



## FELLOWSHIP GRADUATES' PERSPECTIVES OF MENTORED PRACTICE IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

### PERSPEKTIVE DIPLOMIRANIH POLAZNIKA PROGRAMA SPECIJALIZACIJE O MENTORIRANOJ PRAKSI U RADNOJ TERAPIJI

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#### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to improve mentored practice by exploring graduates' perspectives on their mentorship experiences. A qualitative approach was used, incorporating a survey and optional follow-up interviews. Of the nine respondents, seven were occupational therapists who completed an AOTA-accredited fellowship program. These participants, aged 20 to 40, had diverse educational backgrounds, including master's, doctorate, and PhD candidates, and held advanced certifications. Three participants engaged in follow-up interviews. Five themes emerged: (1) the mentoring relationship, (2) impact on skill and knowledge development, (3) role of mentors in clinician growth, (4) effective mentoring techniques, and (5) suggestions for improving professional development.

**Key words:** occupational therapy, mentors, fellowship.

#### SAŽETAK

Ova studija imala je za cilj unaprijediti mentoriranu praksu kroz ispitivanje perspektiva diplomiranih stručnjaka o njihovim iskustvima mentorstva. Korišten je kvalitativni pristup koji je uključivao anketno ispitivanje i opcionalne naknadne intervjuje. Od devet ispitanika, sedam su bili radni terapeuti koji su završili program specijalizacije (fellowship) akreditiran od strane AOTA-e. Učesnici, starosti od 20 do 40 godina, imali su raznoliku obrazovnu strukturu, uključujući magistarski i doktorski nivo studija, kao i doktorande, te su posjedovali napredne stručne certifikate. Tri učesnika su učestvovala u naknadnim intervjuima. Identificirano je pet tematskih cjelina: (1) mentorski odnos, (2) uticaj na razvoj vještina i znanja, (3) uloga mentora u profesionalnom razvoju kliničara, (4) efikasne mentorske tehnike i (5) prijedlozi za unapređenje profesionalnog razvoja.

**Cljučne riječi:** radna terapija, mentori, program specijalizacije

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## INTRODUCTION

Occupational therapy fellowship programs have emerged as essential avenues for post professional training in specialized clinical settings (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2024a). AOTA-accredited fellowship programs provide professional training for occupational therapists in various clinical environments, including acute and critical care, burns, gerontology, lymphedema, neurology, physical rehabilitation, assistive technology, dysphagia, hand therapy and upper extremity, mental health, and pediatrics (AOTA, 2024b). The demand for rigorous skills in occupational therapy continues to grow (Chapman et al., 2019). Therefore, fellowship programs are necessary for occupational therapists to expand their professional skill set and meet evolving healthcare needs (Bergstrom, 2024; Chapman et al., 2019).

Mentorship is a common practice used in higher education, especially in healthcare professions (Bergstrom, 2024). Within the occupational therapy profession, each AOTA-accredited fellowship program must dedicate and document a minimum of 350 hours (25% of the required 1,400 total hours) to mentored practice. Additionally, these mentored practices must incorporate service delivery, caseload management, and professional development (AOTA, 2021). Occupational therapy fellows receive direct guidance from experienced clinicians to improve their clinical knowledge, caseload management, and professional development (AOTA, 2021). As mentoring gains prominence in healthcare professions, its benefits are increasingly recognized (Burgess et al., 2018; Henry-Noel et al., 2019). Central to the mentorship experience is the supportive relationship between mentors and mentees, which heavily influences the mentee's overall success (Hirsch et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2018). Despite the recognized importance of mentorship for healthcare professionals, the literature on mentorship within occupational therapy fellowship programs remains sparse, emphasizing a need for exploration into fellowship graduates' mentored experiences within AOTA-accredited programs (Buning & Buning, 2019; Coppard et al., 2020).

Understanding the perspectives of occupational therapy fellowship graduates holds profound significance for the profession. Effective mentorship plays a pivotal role in shaping the clinical skills, professional identity, and leadership capabilities of specialized occupational therapists (Furze et al., 2016). By understanding the experiences and opinions of fellowship graduates, this study aimed to inform the development of evidence-based mentorship strategies to align with the evolving needs of the profession. The current study sought to identify improvements for mentored practice in AOTA-accredited fellowship programs to cultivate competent occupational therapists, advancing the quality of care provided across various practice settings (Jones et al., 2008).

Occupational therapy fellowship programs currently emphasize the importance mentorship has on fellows' professional growth and development (Bergstrom, 2024). However, the literature lacks comprehensive insights into the structure of mentored practice in AOTA accredited programs (Buning & Buning, 2019; Coppard et al., 2020). This gap in knowledge poses a significant challenge as it hinders the optimization of mentored practice and may impede the ability of fellowship programs to adequately train specialized occupational therapists (Bergstrom, 2024).

Therefore, a qualitative investigation of occupational therapy fellowship graduates' perspectives on mentorship was needed. By addressing this gap, this study aimed to explain the role of mentorship in AOTA-accredited fellowship programs and identify strategies to progress mentored experiences for future fellows. Ultimately, this research sought to attain valuable insights to advance evidence-based mentorship practices in occupational therapy fellowship programs.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Sample of participant**

Participant recruitment was conducted through email, where AOTA-accredited occupational therapy program directors were contacted and prompted to share the study information with fellowship graduates. Fellowship graduates were invited to share their experiences with mentorship as fellows by completing an online qualitative survey. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up virtual interview. Nine individuals participated in the survey; however, two participants did not meet the inclusion criteria, and their data were excluded from the study ( $n = 7$ ). Three of the seven participants provided additional information to participate in the follow-up interview ( $n = 3$ ). The qualitative survey revealed that all seven participants identified as female. Of the seven participants, four were between 20 and 30 years old, and three were between 31 and 40 years old. Regarding educational attainment, two participants held a master's degree, four earned a doctorate degree or doctorate of philosophy (PhD), and one was a current PhD candidate. The fellowship graduates held a range of advanced certifications, including feeding, eating and swallowing, pediatrics, and physical rehabilitation. Regionally, the participants were spread across the United States, with one residing in the Northeast, three in the Southeast, two in the Midwest, and one in the West. Subsequently, three of the seven participants participated in the optional semi-structured interviews; however, no identifying information was obtained during the virtual, semi-structured interviews.

### **Method of conducting research**

To effectively address the research questions, a qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture participants' nuanced experiences and perceptions. Qualitative research enables in-depth exploration and comprehension of varied experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). This study used an exploratory and descriptive design to uncover an understanding of the mentorship experiences of occupational therapy fellowship graduates. This design facilitated a comprehensive examination of participants' viewpoints to identify key themes and patterns within the data.

Prior to recruitment, institutional review board approval was received (approval #GUIRB-2024-3-7215). Data collection was conducted through an open-ended Google Forms survey designed to protect anonymity and elicit information on various aspects of the fellowship experience, including demographic details, roles as a fellow, mentorship dynamics, impact on professional development, and recommendations for improvement. Pertinent demographic

survey questions preceded the mentorship survey questions, adapted from Bergstrom's (2024) exploratory phenomenological study on mentorship in AOTA fellowship programs. Participants were assured the survey would take approximately 15 minutes to complete, ensuring minimal disruption to their schedules. If participants decided to participate in the follow-up interview, they were prompted to create an alias name and email to coordinate the virtual follow-up interview. These interviews offered a flexible framework for exploring participants' experiences and facilitating open-ended discussions while ensuring key topics related to mentorship were fully covered.

Follow-up interviews were offered as an optional component of the study, providing participants with the opportunity for more in-depth discussions about their experiences. Prior to each interview, participants confirmed their anonymous names and provided oral consent for transcription. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, and transcriptions were generated for analysis purposes. To protect participants' identities and ensure confidentiality, all transcripts were anonymized. These interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, with the camera function disabled to maintain participant privacy.

### **Measuring instruments**

The data collection methods in this study were composed of qualitative survey questions with optional participation in semi-structured interviews to gather comprehensive insight into participants' experiences. Supplementary data sources were utilized to enhance the data. These sources included survey responses obtained through Google Forms, which provided qualitative data on various aspects of the fellowship experience, such as demographic information, roles as a fellow, mentor relationship establishment, skill, and knowledge development, mentors' role in mentees' growth, effective mentor techniques, and impact on professional development. The survey questions were adapted from a previous study on mentored practice in AOTA fellowship programs to ensure alignment with the research objectives (Bergstrom, 2024).

In addition to qualitative survey questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for flexibility and depth in exploring participants' perspectives on mentor support. These interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions while also permitting participants to elaborate on specific topics of interest and areas for improvement. This study aimed to capture the complexity of participants' experiences with mentorship to enhance the credibility and depth of the findings.

### **Data processing methods**

To ensure data security and confidentiality, all collected data, including survey responses and interview transcripts, were stored in a password-protected folder accessible exclusively to the researchers. Participants completed an informed consent form prior to navigating the survey, and anonymity was maintained throughout the study, with no identifying information disclosed in any reports. Ethical considerations were highlighted throughout the study process, with participant consent obtained before survey completion and interview initiation.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty; however, once the survey was submitted, it was not possible to withdraw data from the survey due to nonidentifiable information being obtained. Additionally, participants were assured their confidentiality would be upheld and their data would only be used for research purposes.

Several measures were implemented to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Triangulation was used to leverage diverse data sources such as interview transcripts and demographic information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Cross-verifying findings from these varied sources maintained the study's credibility, leading to a more refined understanding of the research.

Furthermore, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. Separately, the two researchers meticulously recorded their thoughts, biases, and interpretations in Microsoft Word documents. Once both researchers conducted their analysis and came to a consensus, a meeting was held to discuss the study's themes. This thorough practice fostered transparency and rigor by enabling researchers to critically assess their own perspectives and potential impacts on the study outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Overall, this methodological approach exemplified a comprehensive and ethical investigation into occupational therapy fellowship graduates' perspectives on mentorship. By addressing methodological, ethical, and practical considerations, this study contributes valuable insights to the enhancement of mentorship in AOTA-accredited fellowship programs.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes emerged after researchers completed comprehensive independent analyses of the responses. Through autonomous coding and thematic analysis, the two researchers determined and agreed that the fellowship graduates' responses were representative of five themes, which included: (1) the mentoring relationship, (2) the impact on skill and knowledge development, (3) the role of mentors in clinician growth, (4) effective mentoring techniques, and (5) suggestions to improve professional development. Numerous subthemes were identified within each theme to illustrate the experiences of the fellows further.

### The Mentoring Relationship

The fellowship graduates reflected on their mentoring relationships and provided information on how mentor relationships were established and their day-to-day interactions. Four subthemes emerged within the mentoring relationship section of the study, which included: (1) assignment and selection of mentors, (2) establishing mentor-mentee relationships, (3) formal versus informal mentorship, and (4) frequency and duration of mentorship interactions.

**Assignment and Selection of Mentors.** Occupational therapy practitioners who graduated from AOTA-accredited fellowship programs described how mentorship was established within their fellowship program. Four participants indicated they had several mentors throughout their specialized training, as well as one-on-one mentorship. Participant 4 reported, "A mentor was designated for each ICU (intensive care unit), and they were the point person throughout that experience." Additionally, participants with multiple specialty mentors described having a primary mentor throughout their experience. Participant 2

commented, “Each fellow was provided one-on-one mentoring. As we developed skills, we were able to wean away from a mentor, but we always had a touch-point mentor to discuss patients’ plan of care.”

**Establishing Mentor-Mentee Relationships.** Mentoring relationships’ dynamics depended on the mentors’ unique qualities and characteristics. Participant 5 explained, “My mentors used different methods to build mentoring relationships.” Moreover, fellowship graduates discussed inclusiveness as an effective strategy to build quality relationships with their specified mentor. Participant 7 described their experience:

Even in the beginning days, it was never just a student-teacher relationship. By the end, I truly felt a part of the team and faculty. Everyone was so welcoming and supportive of my purpose and role as a fellow. (Participant 7)

**Formal Versus Informal Mentorship.** The delivery and style of mentor oversight was a key topic discussed by fellowship graduates. Mentors used a variety of practices to teach and connect with fellows throughout their specialized learning experience. Participant 1 reported, “My mentors checked in often, even outside of our formal mentor times. I think formal membership, especially for new graduates in any setting, is really beneficial.”

**Frequency and Duration of Interactions.** Fellowship graduates regularly met with their mentors for guidance and support. Previous mentees reflected on their interactions with mentors to illustrate the quantity and quality of mentorship. Participant 5 met with her primary mentor “...semi-weekly to discuss learning, questions, caseload management, and projects.” Additionally, participant 3 reported, “The fellowship emphasized support for us at all stages throughout the year.” The fellowship graduates’ responses revealed that consistent mentorship interactions attributed to fellow satisfaction and competency.

### ***Impact on Skill and Knowledge Development***

Four subthemes emerged as fellowship graduates discussed the impact the fellowship program had on their skill and knowledge development, which included (1) practical and clinical skills, (2) exposure to different teaching styles, (3) application of learned skills, and (4) specialized knowledge acquisition.

**Practical and Clinical Skills.** As fellowship graduates reflected on their specialized training, many emphasized the impacts mentorship had on their clinical reasoning and skill attainment. Participant 2 shared that she “appreciated the mentors who were really invested in fostering the development of my skills rather than focusing on being “nice” and “gentle.” Furthermore, participant 7 stated that she “learned a plethora of hands-on clinical and tactile skills. One thing I would have wanted more of was mentorship in my clinical skills that was solely treatment and intervention-based, rather than assessment and evaluation-based.”

**Exposure to Different Teaching Styles.** Another subtheme that emerged was the varied methods mentors used to teach specialized knowledge. Participant 1 explained, “Having so many different mentors allowed for a wider influence into my practice.” Conversely,

participant 3 discussed how “some of the mentors approached their mentoring differently than others, and adjusting to different mentors during my fellowship year was a challenge.”

**Application of Learned Skills.** Many fellowship graduates shared personal experiences where they felt they exhibited expertise through practical knowledge taught by their mentors. Participant 4 reflected on “getting in-depth clinical training about spinal cord injuries from my mentor when I was treating a patient with a spinal cord injury.” Additionally, participant 6 spoke about how she was “able to transition from mentored experiences in the feeding clinic, to treating kids for feeding, to getting a job as a school feeding therapist.” Fellowship graduates’ experiences with their mentors provided unique, specialized opportunities and long-term career development.

**Specialized Knowledge Acquisition.** All fellowship graduates described the advanced training they received as a valuable role in their skill and knowledge development. Participant 2 reported, “My clinical judgment and thought processes are very, very quick and easy now. It’s kind of second nature.” Moreover, participant 3 reflected on how mentorship influenced her knowledge and skill development and stated, “The fellowship trained me beyond what could be achieved in independent study.”

### *The Role of Mentors in Clinician Growth*

Fellowship graduates were asked to consider how the role of their mentors impacted their growth as clinicians, which resulted in two subthemes: (1) provision of feedback, and (2) encouragement of independent practice and critical thinking.

**Provision of Feedback.** Fellowship graduates revealed how they felt about the quality of feedback they received from their mentors. Participant 1 described some mentors’ feedback as “really good and constructive, like they were made to be mentors,” and other mentors’ feedback as “sparse.” As participant 1 continued, she mentioned it was “harder to grow” from mentors who provided critiques sporadically.

**Encouragement of Independent Practice and Critical Thinking.** Although the fellowship graduates were licensed clinicians at the beginning of their experience, many expressed how mentorship enhanced their autonomy and problem-solving skills. Participant 2 said her mentors “asked questions that facilitated critical thinking without giving the answer, but instead, providing the just right challenge.” Additionally, participant 5 explained how her mentors “slowly built” her independence in each specialty area and trusted her “own expertise.”

### *Effective Mentoring Techniques*

To determine valuable mentoring strategies, fellowship graduates were asked to explain useful techniques and activities their mentors utilized during mentored practice hours. Four subthemes emerged: (1) service delivery, (2) caseload management, (3) planning and grading of treatments, and (4) group discussions on evidence-based practice.

**Service Delivery.** Fellowship graduates specifically remarked on how significant service delivery was throughout their learning and mentorship experience. Participant 6 explained

how “the most important technique at the time was service delivery, as I was a new clinician who wanted to develop technical skills.” Furthermore, participant 2 remarked on the positive impacts of service delivery but reported that it “requires time to effectively grasp.”

**Caseload Management.** Fellowship graduates explained specific mentoring techniques and activities that were most beneficial during the fellowship program. Each participant was encouraged to consider the following categories from AOTA guidelines: service delivery, caseload management, and professional development (Bergstrom, 2024). Another subtheme was revealed when fellows reflected on their experiences with caseload management. Participant 3 explained how “it would have been insufficient to train fellows in the specialized practice area without showing us how to manage caseloads, provide quality service in real scenarios within a hospital setting, and pursue professional development effectively.” Many fellowship graduates, including participant 7, “had a full caseload from the beginning” which gave her a “true feel for managing a caseload in specialized clinics.”

**Planning and Grading of Treatments.** Some participants reflected on how their mentors graded activities to enhance clinical judgment and professional development. Specifically, participant 2 believed “there should have been better education for the mentors on how to grade activities to facilitate learning for fellows.”

**Group Discussions on Evidence-Based Practice.** Many fellowship graduates reflected on the impact group discussions and evidence-based practice (EBP) techniques had on their overall experience. Participant 1 explained how her mentors incorporated “group discussions about evidence-based practices” at the beginning of the program. Additionally, participant 2 thought it was helpful to “always be accompanied by someone during evaluations and treatments and to have someone to discuss plans of care with.”

### *Suggestions to Improve Professional Development*

Researchers asked fellowship graduates to reflect on their experience and provide recommendations for improvements concerning professional development and mentored practice in fellowship programs (Bergstrom, 2024). As a result, three subthemes emerged: (1) collaborative experiences with mentors, (2) addressing interdisciplinary roles, and (3) fellow networking.

**Collaborative Experiences with Mentors.** To understand how to enhance professional development, participants were asked to explain how their mentors helped refine their skills to become specialized clinicians. Participant 6 reported, “Looking back, my professional development had a bigger impact on my long-term path. I am still well-connected to my mentors and ask them for advice and suggestions frequently.” Moreover, participant 5 reflected on her collaborative experiences with mentors during service delivery and explained how “having the opportunity to reflect on this was the best for my learning (really engaging in the reflection action cycles of practice).” Furthermore, participants were asked to provide suggestions for mentors to help cultivate professional growth in the future. Participant 1 shared, “I think spending more time with mentors to come up with novel solutions for patients would be nice and reduce the influence over how the mentee practices.” Additionally,

participant 3 encouraged fellowship programs to “include daily support and contact with a designated mentor as well as access to several other skilled clinicians that are available for support.”

**Interdisciplinary Roles.** All the participants discussed their role as interdisciplinary team members throughout their fellowship program. Participant 7 stated, “I had various opportunities for professional development.” Some examples of interdisciplinary roles for fellows included “giving lectures to occupational therapy students, volunteer projects, community outreach, and the option to shadow and observe other specialties” (Participant 7). Additionally, participant 6 had the opportunity to “research and go on an international service-learning trip.”

**Fellow Networking.** Many fellowship graduates reflected on their relationships with their fellow counterparts during their fellowship program. Participant 7 described their experience: For occupational therapy fellows, there could be more of a network. During my time as a fellow, I did not know any other occupational therapy fellows besides the ones who had my placement prior to me. It would be nice to have a network to connect with, lean on, learn from, and compare experiences. (Participant 7)

Fellowship graduates had an overall positive experience with mentorship. The participants were transparent about how fundamental mentorship was to their experience. Mentorship allowed fellowship graduates to develop into skilled clinicians in a specialized practice area. Some participants remarked on how mentorship was established through self assessment of learning styles, which positively shaped their learning experience. Moreover, participants discussed the importance of building rapport with their mentors. Those who bonded with their mentors felt more comfortable when they needed to express challenges or concerns, enhancing their growth as clinicians. Many fellowship graduates were not afraid to ask questions or pursue new opportunities due to their comfort with mentors. Fellowship graduates provided informative insights through the qualitative survey and semi-structured interviews. Their perceptions of the effects of mentorship in AOTA-accredited fellowship programs allowed researchers to gather a comprehensive understanding of productive mentorship strategies.

The findings from this qualitative study provided valuable insights into the dynamics and outcomes of mentorship among occupational therapists who graduated from AOTA-accredited fellowship programs. Five themes emerged through analysis and interpretation of participants’ survey and semi-structured interview responses: mentoring relationships, skill and knowledge development, mentors’ role in clinician growth, mentoring techniques, and professional development. These themes were consistent with Bergstrom’s (2024) study, where the mentoring relationship, the mentoring experience, and the perceived influence of mentoring in skill development were significant. Additionally, due to overall positive experiences as fellows, some participants expressed a desire to become a fellowship mentor in the future.

The establishment of strong mentor-mentee relationships were central to productive mentorships. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of mentors’ unique qualities and efforts to foster inclusive interactions. Mentors used diverse methods to build rapport beyond traditional hierarchical roles. These wide-ranging methods created a supportive learning environment where fellows felt integrated with their team. Similarly, Henry-Noel et

al. (2019) stated that productive mentoring relationships require mutual self-awareness, attentiveness, respect, and clear communication about the relationship.

Participants in this study highlighted the structured nature of mentorship within their fellowship programs. The assignment of different mentors for specific rotations, such as in ICU settings, allowed mentors to match with fellows based on their specialized training needs. Comparably, Amonoo et al. (2019) discussed the positive impact multiple mentors and self-initiated mentorship had on skill development and professional outcomes. Amonoo et al. (2019) explained how the multiple mentor approach ensured personalized guidance and support throughout learners' clinical experiences. Comparably, in the current study, various styles of mentorship were observed and ranged from formal scheduled meetings to informal check-ins. Participants valued structured mentorship for clarity and direction and informal interactions for open communication and mentor accessibility. Consistent mentorship interactions were identified as critical factors that added to fellow satisfaction and competency. Regular meetings facilitated ongoing guidance, clarification of learning objectives, and advice for caseload management. Moreover, the role of mentorship enhanced advanced skill development and professional resilience throughout the fellowship year.

The findings underlined mentorship as a crucial role in fellowship graduates' practical and clinical skills. Participants emphasized mentors' focus on skill development through hands-on training during treatment sessions. Exposure to various teaching styles was generally perceived positively, although challenges in adjusting to different teaching styles were noted. Furthermore, the acquisition of specialized knowledge was universally recognized as pivotal in shaping participants' clinical judgment and overall competence.

Participants in this study reflected on mentors' contributions to their professional growth, particularly through the quality and consistency of feedback provided. Effective mentors challenged mentees' critical thinking skills, which enhanced their autonomy. This approach fostered independent practice, encouraged reflective learning, and allowed for continuous improvement among fellowship graduates. Comparably, mentees from Eller et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of receiving supportive feedback and explained how mentees desired mentors who were honest but gentle, encouraging, approachable, and non-judgmental. Participants emphasized service delivery and caseload management as essential for developing technical and organizational skills in clinical settings. Additionally, participants valued structured activities like planning and grading treatments, as well as group discussions on evidence-based practice, which enhanced their abilities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical ways. Moreover, Drury et al. (2022) specified that structured mentorship programs reduce burnout by increasing job satisfaction, offering emotional support, and fostering supportive workplace relationships. The participants in the current study reiterated the importance of a well-designed and executed mentorship program.

Three subthemes were identified based on participants' recommendations to improve professional development among occupational therapy fellows: collaborative experiences with mentors, interdisciplinary roles, and fellow networking. Additionally, participants suggested implementing more structured mentorship, daily support from mentors, opportunities for fellows to engage in diverse professional roles, and promoting work-life balance. Participants expressed a need for greater networking among fellows to facilitate peer

support and shared learning experiences. Comparably, physical therapy fellowship graduates in Whitman et al. (2020) participated extensively in research, scholarship, teaching, and professional leadership and service roles and expressed a desire to continue developing professionally in these areas. The findings of the current study highlight the need for more diverse professional opportunities within occupational therapy fellowship programs to better prepare practitioners for advanced clinical practice and leadership roles.

The study had several design limitations. First, voluntary participation in follow-up interviews introduced potential selection bias, as those who chose not to participate may have had different perspectives or experiences. Second, interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams without video or identifying names limited the depth of interaction compared to face-to-face interviews. This methodological choice may have influenced the comprehensiveness of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Despite efforts to ensure reliability through independent coding and consensus-building during the data analysis phase, subjective qualitative analysis may have introduced interpretative bias. Variations in how the two researchers interpreted and categorized data could have influenced the identification and prioritization of emergent themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Future research should prioritize investigating several key areas to enhance mentorship effectiveness in occupational therapy fellowship programs. Future researchers should classify a framework for structured mentorship to enhance competency consistency among specialized occupational therapy practitioners. Additionally, a longitudinal study would be beneficial to track the long-term impact of AOTA-accredited fellowship program graduates' clinical outcomes and career trajectories. It would provide valuable insights into how mentorship continues to influence healthcare professionals beyond immediate skill acquisition.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored occupational therapy fellowship graduates' perspectives on mentorship and revealed valuable insights into the emerging area of practice. Despite limited knowledge of mentorship in AOTA-accredited programs, the study identified key themes related to mentoring relationships and educational practices. Responses from surveys and interviews illustrated how mentorship influenced professional interactions, skill acquisition, clinical growth, and career advancement. Participants emphasized the need for mutual respect, support, and effective communication with mentors and suggested improvements to enhance fellows' learning experiences. Consistent with Bergstrom's (2024) research, the study confirmed that mentoring was crucial for specialized skill development and personalized teaching approaches were necessary for post-professional learners. Participants in the current study valued open dialogue with mentors regarding feedback. The study provided a framework for improving mentorship in AOTA-accredited programs and offered practical recommendations for enhancing professional development. Future research should explore the impact of diverse mentors to help create more inclusive programs and better prepare fellows for varied clinical scenarios. Implementing these recommendations could improve mentorship practices, support specialized occupational therapists, and enhance patient care.

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