

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a diverse group of people, including children and adults, holding hands in a circle. They are all looking upwards with expressions of joy and hope. The background is bright, suggesting a large window or skylight. The image is split into two main sections by a horizontal blue band containing text.

Investing in the Future: *A Needs Assessment*

A NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO GUIDE A FIELDWORK
MENTORSHIP PROGRAM TO ADDRESS THE
PEDIATRIC OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY WORKFORCE
OBSTACLES

Summary & Overview of the Needs Assessment



This needs assessment was conducted as part of a doctoral capstone project focused on addressing fieldwork education, mentorship and workforce challenges in pediatric occupational therapy (OT) through the development of a structured mentorship program for OT/OTA level II fieldwork students. The assessment aimed to evaluate gaps in fieldwork education, understand barriers to clinical placements, and identify mentorship needs across key stakeholders: the capstone agency (Occupation In Motion), OT/OTA students, Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWCs), and pediatric professionals. The assessment was grounded in current literature, a site-specific review, and original survey data analysis.

Literature Review

A literature review was completed to explore mentorship in the pediatric field and the impact of pediatric shortages

Site-Specific Needs Assessment

Consisted of a semi-structure interview and completion of a survey by the agency mentor, Michelle Atanu, to assess the assets and needs of the agency

Stakeholder Needs Assessment

A survey was administered to three stakeholder groups: OT/OTA students, academic fieldwork coordinators, and pediatric professionals

Review of the Literature:

The 5 Themes

Connection Between OT and Fieldwork Shortages

The literature highlights a direct relationship between the occupational therapy workforce shortage and the decreasing availability of Level II fieldwork placements. As OT and OTA programs expand, the ability to place students in quality pediatric settings has declined due to practitioner attrition and systemic barriers (Turner et al., 2024; Coppard et al., 2021). Addressing this shortage is essential for sustaining the future OT workforce.

Mentorship as a Tool for Professional Development

Mentorship supports students' professional growth during Level II fieldwork by addressing challenges such as low confidence, difficulty with clinical reasoning, and adapting to workplace demands. Structured, goal-driven mentorship fosters both student and educator development, promoting readiness for clinical practice (Jackson et al., 2023; Schoen et al., 2021).

Need for Improved Pediatric Mentorship

Mentorship in pediatric OT settings is increasingly important given rising employment demands and limited pediatric placements. Intentional mentorship can enhance workplace culture, strengthen clinical skills, and facilitate smoother transitions for new graduates, especially in pediatric roles that often lack required fieldwork exposure (Turner et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2023).

Mentorship Builds Commitment to the Profession

Fieldwork mentorship not only develops clinical competence but also strengthens students' identity as occupational therapists, increasing long-term dedication to the field. Positive mentoring experiences contribute to workforce retention, especially in pediatric practice, and reinforce the profession's sustainability (Schoen et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2022).

Mentorship Creates a Supportive Environment

A strong mentor-mentee relationship fosters emotional support, trust, and confidence. A supportive environment during fieldwork helps reduce student stress, improve competence, and promote mental well-being, ultimately better preparing students for professional practice (Jackson et al., 2023; Naidoo & Van Wyk, 2016).

Assessing the Needs **of the Stakeholders**

The needs assessment continued through a thorough evaluation of three key stakeholder groups involved in occupational therapy (OT) and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) fieldwork education within pediatric settings in Texas:

- OT/OTA students in Texas - 46 responses were gathered
- Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWCs) in Texas - 14 responses were gathered
- Professional working in or working with the pediatric occupational therapy field in Texas (Pediatric Professionals) - 41 responses were gathered

The primary goal is to evaluate the needs of stakeholders to support fieldwork students in pediatric practice, and the needs and barriers experienced by the pediatric workforce.

Through targeted surveys, this assessment investigates several critical issues:

- Fieldwork Challenges Across Stakeholders
- Pediatric Workforce Challenges
- Mentorship in Pediatric Fieldwork: Opportunities & Recommendations

The findings helped inform the development of a structured mentorship program aimed at enhancing student learning, supporting fieldwork educators, and strengthening the pediatric OT workforce.

Fieldwork Challenges Across Stakeholders: Key Survey Findings

Barriers to Securing Pediatric Fieldwork Placements for OT/OTA Students

Top 3 Reported Barriers: According to responses from Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWCs), the most significant barriers to securing pediatric fieldwork placements include:

1. **High competition among OT/OTA programs**
2. **Limited availability of pediatric fieldwork sites**
3. **Shortage of qualified clinical supervisors**

"There is very high competition in Texas due to the large number of OT programs." – AFWC

Additional Barriers Identified:

Imbalance Between Student Demand and Site Availability 6 out of the 14 AFWCs reported a mismatch between the number of students requesting pediatric placements and the number of available sites, resulting in unmet student placement needs.

Site-Specific Requirements That Limit Placement Opportunities Pediatric fieldwork sites often impose criteria that many programs or students cannot meet. For example: Some sites only accept students for their second Level II fieldwork rotation.

Limited Access for OTA Students OTA programs face additional difficulties in securing pediatric placements.

Challenges in Recruiting New Fieldwork Educators Several programs reported difficulty in recruiting new supervising therapists, often relying on the same individuals year after year.

Delays Due to Lengthy Contracting Processes The bureaucratic process of securing contracts with sites causes significant delays, even when therapists are willing to take students.

"It takes too long to secure a contract once a therapist agrees to take a student. There are not enough clinical supervisors to meet student demand, especially given the competitive environment." – AFWC

"Cancellations and staff turnover among fieldwork educators and directors disrupt communication and create placement gaps." – AFWC

"Some pediatric sites commit years in advance to schools outside the area, making them inaccessible to local community colleges restricted by their tax districts. Some OTs also decline to take OTA students." – AFWC

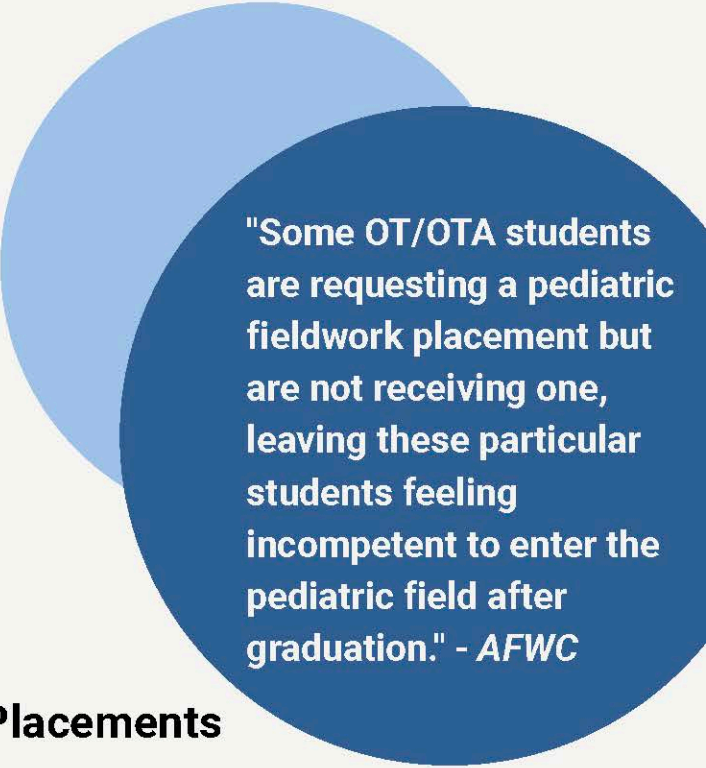
Fieldwork Challenges Across Stakeholders:

Key Survey Findings

High Student Interest in Pediatric Fieldwork Placements

A strong majority of OT/OTA students report interest in completing a Level II fieldwork placement in a pediatric setting:

- **36 out of 46 student participants** indicated interest in a pediatric rotation.
- **46% of student participants** reported being very interested in completing their fieldwork in a pediatric setting.



"Some OT/OTA students are requesting a pediatric fieldwork placement but are not receiving one, leaving these particular students feeling incompetent to enter the pediatric field after graduation." - AFWC

Limited Availability of Pediatric Fieldwork Placements

Despite student interest, many programs are unable to meet the demand for pediatric placements:

- **78% (11 out of 14) of AFWC participants** agreed that there are not enough pediatric Level II fieldwork placements for students.
- **64.29% (9 out of 14) of AFWC participants** reported that the number of pediatric fieldwork sites available does not meet the number of student requests.

Impact on Student Confidence and Competence

Students who do not receive a pediatric placement despite requesting one often report feeling underprepared to enter the field:

- Among students who requested but did not receive a pediatric placement, **5 out of 5** reported feeling "somewhat incompetent" in their pediatric knowledge and skills.

Impact of Fieldwork Placement on Career Interest

Completing a pediatric fieldwork rotation appears to increase students' interest in pursuing a career in the pediatric setting:

- Among students who **requested but did not receive** a pediatric placement, **4 out of 5** reported having **no interest** in working in the pediatric field after graduation.
- **7 out of 14 AFWCs (50%)** believe that the **setting in which students complete fieldwork often influences** the setting they choose to work in post-graduation.

Fieldwork Challenges Across Stakeholders:

Key Survey Findings

Challenges Faced by Pediatric Companies in Serving as Fieldwork Placement Sites

Key Barriers Identified by Pediatric Professionals

Pediatric companies face several obstacles when it comes to serving as fieldwork placement sites for OT/OTA students, including:

- A lack of occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) available or willing to serve as fieldwork educators
- The perceived burden placed on companies and therapists when supervising students
- Additional concerns unique to pediatric settings:

"Insurance and liability issues are higher in the pediatric field"

"Parents can have mistrust when working with students"

"OT/OTA students are timid during their fieldwork"

Financial Incentives and Compensation Barriers

Some professionals believe that financial stipends could help incentivize therapists and companies to take on fieldwork students. However, inconsistencies in institutional policies present challenges:

"... Some OTA programs offer financial stipends to FW sites which causes those sites to be more likely to accept their students over ours. We do not offer financial stipends or compensation due to institutional policy." - AFWC

"Therapists are now requesting to be paid for taking a student due to the time requirements." - Pediatric Professional

Pediatric Workforce Challenges: **Key Survey Findings**

Perceived Occupational Therapy Practitioner (OTP) Shortage in the Pediatric Field

There is a strong perception among pediatric professionals that the field is experiencing a shortage of occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs).

- **61% of all pediatric professional participants** (25 out of 41) agreed that there is an OT shortage in the pediatric field.
- Among clinic owners and directors, this concern is even more pronounced—**86% (12 out of 14)** reported agreement that a shortage exists.

Challenges in Hiring and Staffing Qualified OTPs in the Pediatric Field

Ongoing Difficulty in Hiring Pediatric OTPs

Hiring qualified OTPs in the pediatric field is a consistent challenge:

- **66% of all pediatric professional participants** agreed it is difficult to hire qualified OTPs.
- **92% of owners and CEOs** shared the same concern (agreed it is difficult to hire qualified OTPs).

Key Barriers Identified:

- **Lack of Response and Competitive Market**
50% (20 out of 41) of pediatric professional participants cited limited responses to job postings and competition among companies.
- **Lack of Competitive Pay:**

"Lack of experience and specialized training required for pediatrics is a significant barrier..."

"It needs to be a requirement that occupational therapists receive structured mentoring..."

"Pediatric population is difficult to learn without proper mentor / senior therapist guidance..."

"Financial burdens, unable to meet salary demands with insurance reimbursement rate."

"Pay compared to hospital and nursing/therapy agencies."

- **Shortage of Experienced Therapists & Need for Mentorship** Hiring experienced pediatric OTPs remains a challenge due to the learning curve and lack of structured guidance.

Pediatric Workforce Challenges: **Key Survey Findings**

Financial Concerns as a Barrier to Entering the Pediatric OT Field

Perception of Low Pay Discourages Students from Pursuing Pediatric Roles

A significant reason some OT/OTA students choose not to pursue a career in pediatrics is the belief that they will not earn a sufficient salary in the field.

- **Salary and Benefits are Top Priorities for Students:** 59% of student participants (27 out of 46) selected satisfactory salary and benefits as one of the most important job characteristics when seeking employment as a new graduate.
- **Most Valued Job Characteristics for Students:**
 - Satisfactory salary and benefits
 - Good work environment (communication and teamwork)
 - Mentorship from experienced professionals

Professional Perception of Pay in Pediatrics

Many pediatric professionals echoed this concern, expressing that low compensation impacts workforce retention and recruitment:

"The difficulty with this is that being in this setting you are underpaid and poorly appreciated by the company..."

"Most peds OTs do not get paid what we deserve which contributes to a lack in people wanting to work in outpatient."

Mentorship in Pediatric Fieldwork: Opportunities & Recommendations

Key Survey Findings

Key Insights and Recommendations for a Pediatric Fieldwork Mentorship Program

Mentorship: A Shared Priority and Challenge Across Stakeholders

All three stakeholder groups—students, academic fieldwork coordinators (AFWCs), and pediatric professionals—identified mentorship as both essential and often lacking.

Student Challenges During Level II Fieldwork: Students reported insufficient mentorship as a major barrier to success:



"Not having the guidance needed to succeed in the setting I was in. Not receiving feedback when I felt lost in the setting."

"I have faced difficulties with my CI's professionalism... I felt that he used me to his benefit instead of using it as a mentoring opportunity..."

Limited Availability of Mentors: 6 of 14 (43%) AFWCs cited a lack of clinical supervisors as a challenge. AFWC responses:

"The turnover in OTPs in all practice settings has also been a barrier, creating a need to cancel student placements."



"...only part time therapist, or new OTs without the minimum requirement to have a level II fieldwork student"

Mentorship as a Valued Job Characteristic: 46% of student participants (21/46) selected mentorship as one of the top job characteristics they value in a future role.

Need for Mentorship to Build Competence in Pediatrics: Pediatric professionals emphasized mentorship as critical for clinical readiness:



"Pediatric population is difficult to learn without proper mentor/senior therapist guidance..."

"There is a shortage of experienced pediatric occupational therapists... It needs to be a requirement that occupational therapists receive structured mentoring for their first year treating..."

Mentorship in Pediatric Fieldwork: Opportunities & Recommendations

Key Survey Findings

Top Mentorship Methods Identified by Stakeholders

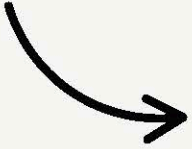
1. **Hands-On Practice:** 77% (17/22) of OT/OTA student participants, 85% (29/34) of pediatric professional participants, 50% (7/14) of AFWC participants
2. **Frequent Meetings/Feedback from FWE:** 71% (10/14) of AFWC participants, 68% (15/22) of OT/OTA student participants, 50% (17/34) of pediatric professional participants
3. **Exposure to a Range of Conditions/Treatments:** 64% (14/22) of OT/OTA student participants, 50% (7/14) of AFWC participants, 53% (18/34) of pediatric professional participants

Key Skills to Address in a Mentorship Program

1. **Assessment & Evaluation Skills:** 78% (14/18) of OT/OTA student participants, 71% (29/41) of pediatric professional participants
2. **Treatment Planning & Implementation:** 56% (10/18) of OT/OTA student participants, 63% (26/41) of pediatric professional participants
3. **Communication with Clients/Caregivers:** 28% (5/18) of OT/OTA student participants, 62% (21/34) of pediatric professional participants

Top Attributes for Students in Pediatric Fieldwork

1. **Adaptability:** OT Students: 88% (21/24), Pediatric Professionals: 56% (23/41)
2. **Openness to Feedback:** 63% (15/24) of OT/OTA student participants, 34% (14/41) of pediatric professional participants
3. **Critical Thinking Skills:** 59% (13/22) of OT/OTA student participants, 63% (26/41) of pediatric professional participants
4. **Professionalism:** 50% (20/41) of pediatric professional participants, 17% (4/24) of OT/OTA student participants



"Food for thought. There are things that are easier to teach in the workforce: attendance, dress code, punctuality. The 3 things listed above aren't easy to teach and sometimes come with personality and awareness as opposed to more education." - *Pediatric Professional*

Mentorship in Pediatric Fieldwork: Opportunities & Recommendations

Key Survey Findings

Recommendations for Enhancing a Pediatric Fieldwork Mentorship Program

Thorough Orientation at the Start of Fieldwork

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of a structured orientation to set expectations and introduce students to the pediatric setting.

"I have provided students with a fieldwork orientation on basic things to expect and have had them meet several pediatric OTs as part of their curriculum." - AFWC

Weekly Feedback and Clear Objectives

Students, AFWCs, and pediatric professionals all expressed the value of frequent feedback and clear weekly goals. AFWCs: 8/14 (57%) ranked weekly objectives as a top mentorship method.

"Organized timeline to clearly show expectations... weekly meetings and check-ins... I met with my two mentors every Friday... we reflected on what went well, areas of improvement, next week's expectations. I loved my peds experience..." - OT Student Recommendation

"Establish clear objectives and expectations... share these with the student during orientation... Provide frequent feedback regarding client evaluation, treatment planning, treatment activities, and documentation..." - Pediatric Professional Recommendation

"Give the student feedback weekly (strengths and weaknesses)..." - OT Student Recommendation

"Clearly and realistic weekly objectives to meet." - AFWC Recommendation

Mentorship in Pediatric Fieldwork: Opportunities & Recommendations

Key Survey Findings

Recommendations for Enhancing a Pediatric Fieldwork Mentorship Program

Support Student Mental Health and Professional Boundaries

Stakeholders noted the emotional demands of pediatric care and recommended mental health resources and boundary-setting guidance.

"Strategies for maintaining professionalism even if you do not enjoy the pediatric setting... Outside counseling sessions/weekly peer counseling... Pediatrics can be emotionally draining... your CI is not your counselor... fieldwork is not the time or place for outside drama..." - *Pediatric Professional Recommendation*

Expand Knowledge of Conditions, Assessments, and Interventions

Providing hands-on exposure and access to practical tools was highly recommended.

"Emphasis on learning developmental milestones and standardized assessments..." - *OT Student Recommendation*

"Providing a list of common assessments would be helpful..." - *OT Student Recommendation*

"Guidance on interventions and how to plan a treatment session with limited resources." - *AFWC Recommendation*

"I have my students read parts of a book written for caregivers regarding sensory processing... DIR approaches." - *Pediatric Professional Recommendation*

"Milestones were a huge part of my pediatric rotation... my mentor constantly helped me understand expectations by age." - *OT Student Recommendation*

Mentorship in Pediatric Fieldwork: Opportunities & Recommendations

Key Survey Findings

Recommendations for Enhancing a Pediatric Fieldwork Mentorship Program

Develop Communication and Adaptability Skills

Students highlighted the need for communication strategies tailored to children, caregivers, and educators.

"Flexibility and proficient communication... is especially important to be successful in a pediatric setting."

Alternative Mentorship Models and Structural Suggestions

Alternative Supervision Models

"Being open to alternative supervision models—1 FWE to 2 students, or 2 FWEs to 2 students... clear communication of expectations and needs." - *Pediatric Professional Recommendation*

Off-Site or Remote Mentorship

"Possible to develop a program to mentor off-site? Regular Zoom meetings... I am currently mentoring international OTs this way... maybe I can be utilized as a fieldwork mentor in a creative way?" - *Pediatric Professional Recommendation*

Financial Compensation to Fieldwork Sites

"It has been the burden of the companies to take on a student. If universities would like more participation, compensation would be a good avenue..." - *Pediatric Professional Recommendation*

Using Level I as a Screening Process for Level II

"I wonder if level 1 placements could somehow become screening/relationship building/interview-like experience... to support engagement and learning process." - *Pediatric Professional Recommendation*