

CAREER JOURNEYS OF AUTISTIC OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY STUDENTS
AND NEW PRACTITIONERS IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis submitted to the faculty at Stanbridge University in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy

by

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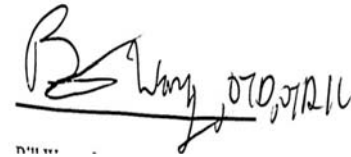
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Certification of Approval

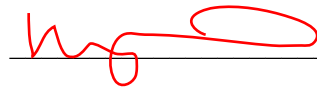
I certify that I have read *Career Journeys of Autistic Occupational Therapy Students and New Practitioners in the United States* by Nicole Alonzo, Chrystine Angeles, Nikki Saberi, and Haley Vandeweg and in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy at Stanbridge University.



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Abstract

Holistic admissions is an emerging trend in occupational therapy (OT) and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) programs in the United States that focuses on recruiting candidates from diverse backgrounds to enter the OT profession (Brotherton et al., 2021). The purpose of this study is to inform OT and OTA educators and employers on how to identify solutions and better accommodate for autistic OT students' and new practitioners' during their journeys, in order to be successful in the classroom and their clinical practice. More research is needed on autistic OT students' and new practitioners' lived experiences, and we hope with our study will help contribute to the research needed in this area. This research will provide insight on how to make AOTA's Vision 2025 more effective. Our inclusion criteria consisted of current autistic OT and OTA students and new practitioners with less than five years of clinical experience. We also accepted co-occurring conditions with an initial autism diagnosis. This qualitative study utilized a one-on-one, semi-structured interview over Zoom with participants conducted by a student researcher. The findings showed that five out of the eight participants stated they did not have a sense of belonging in the profession after disclosing their diagnosis with their peers. In addition, five out of eight participants shared they were not provided accommodations as needed. We concluded that while many OT graduate programs have adopted holistic admissions as an attempt to increase diversity and inclusivity of OT, however, our findings indicated that improvements are required to better support autistic OT students and new practitioners.

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Career Journeys of Autistic Occupational Therapy Students and New Practitioners in the United States

The holistic admissions process reviews an applicant as a whole, rather than just considering grade point averages and standardized test scores that show an applicant's potential (Murray, 2021). Healthcare professional programs, such as nursing programs, have been utilizing holistic admissions to recruit students from diverse backgrounds. Our literature review has found that certain occupational therapy (OT) and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) programs also use a holistic admissions approach. However, autistic students from diverse backgrounds may experience discrimination and ableism after they are admitted into their OT/OTA program. The American Occupational Therapy Association ([AOTA], 2019) describes a vision for 2025: “As an inclusive profession, occupational therapy maximizes health, well-being, and quality of life for all people, populations, and communities through effective solutions that facilitate participation in everyday living.” Distinguishing and implementing solutions to accommodate autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners would keep this vision for inclusivity in effect and continue to advance and improve the profession for the future.

Statement of Problem

There is limited research about accommodations and education that involves autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners throughout their journey in school and in the workplace. Without addressing these concerns and implementing strategies to assist autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners in their careers, the profession will lose opportunities in establishing a diverse profession. Addressing the gaps in research about accommodations and education for autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners can

ultimately cultivate a supportive environment that is inclusive, which allows autistic individuals to flourish in the occupational therapy profession.

Literature Review

Through our research, we have found three common themes relating to autism, occupational therapy programs, and new workplace environments. These themes are holistic admissions, lived experiences, and transitions. We also identified several gaps in research, which we will discuss at greater length below.

Holistic Admissions

One of the common themes we discovered through our research was holistic admissions. The holistic admissions goal is to create diversity and increase inclusion. In the holistic admission process, an admissions team will reflect on an applicant's comprehensive potential, rather than determining their capabilities based off assessments (Murray, 2021). When discussing holistic admissions, the topic leads to implications that accepting a student for more than their grades eventually leads to lowering a school's standards. Furthermore, the students will not be successful in a rigorous program leading to the deficit thinking approach (Murray 2021, p. 427). The deficit thinking approach entails that teachers undermine the student's abilities due to the negative stereotypes that autistic students face amongst their peers. The discrimination that autistic students face due to their disability causes them to feel neglected and give up (Murray, 2021). When these biases are involved, it can lead to countless faults selecting potential students due to being blinded by stereotypes and overlooking students.

There is a need for occupational therapy programs to further explore a holistic approach. Research by Brotherton et al. (2021) looked at a holistic admissions process in

the occupational therapy, physical therapy, and physician assistant programs at Medical University of South Carolina. The researchers found that the approaches differed amongst the different programs, “all programs saw an increase in diversity among their student cohort” (Brotherton et al., 2021, p. 96). Adoption of holistic admissions has shown potential for increasing diversity within the field. Recent demographics have shown that there are 149,000 practicing occupational therapists in the United States and of this number 85.9% are women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). This suggests a lack of diversity in the profession, however more research is needed to conduct and observe occupational therapy programs that have implemented adopting a holistic admissions approach as part of the application process.

Lived Experiences

The second common theme is lived experiences. When it comes to academic challenges that autistic students face, the way in which information is obtained by students is a large determinant of whether or not they will be successful. When autistic students are given too much information at once, it can be very overwhelming (Hees et al., 2015). Other challenges autistic students face is not knowing what is expected of them as well as not understanding how to pace themselves (Gurbuz et al., 2019). Despite the difficulties that the students encountered, the students that self-reported mentioned that they had the capability to stay focused on a certain task, in addition to paying close attention to detail on one subject, with the ability to study for long periods of time. Another strength of autistic students included being able to understand complex ideas by using critical thinking methods. Even though the students did possess a lot of strengths, “a small number of students mentioned that their difficulties could be underestimated due

to their high academic grades, and indeed the social challenges may be masked by strong academic performance” (Gurbuz et al., 2019, p. 624).

Social challenges were another issue raised by autistic students. The social challenges that autistic students self-reported were having trouble initiating social interactions, whether that involved making new friends or expressing to others such as feeling anxious in certain types of situations. Gurbuz et al. (2019) discussed that having support, “is very important for students with autism due to difficulties with new environments and new, or changing, routines which might further increase stress levels when engaging in social situations” (p. 623). In order to best support autistic students in a new environment, it would be helpful before entering the new and unknown area to explain what they should expect in this environment (Gurbuz et al., 2019). It is also important to recognize different types of social events that autistic students self-reported they were interested in, such as social gatherings or volunteering.

Transitions

A third common theme emerging from our literature centered around transitions. In occupational therapy, transitions involve having the ability to prepare and facilitate change, including life changing events. This includes transitioning from graduate school to fieldwork, or graduate school to the workplace. Limited studies were found of autistic OT/OTA students transitioning into their fieldwork, as most of the available research focused primarily on the difficulties faced by neurotypical graduate students. Karp (2020) conducted a study involving new occupational therapy graduate students transition into their first placements of fieldwork. The students had stated a lack of confidence due to many barriers going into their placements for fieldwork (Karp, 2020). Gat and Ratzon

(2014) stated that placing students in non-traditional settings had left the students feeling confident and more culturally competent compared to those in traditional settings. This indicates that those who did not report to an active occupational therapist were given room to explore their skills. Giving potential options for graduate schools to place students in non-traditional settings to accommodate students' needs gives them an opportunity to have more autonomy, which allows for the development of their own skills in the field of OT.

Several studies addressed the importance of providing mental and physical health support to increase workplace readiness and reduce dropout rates for autistic students during transition periods. Poor health such as disrupted sleep for autistic people impacts their overall work performance and can cause difficulties in transitioning into the workplace (Fernandes et al., 2021). This suggests that prioritizing support services and acknowledging health needs of autistic individuals is an important consideration for transitions (Fernandes et al., 2021). Roberts and Birmingham's (2017) research discussed an important factor to create successful transitions for college autistic students. Universities adopting a mentee-centered approach required the mentees to learn how to self-advocate and receive extra help during their time in universities. Roberts and Birmingham's (2017) research emphasized that it is crucial for autistic students to find services to help them succeed in making connections with their colleagues in order to have long lasting professional relationships in the workplace. The article by Lucas et al. (2022) focuses on how readily prepared autistic students were after graduation, and the lack of support the university had provided for post-graduate students. The two biggest

complaints the students reported were a lack of emotional support services and a lack of career support services at the universities.

Methodology

The eligibility criteria for the study required the participants to be at least eighteen years old with a formal diagnosis of autism, and less than five years of OTA or OT clinical experiences licensed in the U.S. Those with any co-occurring conditions with initial autism spectrum disorder diagnosis were accepted to participate. We chose OT practitioners with less than five years of clinical experience because we are adopting a similar criterion the AOTA had used when recruiting applicants for its Emerging Leaders Development Program in the 2010's (Strzelecki, 2009). We excluded any OT and OTA students who self-diagnosed as autistic individuals for this study because we expected our participants to share their experiences in utilizing reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disability Act. We assumed these participants have attended or are currently attending OT or OTA programs where their student services require formal written documentation prior to receiving reasonable accommodations.

We recruited eight participants, seven women and one man, four of whom were OT students and four were new practitioners. During the collection of data some participants recently graduated and were in the process of receiving licensure. The participants were included and categorized as "new practitioner."

Design

A part of this research involved help from our co-investigators Dr. Caroline Mills and Dr. Kitty Foley, who joined our meetings periodically for extra assistance. Prior to the development of our interview guide, the student researchers met separately with our

co-investigators to develop an initial draft. Our advisor, Dr. Bill Wong, reviewed it from his perspective to better ensure our questions met the needs of our potential participants. Our advisor has extensive knowledge of our study population, and he provided us with a list of ten potential participants. We selected eight of these participants and our advisor did not influence our decision making in the selection process. As for the interview portion, each potential participant was interviewed by one of the student researchers via a semi-structured interview. The interview was between 45-60 minutes in length. We provided a copy of our primary interview guide via email at our participants' request if they needed it to follow along during the interview. Our advisor set up a Zoom meeting for us to conduct each interview. After each interview was completed, our advisor provided a sharable link to us to access the transcript for each interview in a Google Drive that was accessed by a secured password.

We created a recruitment post on CommunOT, which is a discussion forum moderated by AOTA. We also formed a recruitment post on DisabilOT, which is a Facebook group for OT students and practitioners with disabilities. Due to the fact that our advisor may also be an acquaintance to some of our potential participants, he assisted us in screening their eligibility for our study.

Data Analysis

After interviewing the participants, we utilized a data analysis software, Dedoose (www.dedoose.com), and collaborated with our advisor to create a coding process. The codes were used to identify recurring themes that were reviewed through a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a

dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We followed the six phases of RTA “(1) familiarize yourself with the data,” “(2) generate initial codes,” “(3) search for themes,” “(4) review potential themes,” “(5) defining and naming themes,” and “(6) producing the report” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In the first phase, we re-read the transcripts of the interviews and scrutinized impressions that stood out amongst the participants. In the second phase, we organized the data by chunking order to keep the data simple. During the third phase, we searched for common themes among our data in order to answer our research question. During phase four, we reviewed the themes and other information gathered in the study to determine commonalities. In phase five, we defined and named each theme. For phase six we generated a report using the Dedoose software which was useful to determine the participants responses that categorized each theme. The findings will be able to educate universities on how they can assist autism spectrum disorder students to transition from their programs and into the workplace.

The RTA method allowed us to identify common responses. It also allowed us to observe and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences that are found through single data. We can report the obvious or semantic meanings in the data, or we can interrogate the latent meanings, the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process allowed us to determine some possible gaps in literature.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

In our study, we dealt with ethical issues such as anonymity, informed consent, and other concerns related to Stanbridge University Institutional Review Board approval. We gave our participants a verbal informed consent agreement, an informed consent

signature form, and protected any identifiable data collected during the interview process. The verbal informed consent agreement was used to ensure that all eight participants had a thorough understanding of what was expected in the research study. Another consent form for videotaping was given, due to the interview being conducted over Zoom and recorded for data analysis purposes. If the participants decided to accept, and if the participant decided to withdraw from the study, we stated that it will not impact relations with Stanbridge University or the primary investigator. They were also told that they had the option to opt out of the study at any time. The semi-structured interview took approximately 45-60 minutes, participants were asked a series of ten questions. If at any point, the participants did not feel comfortable answering any questions, they were able to skip the question and move on. Confidentiality was taken into significant consideration for this research study, and any sensitive information such as name or personal address has remained confidential and de-identified by use of codes. We utilized the Dedoose software for our data analysis and collaborated with our advisor in the coding process. This included assigning codes to the data and identifying recurring themes that were reviewed through RTA. The de-identified information was stored in a Google Drive with a security password, to which only the student researchers and primary investigator had access to view. No data was displayed publicly or privately unless research participants provided consent to share their data or information to other future research studies. The study data, consent records, and Institutional Review Board documentations will be retained by our advisor for at least three years following study completion. The subject data list, contact information and video recordings of the interview will be destroyed immediately upon study completion.

Results

After transcribing the interviews, we identified three themes to describe the common barriers amongst the eight participants: accommodations, engaging with peers and mentors, and having a sense of belonging to the profession. Providing these students accommodations in their schooling and fieldwork and having mentors to guide them can help them have an easier time transitioning to the workplace. Furthermore, the barriers that should have been implemented could have also been affected by COVID-19. We also achieved demographic diversity as we had eight participants from United States, three from the mid-west, three from the east coast, and two from the west coast. In terms of gender, our sample is representative of the OT profession due to the population being majority female.

Accommodations for Fieldwork/School

Receiving necessary accommodations was challenging for most of the participants. Five participants reported that they received necessary accommodations to participate in school but three shared they were not supported with accommodations. One participant shared that only simple accommodations such as having noise cancelling headphones or more time for exams was provided, while other accommodations surrounding group work were not easily addressed. Another participant shared that their accommodations office did not show sympathy for their disability, and they were required to figure out their problems on their own without assistance from the school. Overall, the participants who were able to acquire the requested accommodations felt that they gained more confidence about performing at their greatest potential. The

accommodations are needed to reduce the risk of the participants falling behind in their education, career, and help with their overall well-being.

Participant 1 discussed their experience of receiving accommodations from their program as “like, you know, like a quiet space to take a test like noise cancelling headphones right if you need them. So those are very relatively easy to do. But other accommodations, like group projects, right like sometimes that's hard to navigate those group situations right? But you can't avoid working in groups in health care so right that wasn't reasonable, and I agree that that wouldn't work out, so I think that was totally fair.”

The same question was asked to Participant 3 about their programs offering accommodations “I was on the first phone call with the accommodations office and she told me you need to just figure this out and figure out what you need. You know it's a sin to be anxious because you need to give your anxiety to God, and I was like, okay.”

Accommodations for Participant 4 had “accommodations, and they were listed but for last 2 years, for the most part, except for, like a few here and there they're treated as optional.” Participant 6 discussed how they “really didn't give us accommodations at all. They put a lot noises, and that would be really distracting, and I got told I had to make eye contact in class...I would say that there was some people on the faculty who were really supportive. But I wouldn't rank the faculty overall as pretty supportive...I'm also in like an autism support group outside of school. But that's something I found for myself. But it's been very helpful.” Lastly, Participant 7 discussed how “the professors were very unsupportive with accommodations and tried to get me to not use them and things like that.”

Engaging with Peers and Mentors

When it came to discovering how the participants found support from mentors or peers, most mentoring came from fieldwork. All eight participants completed level 1 fieldwork, six out of eight completed level 2 fieldwork, and six out of eight finished a capstone. Other than receiving mentorship outside of fieldwork, four participants sought out networking opportunities with OT autism support groups. Finding support amongst peers was difficult for all participants. In addition, one participant also stated how COVID-19 could have influenced their willingness to connect with others and be part of other groups. Completing their program online did not give the students an opportunity to practice networking amongst their peers. When we asked our participants about their experience in engaging in extracurricular activities, all eight shared enjoyments of doing solitary activities and participant 6 discussed the enjoyment of “reading”, and commonalities from other participants stated a liking in “exercising”, “volunteering”, and “being on social media”.

Participant 1 discussed their study habits as being “more of like a lone wolf type of study. I mostly, you know, study alone. Study groups don’t really tend to help me out right.” Then participant 1 continues to discuss how studying with others is “a lot of like auditory processing. So, talking out loud about your thoughts, and that I don't know that just doesn't really work for me.” Asking Participant 2 about their experiences in their OT program they stated, “I come to school, and it's like all these like little cliques, and things, and I just don't fit in with anyone.” Participant 2 discussed their expectations of OT school being “for some reason I thought it would be better because we were like all pursuing the same degree. But I’m sure COVID-19 also played a huge role. We started

classes like online at first and then in person. My school has noticed that, like with my cohort, specifically like we're less friendly with each other.” On the same topic of COVID-19 playing a factor in partaking in extracurricular activities, Participant 3 stated how they “had a weird experience because of COVID-19. We had a hard time getting to know our classmates because of like split classrooms and partly virtual, but overall, I’m leaving my program with real friends.” Then, Participant 4 discussed a different perspective on their experience of them engaging with their peers as “not expect the amount of ableism...I was not expecting, like the lack of disabled perspectives in a profession that professes itself to be diverse, and all the wonderful things that they teach you in school as ideals about OT.” While engaging with their peers Participant 6 discussed how their experience was “people thinking that my diagnosis shouldn’t matter or like they wanted to be blind to it or say we’re all a little autistic, and I think that those kinds of microaggressions can be actually insidious.” Then Participant 6 discussed further on how “it’s always been hard for me like because my classmates would make study groups, and they’d only have to read like a chapter of the book. And I had to read the whole book because I didn’t have a study group. But I was sort of falling through the cracks with some of that.” Participant 7 struggled as well to connect with their peers and stated how “one instructor in particular told some of my classmates that I was autistic, and I actually had a bunch of bullying going on with that, and it ended up needing to get moved to a different class like a section of the class.” Participant 8 stated, like others, that “COVID-19 really put me back into my comfort zone, and then we went back to school for the last what month and a half, before our final field work. It was so awkward because

I was just done with everybody, like shell shock from being comfortable in my happy, independent place.”

Sense of Belonging

Of our eight participants, five shared that they do not feel a sense of belonging in the occupational therapy profession. The lived experiences that the students and practitioners shared displayed similarities, such as struggling to be part of a group. Four participants shared that they had some feelings of alienation that were caused by perception and discrimination. The students were being singled out, harassed by fellow students, and discouraged from using legally allowed accommodations. Some students felt discouraged because they experienced a lot of stigmas because of their diagnosis, which caused them to underestimate their capabilities eventually leading to self-doubt. Experiencing stigma from their peers brought down their self-esteem. This eventually led to a fear of being judged by others, causing them to feel isolated. Despite the participant's sense of not belonging in the profession, they still have a passion for being occupational therapists. Their passion for helping others, their work and volunteer experience, motivated them to be occupational therapists. Having connections with other autistic occupational therapists gave them the perseverance to overcome the obstacles and stigmas that they experienced because of their disability. Their perseverance eventually led them to pursue their dreams of becoming occupational therapists. Most of the participants in our study have worked alongside other occupational therapists helping others, and their work and volunteer experience motivated and found the job to be meaningful. The participants in our study enjoyed the hands-on experience of working

with patients, but also felt some disconnect from feeling a sense of belonging in the field of OT.

All participants were asked the question if they had felt a sense of belonging in this profession. Five of these participants answered “no” and Participant 1 stated how “it really helps to know that there are other people in the profession like myself.” Participant 3 discussed how they feel “very welcome if anything, I just feel really inadequate around them.” Participant 4 further discussed that “maybe once I'm out of school... but my capstone is helpful, and I hope that there is a shift and that at least my own little corner of the world that it's worthwhile.” Participant 6 discussed a general lack of sense of belonging and, “I think that's a key thing that I don't feel like I belong any less in this profession that I belong anywhere else in society. I just don't feel like I very much belong.” Lastly, Participant 7 stated that “I don't really have a sense of belonging for anything I like OT, and it's interesting. I want to keep doing it, but I don't have a sense of belonging really anywhere for anything.”

Discussion

Given the amount of time to collect this data, our advisor gave great insight when creating our interview guide and collecting data that may have been missed during the interviews. Meanwhile, our advisor only provided a brief overview of all pre-existing relationships he had with the potential participants during the participant selection phase because he did not want to influence our selection process. After we completed the analysis of our data, the influence of our advisor's professional relationships played a stronger role in our outcomes than we expected it.

As researchers, we acknowledge the importance of not causing potential harm to our participants. In the context of our study, an adverse outcome would have been either our participants dropping out of the OT/OTA programs they are attending if they were students, or leaving the occupational therapy workforce if they were OT practitioners when we were conducting participants' interviews. After discussing with our advisor, we concluded the following actions he did would be justified in research ethics- providing mentorship in professional development, connecting participants to other autistic OT students and practitioners, and providing information on OT social networks that these participants may not be aware of.

Because our advisors' connections have played a strong role in our outcomes, we must recognize that our advisor is working hard to make a positive impact in supporting other autistic OT students and practitioners in their career journeys. However, we also hope that the OT profession will realize that implementing holistic admissions practices is only the first step of many for OT to become a more welcoming profession for autistic OT students and practitioners.

Recommendations

This study highlights the need to establish effective solutions to educate academic faculty and employers on barriers that autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners face. There is also a need to further educate those in fieldwork educator positions on supervising autistic students. It is beneficial for professional associations to make diverse groups such as mentorship programs more accessible and available to autistic students to strengthen their sense of belonging in this profession.

Limitations

This study may have some potential limitations. These potential limitations may include our advisor being acquainted with the participants prior to our study, time restraint on data collection process, and COVID-19. Having our advisor acquainted with the participants either through LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram etc. prior to the study may be seen as a potential limitation. Although our advisor was not involved in the conducting any portion of the interviews, there still may be some biases in participants' data analysis.

The time restraint on the data collection process can be seen as a potential limitation. During this data collection process, the study was on a strict schedule for conducting the interviews and then transcribing the data collected. More time to code and analyze the data would have been beneficial to distinguish common codes and themes amongst the responses.

An unexpected limitation to the research was COVID-19 playing a factor in the participant's responses. Due to isolation from COVID-19 many of participants were impacted during their time in school and in the workplace. The participants discussed the difference it had made in socializing with peers, fieldwork experiences, and accommodations given by their schools. Although COVID-19 impacted many of our participants, this is an important aspect of the participants' lived experiences.

In order to potentially avoid these limitations in future research, it may be beneficial to have a longer period of time to analyze and code the data, especially for those who are still in the learning process and conducting research for the first time. Lastly, future research may want to take into account how COVID-19 may have affected

the admissions process, fieldwork opportunities, connections with peers or colleagues, etc. when interviewing autistic occupational therapy students and practitioners.

Conclusion

Practitioners in the field of occupational therapy value inclusion and strive to implement it at all levels of the profession. This research highlights the difficulties and barriers that some autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners may face while in school or working in the field. The responses given by the participants regarding why they chose the OT profession are a result from meaningful experiences. Through our research we found that five out of the eight participants felt they do not have a sense of belonging in the field. This is essential information to further explore identified solutions and better accommodations to ensure that autistic OT and OTA students can feel supported and accepted in the OT community. Educators, fieldwork coordinators, and national associations need to improve upon ways to be more inclusive. Additional research is needed to understand specific accommodations that can be utilized for autistic OT/OTA students and new practitioners, to help build confidence in their ability to contribute to the profession.

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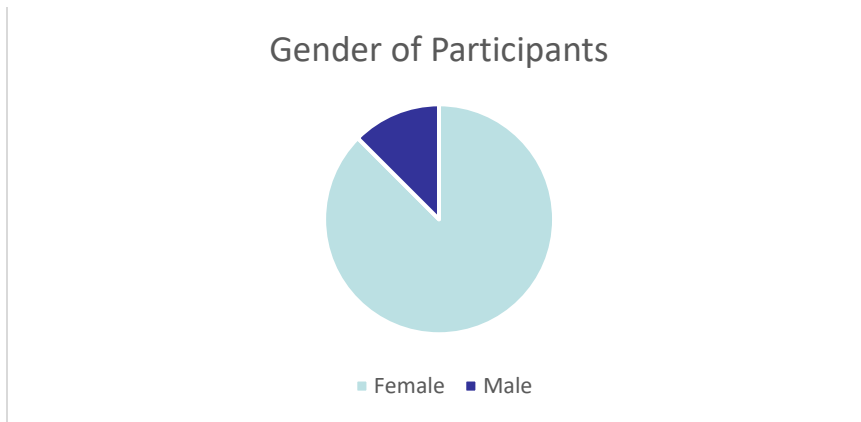
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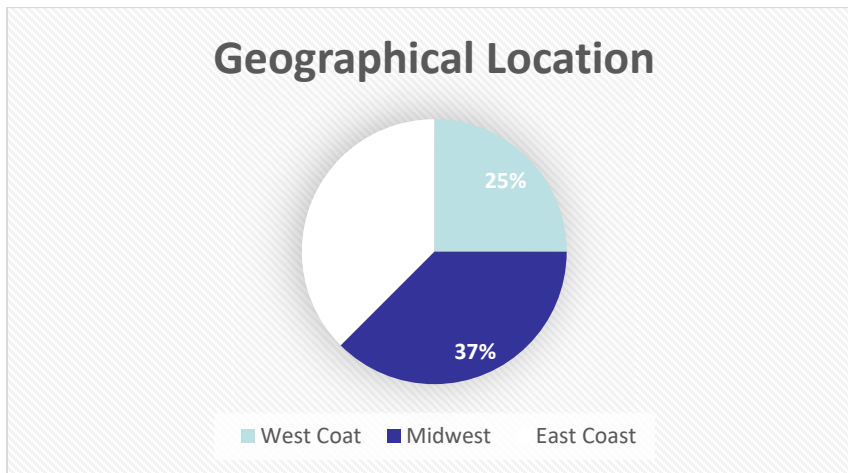
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Figure 1*Pie Graph of Participant's Gender*

Note: 7 participants are female and 1 participant is a male.

Figure 2

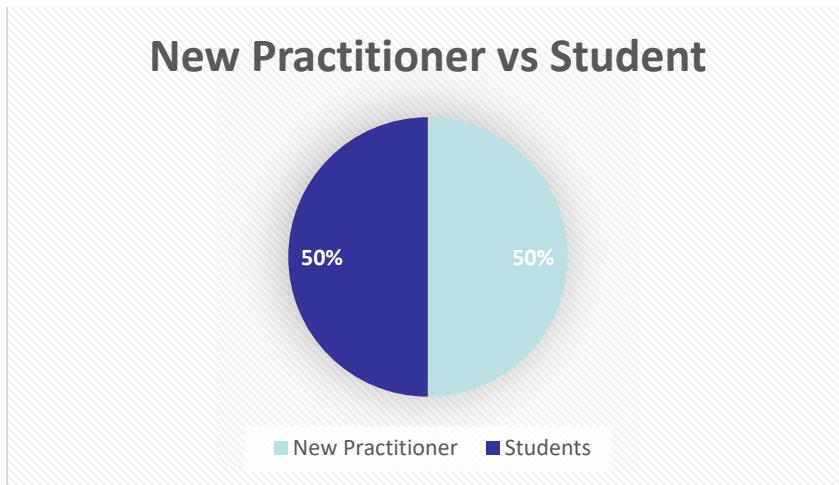
Pie Graph of Geographical Location



Note: This graph demonstrates the geographical diversity of our participants in the United States.

Figure 3

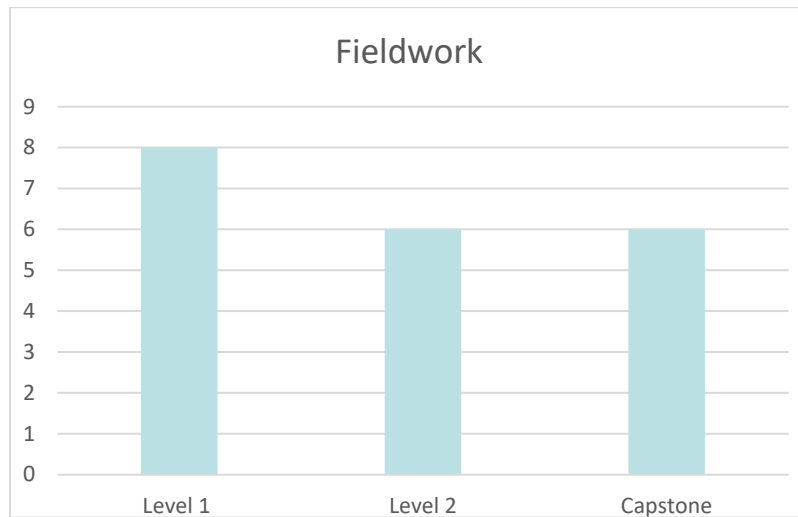
Pie Graph of New Practitioners and Students



Note: Four new practitioners and four students that participated in this study. Two of the new practitioners are newly graduated from their program and are in the process of receiving their licensure.

Figure 4

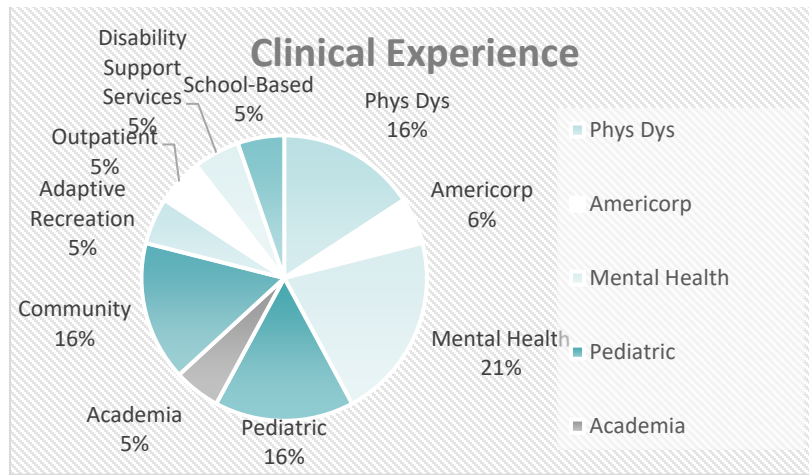
Bar Graph of Fieldwork Experience



Note: Eight participants completed fieldwork level 1, 6 participants completed level 2, and 6 participants completed a capstone.

Figure 5

Pie Graph of Clinical Experience



Note: Participants were asked what kind of clinical experiences they have and settings they practiced in.

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

Dear Dr. Bill Wong and Students,

The Stanbridge University Institutional Review Board has completed the review of your application entitled "Career journeys of Autistic OT students and new practitioners in the United States." Your application (#01MSOTRS001) is approved and categorized as Expedited.

IRB Application Number	#01MSOTRS001
Date	04/17/2023
Level of Review	Expedited
Application Approved	X
Conditional Approval	
Disapproved	
Comments	The requested Minor changes have been reviewed and confirmed as completed by the IRB. (04/17/2023)
Signature of IRB Chair	

Please note that any anticipated changes to this approved protocol requires submission of an IRB Modification application with IRB approval confirmed prior to their implementation.

Sincerely,
 Julie Grace, M.S., M.A.
 IRB Chair

Appendix B

Informed Consent



INFORMED CONSENT SIGNATURE FORM

Consent to Participate in Research

Stanbridge University Institutional Review Board

Title of Study: Career journeys of Autistic OT students and new practitioners in the United States

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Codes will be assigned to keep your identity confidential.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

- a. The purpose of this research study is to identify strengths and to classify the barriers that may be related to the academic institution, the faculty, the peers, and community support.
- b. This research study will be a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews due to the data being collected is subjective information seeking to examine lived experiences of Autistic OT students and new practitioners.
- c. This study is about seeking to inform educators and employers how to identify solutions and better accommodate for Autistic OT students and new practitioners during their journey to be successful in the classroom and in their practice.
- d. In this study, participants will be asked to take part in a 45–60-minute semi-structured interview that will take place on Zoom and be recorded. Participants will be asked questions about their personal experiences, schooling, clinical experiences, accommodation needs, etc.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS INVOLVED IF I CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY ?

We hope to discover new information that can help OT autistic students and new practitioners have the opportunity to self-reflect upon their lived experiences.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS INVOLVED IF I PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

The risk involved in participating in this study are the potential risk of data being breached and confidential information about the participants may be accessed. Measures will be made to secure confidential data that is stored in a centralized G-mail account with a passcode but we cannot guarantee against hackers.

WHAT DOES THIS STUDY INVOLVE? (TIME COMMITMENT, THE DURATION OF STUDY)

Your participation in this study involves 45-60 minutes of your time commitment. You are being asked to be liable for one session over Zoom for a series of 10 personal questions.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE STUDY

You may choose to stop participating in this study at any time. Your decision to stop will not affect: Your relations with the University or with the investigator, Dr. Bill Wong
All information given to the researchers will be deleted upon withdrawal

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY/DATA SECURITY (NO MORE THAN ONE SHORT PARAGRAPH)

During our interview process, all identifiable data from the audio recording transcripts will be de-identified and stored in a google drive in which only the student researchers, and primary investigator will have access to view. With participants' permission, any anonymous quotes from their interview may be used in future publications and presentations. No data will be displayed publicly or privately unless research participants consent to have their de-identified data or information shared for other future research studies. The study data, consent records, and IRB documentation will be retained by the Faculty Advisor for at least three years following study completion. The subject data list, contact information and video recordings of the interviews will be destroyed immediately upon study completion/following interview transcription.

WHO SHOULD YOU CALL WITH QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

Please contact the study team and principal investigator if you have any questions about this research study.

Independent Contact: If you are in some way dissatisfied with this research and how it is conducted, you may contact the Stanbridge University Vice President of Instruction, VPinstruction@stanbridge.edu, or the Stanbridge University IRB Office at irb@stanbridge.edu

Student Researcher: Nicole Alonzo

Phone Number: (909) 767-2926

Email: nicole.alonzo@my.stanbridge.edu

Student Researcher: Chrystine Angeles

Phone Number: (909) 333-8156

Email: chrystine.angeles@my.stanbridge.edu

Student Researcher: Nikki Saberi

Phone Number: (714) 686-2890

Email: nikki.saberi@my.stanbridge.edu

Student Researcher: Haley Vandeweg

Phone Number: (707) 480-1973

Email: haley.vandeweg@my.stanbridge.edu

Principal Investigator: Dr. Bill Wong

Phone Number: (615) 215-9012

Email: bwong@stanbridge.edu

DOES IT COST ME ANYTHING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

There is no cost to participate in this study.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

- a. I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I may have asked.
- b. I am 18 years or older.
- c. My participation is voluntary.
- d. I may withdraw from this study at any point.
- e. I consent to take part in the study.

Consent Item	Yes/No	Participant's signature
Video		
Voice recording		
Photography		

Participant's Printed Name

Participants Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

E-mail Address: _____

INDICATE YES OR NO:

I give consent to be audio-taped during this study.
 ____ Yes ____ No

I give consent to be photographed for this study.
 ____ Yes ____ No

I give consent to be videotaped for this study for purpose of retrieving data from any saved recordings resulting for this study.
 ____ Yes ____ No

I give consent for anonymous quotes from my interview transcript to be used in future publication and presentation materials resulting from this study.
 ____ Yes ____ No

Appendix F - Video/Photo Release Form

Institutional Review Board

Any person taking a video or still photograph for Stanbridge University related research dissemination must obtain a signed release form from all persons who are visibly recognizable in the video or photograph. Crowd scenes are exempt where no single person can be identified.

PARTICIPANT/PARTICIPANT CONSENT

I am 18 years of age or older and hereby grant the researcher designated below from Stanbridge University permission to photograph and/or video, my voice and likeness and to use my voice and likeness in photograph(s)/video for publication/ dissemination. I understand that my name will not be used in any publication/dissemination. I will make no monetary or other claim against Stanbridge University for the use of the photograph(s)/video.

Printed Name	Signature	Date

If Participant is under 18 years old, consent must be provided by the parent or legal guardian:

Printed Name	Signature	Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Research Question: What are the lived experiences of Autistic OT students and new practitioners when transitioning from school to the workforce?

1. Are you a student or practitioner?
 - a. If you are an OT student, were you an OTA before?
 - b. If you stated practitioner, how many years of practice experience do you have?
 - c. If student, are you currently on fieldwork or capstone?
2. When were you formally diagnosed with autism?
 - a. What is the process like when you seek your diagnosis?
 - b. (If over 18) What particular part of your life?
3. Did you disclose your diagnosis to anyone?
 - a. If you did not disclose it to anyone, why?
 - b. Was there anybody that made you feel safe?
4. When you were in OT/OTA school, did you receive help in school? (This includes access to reasonable accommodations, support services, connections to other autistic OT students and/or practitioners) and/or mentorship if participants require clarification.) If so, what are they? If not, what prevented you from receiving help?
 - a. How well did your faculty team (including your faculty mentor) support your journey to become an occupational therapist/occupational therapy assistant?
 - b. (If the participant is a practitioner) How did you adjust to the workflow and the transition from being a student to a practitioner?
 - c. (If participants need help to prompt their responses) Were you involved in any mentoring program through state associations or school programs?
5. Why did you choose OT?
 - a. Were there any barriers to the application process that made you hesitate from applying?
6. What were your expectations before OT/OTA school?
 - a. After joining your OT/OTA program, have your perceptions of OT changed?
7. What kind of clinical experience do you have?
 - a. For practitioners, what setting(s) have you practiced in?
 - i. *OT or OTA student: what volunteer, or past jobs have you completed? What setting(s) are your fieldwork and/or capstone sites in*
 - ii. *OTR or OTA: what setting(s) have you practice in as an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant?*
 - b. What were your expectations going into fieldwork?
 - c. Did you face any challenges during clinical placements (and capstone project site if applicable) at each of the different settings, if so, what were they?
 - d. What did you receive in school or clinical settings for accommodations?
8. During your time in school or work did you ever encounter a situation in which a person believed there were things you could not do because of your diagnosis?
 - a. If so, what was your response?
 - b. Did you believe there were things that you cannot do because of your diagnosis?
9. What was your experience of meeting and connecting with your classmates?
 - a. Did you prefer to study in a small group or study alone? Did you participate in any extracurricular activities with your classmates?
 - i. When you were in school did you participate in extracurricular activities?
 - b. What are things you do for fun to help destress from school curriculum?
10. Do you feel you have a sense of belonging in this profession?
 - a. Did you join any SSOTA groups, or a part of any AOTA groups, PTE (Pi Theta Epsilon), any online groups?
 - b. If no, why not?
 - c. If yes, what were your experiences like?