWES-Q) is a 10-question, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire that measures perceptions of fieldwork educator support and the experience of protective psychosocial factors in fieldwork students. Questions address educator availability, emotional/physical support, self-efficacy, and quality of feedback provided.

Validity/ Reliability: Preliminary content validity was established through an expert panel review (n=2) and piloting with occupational therapy students (n=2), with feedback integrated into the questionnaire. 4 questions are reverse coded to improve the validity of questionnaire findings.

Scoring: Assign point values on a scale from 1 to 5, where almost never=1 and almost always=5. Scores are reversed for questions 3,7,8,10, where point values are assigned on a scale from 5 to 1, where almost never=5 and almost always=1. Scores are out of 50 points total.

Perceived Fieldwork Educator Support Questionnaire

Instructions: Please answer the following questions as they pertain to your current fieldwork educator or most recent fieldwork educator if you have completed both level II fieldwork placements. Please circle how often your fieldwork educator exhibits/exhibited the following behaviors.

1. My fieldwork educator asks about my well-being “how I’m doing/ feeling”.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

2. My fieldwork educator provides constructive feedback regarding my work performance.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

3. My fieldwork educator is unavailable to help me.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

4. My fieldwork educator asks me to complete work I am prepared for.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

5. My fieldwork educator assists me when needed.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

6. My fieldwork educator and I discuss strategies to support my well-being.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

7. My fieldwork educator appears disinterested in my feelings.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

8. My fieldwork educator provides unproductive feedback regarding my work performance.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

9.My fieldwork educator supports my interests or motivations in therapy practice.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

10. My fieldwork educator proposes unachievable challenges to me.

Almost Never Occasionally Half the Time Usually Almost Always

_____Total Score