

## LET'S TALK DEI

# Difficult conversations in fieldwork education

Razan Hamed, Volume 28 • Issue 3 • March 2023, pp. 10–11 03/01/2023



Occupational therapy (OT) students complete their clinical education within fieldwork I, and fieldwork II experiences (FW) under the supervision of OT practitioners, referred to as FW educators. FW educators play a critical role in building occupational therapy students' clinical and professional skills. Without their mentorship, didactic coursework is incomplete, if not moot. FW educators can facilitate solid clinical education and be perceived by students as motivating, inspiring, or helpful. Unfortunately, FW educators can also hinder clinical education and be perceived as intimidating, unfriendly, or closed-minded (Grenier, 2015). When FW educators lack cultural humility (Brown & Norris, 2019) or display behaviors of incivility and bullying (Bolding et al., 2020) and racism (Beagan et al., 2022), FW educators can be barriers to students' learning. Consider the following example:

*A student who identifies as Chinese starts her FW rotation at a busy inpatient rehab unit. The student completed the first semester remotely in China and has never been to the United States*

*Journal of Occupational Therapy, 28(3), 10-11. doi:10.1177/00220221221111111111*

*prior to starting fieldwork due to COVID-19 restrictions. The student observes the supervisor during a session on ADLs and offers to help. The supervisor responds to the student by saying, "don't worry about it." The student reoffers help, and the supervisor repeats the phrase "don't worry about it" with a visibly "dry" facial expression. The supervisor never discussed the incident with the student afterward. While completing the FW Performance Evaluation form (FWPE), the supervisor describes the student as "does not respect professional boundaries" and cites that incident. While discussing the FWPE concerns with the academic FW coordinator back at her school, the student describes that in Chinese culture, you are expected to offer help to authority figures even if the other person declines because they are most likely trying to save you the trouble.*

In this example, if the FW educator had taken the time to have a conversation with the student prior to completing the FWPE, it could have been an insightful experience for both parties and may have resulted in different outcomes for the student.

FW educators must consider how students' culture, religion, race, and intersectionality can influence their FW performance. They must also be mindful that their mentorship style may be perceived by the students as insensitive or lacking cultural humility. These conversations can be difficult, awkward, or uncomfortable for FW educators and students. When FW educators provide the opportunities for students to express their concerns, they can facilitate student learning, engagement, and motivation. However, when FW educators avoid such conversations, it can destabilize students' psychological safety (i.e., leave students confused, uninspired, or defeated). Some optional tools exist for FW educators' self-assessment and reflection on the mentorship process, such as the American Occupational Therapy Association Self-Assessment Tool for Fieldwork Educator Competency [AOTA, 2009]. However, without mindful reflection on one's cultural humility, there is no evidence that these tools will enhance an FW educator's ability to navigate these conversations. Given research evidence on the value and impact of mentorship in the educational process (Gallagher & Hamed, 2022; Schoen et al., 2021), I invite FW educators to reflect on their mentorship style and how they can impact students' learning.

Some actions FW educators can take to reflect on their mentorship style and cultural humility include inviting informal feedback from students on their mentorship experience and aiming to learn one new thing related to diversity from every student they supervise. Additionally, here are a few questions to consider when interacting with students as a FW educator, especially those from diverse backgrounds or marginalized groups.

- Are students comfortable asking me difficult questions?

- Am I comfortable handling difficult conversations with the students?
- Am I considering the students' well-being while under my supervision?
- What do I know about the students' culture, race, ethnicity, or other intersections of diversity?

FW educators have the power to pass or fail students in their clinical placements and the power to make or break a future occupational therapy practitioner. But having an empathetic dialogue with the students, no matter how difficult a conversation is, can be a FW educator's superpower.

## References

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2009). Self-assessment tool for fieldwork educator competency. AOTA.

Beagan, B. L., Sibbald, K. R., Bizzeth, S. R., & Pride, T. M. (2022). Systemic racism in Canadian occupational therapy: A qualitative study with therapists. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 89*(1), 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00084174211066676>

Bolding, D. J., Dudley, T., Dahlmeier, A., Bland, L., Castro, A., & Covarrubias, A. (2020). Prevalence and types of incivility in occupational therapy fieldwork. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education, 4*(1). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2020.040111>

Brown, T., & Norris, C. (2019). *Navigating cultural differences between fieldwork educators and Students* [University of North Dakota]. *Occupational Therapy Capstones*. <https://commons.und.edu/ot-grad/406>

Gallagher, R. G., & Hamed, R. (2022). Benefits of peer-mentorship for entry-level occupational therapy students: A descriptive study. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy, 10*(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1946>

Grenier, M.-L. (2015). Facilitators and barriers to learning in occupational therapy fieldwork education: Student perspectives. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 69*(Suppl. 2), 6912185070. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.015180>

Schoen, S. A., Gee, B. M., & Ochsenein, M. (2021). Preparing advanced clinicians and practitioners: A model for mentorship in occupational therapy practice. *Occupational Therapy International, 1*–6. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/3394478>

**Razan Hamed**, PhD, OTR/L, is a member of the AOTA DEI Committee. She is an Associate

Professor, Programs in Occupational Therapy, and Director of MOT Research Curriculum,  
Department of Rehabilitation and Regenerative Medicine, at the Vagelos College of Physicians  
and Surgeons–Columbia University.

© 2023 American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. All Rights Reserved