Perspectives of Occupational Therapy Graduates on Sentinel Events During Transitions to Practice: A Phenomenographic Study

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Abstract
Research suggests new occupational therapists face many positive and negative experiences during their transition from student to therapist. Current research lacks information regarding sentinel events that occur during this shift. An exploration of sentinel events as interpreted through the life course perspective may inform how to support the transition to occupational therapist. The purpose of this study is to (a) determine sentinel events that occur during the transition to practice for new occupational therapists and (b) the impact of these events. A phenomenographic approach guided a semi-structured interview with 14 recent occupational therapy graduates. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was conducted. The results show themes of (a) becoming independent, (b) feeling isolated, (c) navigating the unknown, (d) having supports, and (e) developing new identities. Sentinel events (e.g., navigating a new health diagnosis, orienting to a new workplace) were identified in graduates’ personal and professional lives. Understanding sentinel events in new graduates’ lives can inform curricular and workplace changes to facilitate the transition.

Keywords
academia, transitions, experiences, graduation

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During the transition from student to occupational therapist, new graduates often encounter novel experiences and challenges that impact their transition to practice (Hodgetts et al., 2007; Robertson & Griffiths, 2009; Toal-Sullivan, 1999). An understanding of sentinel events (Nalder et al., 2012) that occur during this transition may illuminate the pivotal experiences of new graduates and inform educators and workplaces on how best to prepare and support new graduates entering the workforce.

**Experiences of New Graduates**

Previous research indicates that the transition from student to practicing occupational therapist is not without some struggle. A phenomenological study during which semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight occupational therapy graduates in Australia showed that new graduates experienced challenges juggling unpredictable workloads, assuming their new identity as occupational therapists, and establishing meaningful relationships with clients (Seah et al., 2011). A similar study involving focus groups with graduates from New Zealand by Robertson and Griffiths (2009) indicated that many new graduates struggle with their new role and related expectations as they transition to occupational therapists, with some finding that their team members had a more concrete idea of the occupational therapist’s role than they did. Some new graduates also reported feeling a divide in their perception of the occupational therapist role in their workplace and their team members’ expectations, which negatively impacted their confidence (Robertson & Griffiths, 2009).

This sentiment is echoed in research by Hodgetts et al. (2007), who used surveys, focus groups, and telephone interviews with 62 students and graduates of the occupational therapy program in Alberta, Canada. The authors indicated that many new graduates reported feeling a discrepancy between their employers’ expectations of them and their abilities on graduating, which led to feelings of frustration (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Many new graduates in these studies also reported feeling incompetent because of a lack of technical skills and felt that their skill set on graduation was inadequate for their occupational therapist role (Hodgetts et al., 2007; Seah et al., 2011). A narrative literature review of 21 studies by Moir et al. (2021) categorized many of the above challenges new graduates face into four subgroups: decision-making, the context of service provision, managing caseloads, and self-doubt.

The occupational therapy literature suggests that these new experiences have varied effects on the transition of new graduates to practice. For some graduates, facing challenges led them to seek out their own supports through networking with other occupational therapists and establishing mentors (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Others reported returning to their occupational therapy coursework to better understand the material during their transition to practice (Robertson & Griffiths, 2009). Hummel and Koelmeyer (1999) studied the questionnaire responses of 74 new Australian occupational therapy graduates and found they were able to identify supports and factors that helped them manage new experiences in their workplace, including continuing education opportunities, the supervision of experienced clinicians, and the support of loved ones, which helped increase their satisfaction with their transition. These findings were echoed in a phenomenological study of six occupational therapy graduates in Ghana by Opoku et al. (2022) as well as a study of 202 survey responses from American graduates by McCombie and Antanavage (2017). Patterson and D’Amico (2020) confirmed in their scoping review of 14 studies that supportive relationships with supervisors, colleagues, and clients influenced self-efficacy and, in turn, enabled the transition to practice.

New graduates also reported taking additional time both in and outside of work hours to supplement their knowledge and learn more about their role (Hodgetts et al., 2007). In addition, the results
of a phenomenological study of six new Canadian graduates from the occupational and physiotherapy programs demonstrated that developing time management skills to schedule time for life outside of work was beneficial in the transition to practice (Tryssenaar & Perkins, 2001).

**Gap in Literature**

While literature exists on the experiences faced by new occupational therapy graduates during their transition to practice, most studies focus on general experiences. At present, there is a lack of information on the specific, discrete events that occur during this transition process that new graduates feel impacted their transition to practicing occupational therapists.

An additional limitation of available literature on this topic was the lack of information specific to new Canadian occupational therapy graduates. Articles identified through the literature search examined the transition experience of graduates in countries such as Canada, the United States, Ghana, New Zealand, and Australia, with only one of the nine studies containing data focused strictly on Canadian occupational therapy graduates. Educational requirements and curricula for occupational therapy programs vary internationally, and as such, data collected from new graduates globally may not accurately reflect the experiences of new Canadian therapists. For example, in Ghana, the minimum required level of education for participants in the Opoku et al., 2022 study was a Bachelor’s degree in occupational therapy, while new graduates in Canada require a Master’s degree in occupational therapy to practice (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 2022).

**Sentinel Events**

Sentinel events are traditionally defined as events that lead to serious patient injury or death (The Joint Commission, n.d.). However, this definition has been adapted for life course research to include a broader definition of significant events (Nalder et al., 2012). A sentinel event is defined by Nalder et al. (2012) as an “important event, either positive or negative, which arises in the life of an individual and requires investigation to assess its timing, precursors and impact (both positive and negative) on aspects of the life course” (p. 1383). For the purposes of this study, a sentinel event was determined to be an event that (a) is discrete with a defined start and end and (b) has precursors and impacts on the individual’s life course.

**Objective**

The aim of this study was to determine the specific sentinel events that new graduates feel were significant during their transition from occupational therapy student to occupational therapist and their impact on the transition to practice. An understanding of sentinel events as defined by the life course theory may be used to inform occupational therapy curricula and workplaces with occupational therapists to better prepare and support new graduates as they enter practice. Life course theory seeks to understand how the interplay among human lives and historical time, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency influence a person’s life (Hutchison, 2011). Therefore, the research questions we aimed to address were (a) what are the sentinel events experienced by recent, practicing Canadian occupational therapy graduates in their academic training and professional practice, and (2) how have these influenced their transitions from student to occupational therapist?

**Method**

**Design**

This study was conducted using a phenomenographic approach (Marton, 1986). Phenomenography was developed in education research where students’ perceptions were used to make improvements to curricula (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016; Marton, 1986). This design was posited as
appropriate to support our research questions, given the potential impact on occupational therapy curricula. Phenomenography aims to qualitatively understand the different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, and understand phenomena (Marton, 1986; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013). Phenomenography postulates that individuals may experience different parts of phenomena and that even those who experience the same parts may have varying perspectives, leading to the cultivation of different meanings (Han & Ellis, 2019). Therefore, a phenomenographic approach best aligns with this study’s aims as it elucidates the unique ways in which graduates perceive the phenomenon of sentinel events during their transition. An examination of the similarities and differences among graduates’ sentinel events during the transition to occupational therapist will be guided by the life course tenets.

This study was reviewed by and received approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Board (University of Toronto Research Ethics Board #40152). All study participants provided informed signed written consent before participation in the study.

Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher’s experiences, beliefs, and values may influence the research process. As such, a reflexive stance was taken to identify how our assumptions, experiences, and beliefs may influence our research. All authors are occupational therapists; AD and EF were enrolled in a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy program at the time of this study and completed all interviews. The senior author is an occupational therapist with 30 years of experience in clinical, research, and academic occupational therapy. All authors hold a curiosity about the transition from graduate student to therapist; AD and EF hold this perspective as student occupational therapists and recent program graduates while AH holds space as an education scholar and instructor who wishes to support this transition from an academic viewpoint. The research team met biweekly throughout data collection and monthly during data analysis to reflect on how our position impacted process and interpretation.

Study Population, Recruitment, and Sampling

The inclusion criteria for this study were occupational therapists who: (a) were registered with a provincial occupational therapy regulatory college, (b) graduated from an accredited Canadian University Master of Science in Occupational Therapy program from 2018–2020, (c) had at least 3 months of experience working as a registered occupational therapist, (d) were able to communicate with researchers via email, and (e) had access to a device with which they could participate in a virtual interview. Participants were excluded if they were non-English speaking. Purposive and snowballing sampling were used to recruit participants. We aimed for a sample size between 10 and 15, as research documents a sample between 10 and 30 as adequate for a phenomenographic study (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013). Participants were recruited through direct email from their occupational therapy program, advertisements on social media, and word of mouth. All candidates were screened by a researcher via phone for eligibility. If the candidate met the inclusion criteria, a member of the research team reviewed the information letter and consent form via phone.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews lasting about 60 min took place over Zoom at a date and time that was convenient for the participants. All interviews were recorded. The interview commenced with demographic questions inquiring about gender, age, education history, number of years in practice, province in which they were practicing, and current and previous practice settings. Interview questions focused on asking the participants to reflect on their experiences of first starting work as an occupational therapist post-graduation and to identify the sentinel events that shaped this transition (Entwistle, 1997).
The role of the researcher was to offer an interpretation of the respondents’ answers immediately to ensure a mutual understanding was reached between the researcher and participant and to determine if further probing was needed to clarify the participant’s perspectives (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

Figure 1
Data Analysis Flow Diagram

The data analysis process used to inform theme development is outlined in Figure 1. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Two out of the three researchers (AD & EF) reviewed each transcript extensively and performed line-by-line coding to identify initial codes that described how the participants perceived their transition experiences and any sentinel events that occurred, referred to as utterances in the dialogue (Khan et al., 2019; Marton, 1986). Thematic analysis was completed to identify key patterns in the data following the procedures by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers used the steps outlined in the six phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes, which the researchers defined as “interesting features of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 88) were identified from the data and organized into themes using inductive thematic analysis, which is defined as a data-driven analysis. Codes were combined to identify overarching themes, and themes with strong supportive evidence were refined and clearly defined. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes were reviewed at two levels. Data extracts in each theme were analyzed to ensure they formed a cohesive pattern and were clearly interconnected to confirm the data supported the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were not decided by strictly using the most prevalent data points and also took into consideration interesting ideas related to the research question that were brought up by a minority of the participants at the researchers’ discretion (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each theme was then compared to the whole data set to ensure they adequately represented the ideas and key concepts outlined throughout all the transcripts (Braun & Clarke,
2006). Themes were then defined to ensure they captured the interesting points in the data set and told a story about the data while being distinct enough that they had little to no overlap (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The sentinel events that comprised each theme were then analyzed through the lens of life course theory to better understand their impact on the life trajectory of new graduates.

Significant repetition in codes was noted during the data analysis process, indicating that data saturation had likely been achieved. The research data was triangulated through member checking, which involved emailing each participant a list of themes and an explanation for each theme to ensure their experiences were accurately reflected in the themes (Harvey, 2015). The findings of this study were compared against existing literature on this population to verify the validity of the themes.

Results

There were 14 participants (N = 13 female, N = 1 male) from three provinces and territories. Table 1 provides a description of participant demographics. All of the participants were registered with a provincial regulatory college and had experience working as a practicing clinician (average = 6.3 months). Significant repetition in codes was noted during the data analysis process, indicating that data saturation had likely been achieved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Participant Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>N = 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Gender | Female: N = 13
Male: N = 1 |
| Age | Range: 24–30 years
Mean: 25.7 years |
| Prior degree level | Bachelor’s degree: N = 12
Master’s degree: N = 2 |
| Current practice setting | Home and Community: N = 7
Motor vehicle: N = 5
Acute care: N = 2
Rehabilitation: N = 1
Health insurance: N = 1
Workers’ compensation: N = 1
Long-term disability: N = 1 |
| Previous practice settings | None: N = 13
Auto insurance: N = 1 |
| Time spent in practice | Range: 3–18 months
Mean: 6.3 months |
| Fieldwork experience in current setting | Yes: N = 6
No: N = 8 |
| Location of practice | Ontario: N = 12
Quebec: N = 1
Northwest Territories: N = 1 |

Five themes emerged from the data: (a) becoming independent, (b) feeling isolated, (c) navigating the unknown, (d) having supports, and (e) developing new identities. These themes describe the nature and impact of sentinel events experienced by new graduates during their transition from student to clinician. Under each of these broader themes, specific sentinel events and ongoing experiences were
identified as recounted by the participants. The participant quotes were minimally edited for readability. The participants confirmed the themes via member checking.

**Becoming Independent**

A theme that emerged throughout the interviews was gaining independence, which the participants reported as appearing in both their personal and professional lives. Becoming independent in the context of graduates’ personal lives is primarily related to independence in their living situation and increased responsibilities, such as financial management and decision-making. One participant recounted the experience of being in control of their purchases after gaining employment:

> Trying to get more of that independence and transitioning into having real money for the first time because when you’re in school, obviously, a lot of that money is just going toward paying bills. So, finally actually having the money and being able to decide what you’re going to do with where you’re living and making plans and things like that. (02)

Though the theme of increased independence and responsibilities in the personal lives of new graduates frequently arose in interviews, the participants listed few specific sentinel events, as many events were described as ongoing. For one participant, their orientation to their new workplace was a sentinel event that reinforced the level of independence and responsibility they would be expected to demonstrate as a clinician. This participant described the orientation process, saying:

> It was definitely kind of a shock. You go from being a student to a very gradual . . . assumption of responsibility. You start at the beginning, usually shadowing, and then by the end, you have your own little caseload, but for this it was like, you know, here is all the rooms, here’s the equipment, here’s the referrals, go ahead. And, even my manager would say “okay, you had orientation yesterday, pick up a shift on the floor,” so I think it was definitely a bit of a shock. And you know, no one checking your documentation anymore and I could forget something and no one would ever know. (04)

Certain workplace experiences encouraged independence among the new graduates. One participant who reported feeling unsupported by their first workplace explained that the lack of support encouraged them to take ownership of their education by setting up virtual practice sessions with a peer:

> Taking ownership of my learning, I was very independent. I had nobody else to learn from. Another peer of mine also got hired, so she and I would be on Zoom every night discussing our caseload and practicing administering assessments on each other and really navigating this together, so I think one thing I got out of that was friendship and using my resources; it helped me build a lot of self-efficacy because I’ve never worked in this practice setting before, I’ve no idea how things work, but I can figure it out because school has equipped [me] to figure things out, yeah, helped me build a lot of self-efficacy. That was a positive thing. (10)

Some of the participants also described sentinel events that challenged their sense of independence and led to feelings of doubt. One participant discussed the death of a client as a sentinel event that resulted in feelings of doubt and a need to consult more with others:

> One of my clients actually passed away, so that is definitely memorable, just because when you’re transitioning you feel like everything is your fault. I guess it places more doubt on you, so then
you constantly feel that you further need to consult your supervisor and your colleagues, and it shifts in that sense, I guess, where you feel a bit more, not dependant but there is more doubt I think that plays there. (03)

**Feeling Isolated**

The theme of feeling isolated was prevalent throughout the interviews, and especially among those practicing remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic was cited as a major contributor to these feelings of isolation, as many of the participants working in community and outpatient contexts found themselves working largely from home and unable to interact with colleagues as frequently. Identifying discrete events was challenging, as the participants described events that were ongoing and did not necessarily reflect the definition of a sentinel event. Nonetheless, the participants noted that starting a new remote job was associated with loneliness. One participant described the remote working experience:

Before the pandemic, they said people would go into the office and work out of the office, but now, I can’t just hang out there and bounce ideas off of each other and kinda work there. So, that’s kind of a negative thing in the sense that, like I said before, there’s certain people at the company I literally don’t know what they look like and have never had to speak to them over the phone or anything, so it’s just a bit isolating. (02)

The isolation of remote practice did nonetheless support the development of practice competencies and increased their feelings of independence. One participant working virtually reported of their experience:

I found, especially with the MVA world, it’s already very isolating, it’s just an isolating field that you’re working mostly from home anyways besides seeing people. There isn’t an office to go to, so with that it’s been quite difficult. Just trying to figure that out . . . you feel like because it’s so isolating, you still can’t have that back and forth with somebody. And I guess it changed my identity in the sense that I used to be constantly trying to cooperate with other people but now you have to change your mindset, you can’t really go into an office and constantly collaborate, so I guess that’s made me more of an independent person. (03)

**Navigating the Unknown**

The theme of navigating the unknown reflected the participants’ varying experiences transitioning from student to clinician during evolving circumstances in their personal, academic, and professional lives. The participants described personal and social sentinel events that were stressful because of the unknowns of the timelines, responsibilities, procedures, and clinical knowledge required.

One participant recounted navigating a new health diagnosis during their transition to practice as a sentinel event and described the method by which they developed strategies that worked for them:

I’ve been more open with both of my supervisors, just letting them know about it, but I know it’s difficult to do, I didn’t go into details, of course. I think that’s been helpful. I think even just being in this field where I can pick my own schedule, that’s been helpful. I guess just the way I schedule my days, just to kind of say “okay, I’m going to start my day at 9 o’clock and I don’t need to work all the way until five.” I can take breaks in between the days, which is good, and I just schedule myself like that so that I can actually last for the full day and do all my tasks. (03)
Regarding the sentinel event of looking for work, one participant discussed the various challenges they had to navigate:

I think that progression of looking for jobs was very stressful, and that was back in April, so starting to look for a job, kind of trying to figure how to make ends meet. You know, toward the end of school, you’re kind of starting to run low on money, so it’s like trying to be able to set something up quickly enough. (14)

Another participant described their experience during the sentinel event of beginning a new job in a practice area with which they were unfamiliar,

The transition itself, it was a few days of training before I was kind of just on my own. It was exhausting. We didn’t learn anything about [current practice area] in school, so I really had no idea about the population, I didn’t know the difference between all the different conditions, I truly had no idea and, you know having to do my own research at home, asking the physios questions and kind of taking my time reviewing charts and looking things up and what the acronyms meant, I think the first month it was very tiring and overwhelming. (06)

One participant recounted their experiences navigating the move to a new city and described how their experience in the program facilitated this transition:

It’s mixed feelings, so I think a little bit of apprehension, but also some excitement for new opportunities and new possibilities. I think, definitely, some of the advantage of working in a space where you went to school and you have those connections, like the network, so I was kinda nervous about finding that network here in [a new city], but I was able to do my last placement virtually at a hospital site here in [a new city], so I think that kind of helped with building the network. I was able actually to find my current employment through that connection. (12)

A participant recounted a moment where they problem-solved a situation to communicate more effectively with a client, and described how the positive feedback from the client’s family helped:

Near the beginning there was someone who came into hospital, and her chart said, dementia, cognitive impairment. And, I saw a lot of people not even trying to talk to her. So, I got a pocket talker, we had her hearing aid, we put the pocket talker headphones on top of that and I was screaming into the pocket talker, honestly the hospital probably heard, but she was answering, and she was with it. She was oriented, and then I called her daughter to check; her daughter just said, “oh my god, thank you so much for actually taking the time to talk to her. I know my mom and I know that people get confused in the hospital, but she’s not as bad as they say she is.” Anyways, she was so grateful to me for just getting a pocket talker, and I feel like that’s my job, that was the first time I had a family member be really grateful for something I did, which was really nice. (04)

**Having Supports**

The theme of having supports was reflected in all of the participants’ responses, and they described that social support in their personal, academic, and professional lives helped them manage challenging aspects of their transitions by mitigating the negative impacts of managing challenging client referrals or cases and beginning full-time work. However, limited discrete sentinel events were identified in this theme by the participants. Instead, ongoing experiences related to having supports were reported to build new
graduates’ networking, knowledge base, and confidence as they received feedback from their supervisors/mentors to improve and reaffirm their practice knowledge and reasoning.

One participant shared how having the support of a manager enabled them to navigate a sentinel event of a challenging client referral:

What happened is the hospital discharge was assigned to me. I was kind of overwhelmed. There was one of the managers, an OT manager, you know, I called her five times in one day. But she was super nice about it. She made me feel like I could handle it and figure it out and that even though she had a lot on her own plate, ‘cause she’s an OT and a manager, she was still willing to talk me through those things. So I think having the support of others really helped with that. (03)

One of the participants reported that having support from their partner in their daily life during their transition facilitated the sentinel events of starting full-time work:

Moving out of my parents’ house, for me, was a positive thing, and living with my boyfriend has been a really positive thing, too, and while I adapt to now working full time and focus on that transition, having a good stable relationship with him allowed me to not have to worry about that, or not even have to worry about cleaning or doing dishes or making dinner when I get home if I’m exhausted from work because I know someone else is gonna be able to help me. So that’s been really nice, because I know that if I was doing it all on my own, it definitely would have been harder. More pressure, I think. (01)

Having a mentor during the initial stages of practice, while not a sentinel event by this study’s definition, was also cited as an essential support in helping new graduates transition to practice. One new occupational therapist explained how more formal mentorship arrangements might have helped them feel more comfortable reaching out for help during the program:

I think the program did a good job at setting up those mentorship opportunities, like a second-year mentor, or the faculty mentors, and then your mentorship groups. I feel like, for me, I didn’t maybe use those to the best of my ability. I didn’t feel like my second-year mentor also made much of an effort, and the faculty mentors I think [were] really self-directed, like if you didn’t reach out to your faculty mentor you weren’t really gonna get any mentorship. So I wonder if that could be a little bit formalized, a little bit more structured, acknowledging that some students might not know how to reach out or know when to reach out, so just making it a little bit more structured at first to really show the benefit. (12)

**Developing New Identities**

The theme of developing new identities represented a shift in how the participants regarded themselves and their roles. Many of the interviewees described developing their identity as occupational therapists and gaining an understanding of both the occupational therapy role and their own values regarding their careers.

One participant explained how the sentinel events of graduating and starting a job catalysed a shift in their identity:

I mean, the graduation itself and starting a new job is a huge change in and of itself. I guess that kind of changes your view of yourself, shifting from that identity to the identity of a full working adult, so just that kind of perception of yourself changes I guess. (07)
Another poignant sentinel event reported by a participant was during their first job on graduating, which helped them come to terms with the type of occupational therapy role they felt best suited them:

I think even when I started OT school I knew that I didn’t want to be working as a clinical OT, and I think that mindset really solidified after my first clinical OT job, which I only stayed at for 2 months prior to switching over to a non-clinical role, and I think it was really about kind of wanting to see what growth do I have in an OT role, where do I go from here, and I didn’t really like the practice area I was working in. I felt like I was doing an injustice to my clients by continuing to practice in that area, so I sought other roles that better aligned with my non-clinical interest. (10)

Another participant shared how their attitude toward their company changed after their attempts to self-advocate for a manageable caseload were not well received:

I just felt like it was such a business-oriented company that it didn’t really matter, and I think that’s changed my attitude toward work as well, whereas now I just, I kind of have a don’t care attitude as much about things. I’m trying to find another job because it’s just not what I’m looking for in a work life balance. (11)

Another participant described how a sentinel event with a client who contacted them outside of business hours taught them to establish professional boundaries:

We do have to set that professional boundary, I’m not your daughter, I’m not your kid, I’m not your niece. I’ve told them, after 4 pm, if you want to call me, you have to call me in my work hours and that’s it, and it is what it is, I’m still professional I still have to have those boundaries with you. (09)

One participant recounted the event of moving back with family and how they balanced their work as a therapist with their role in the household,

Coming back from living on your own, to living with your parents, is also something ‘cause my parents tend to rely on me for a lot of stuff which, before I starting work and starting my masters, I can be there for them, right, ‘cause you have so much spare time. But now I find after coming back it was like okay, if you need me to help you with something, you have to tell me ahead of time, ‘cause sometimes I have work in the evenings, so kind of adjusting back to that. (09)

This study aimed to determine sentinel events that new graduates feel were significant during their transition from occupational therapy student to occupational therapist. Sentinel events were identified and grouped into five themes: (a) becoming independent, (b) feeling isolated, (c) navigating the unknown, (d) having supports, and (e) developing new identities. While our research questions were intended to focus on professional events during this transition, the data indicated that this period was also associated with many personal transitions.

Discussion

The participants reported that sentinel events occurred in their personal, academic, and professional lives. While most previous literature focuses on academic and professional transitions following graduation (Hodgetts et al., 2007; McCombie & Antanavage, 2017; Toal-Sullivan, 1999), there
are also personal transitions with which students and new graduates can be further supported. These personal sentinel events included moving to a new city, gaining financial independence, moving in with loved ones, and receiving a health diagnosis. All of these can be considered impactful experiences rarely discussed in transition to practice literature (Hodgetts et al., 2007; McCombie & Antanavage, 2017; Toal-Sullivan, 1999). Academic institutions and workplaces that employ occupational therapists must consider personal events that may co-occur during the transition to practice and provide opportunities for more support.

The professional sentinel events identified are consistent with earlier literature; however, this study provides more context. Many of the participants, particularly those within 6 months of graduating, expressed feeling unprepared for practice because of the learning curve they encountered in their new roles. This sentiment aligns with prior research findings, as graduates in the first 6 months often report feeling overwhelmed and lacking confidence while transitioning to practice (Hodgetts et al., 2007; Morley, 2006). The participants in our study indicated that positive sentinel events relating to client interactions reinforced feelings of competency and the development of their identity as an occupational therapist. The participants also reported that negative sentinel events, such as experiencing a client death, having difficult client interactions, and working in a practice area that did not align with their interests, encouraged them to reflect on their practice.

The participants’ experiences reflect the core tenets of life course theory, as many of them recounted that their initial transition to practice influenced their careers and practice in many ways. Themes of linked lives, where interpersonal relationships impact the trajectory of graduates’ life courses, can be identified in the sentinel events the participants experienced (Hutchison, 2011). An example of linked lives was demonstrated in the interviews when the participants mentioned human relationships that influenced aspects of their personal lives during their transition. One example is of a participant who cited their boyfriend as a support during the transition period, reporting that moving in together helped alleviate the strain of full-time work by splitting domestic duties. Some of the participants also mentioned human relationships that assisted them with their work during their transition to practice. One participant described a supportive manager assisting them through a challenging event in their transition, leading them to feel more supported during a stressful time.

The life course theory also recognizes human agency, which is defined as the ability to make decisions and take actions to shape one’s life trajectory, which can be seen in the experiences of the participants (Hutchison, 2011). An example of human agency was demonstrated by one participant who identified that starting work for the first time provided them with the autonomy to make financial decisions and, therefore, was a sentinel event for them. The participants also identified that environmental constraints, such as having limited resources or social support at work, influenced them to exercise human agency in seeking resources to enable their transition to occupational therapist. For another participant who perceived limited agency in their workplace, advocating for manageable caseloads helped guide their decision to change workplaces. Human agency was also depicted by a participant who sought out non-clinical work opportunities after realizing that clinical work, which they experienced during fieldwork and in their first job, did not align with their interests.

Factors such as personal and professional relationships and opportunities to exercise autonomy in school and work influenced the unique ways the participants viewed how sentinel events impacted their transition to practice. The themes identified during this study can inform areas where curricular and workplace changes can be made to support graduates better. The theme of becoming independent supports
these recommendations. Curricular additions can assist new graduates in better understanding practice areas, and employers and educators can encourage feedback sessions between students and clients, as well as provide students with a greater variety of clinical and non-clinical placements to recognize the range of occupational therapy practice. Students may also benefit from discussions with recent graduates about their experiences transitioning from student to occupational therapist, which is supported by the theme of changing identities.

Furthermore, mentorship was fundamental in facilitating the transition, echoing previous literature findings (McCombie & Antanavage, 2017; Toal-Sullivan, 2006). The participants suggested structured mentorship before graduation, which relates to the theme of having supports as being instrumental during the transition process, with mentors taking the initiative to guide students rather than mentorship being self-directed. In addition, the participants suggested assigning mentors based on their field of interest, which may provide professional networking opportunities for graduates who relocate or who have limited opportunities to connect with colleagues because of their area of practice. Students and new graduates may also benefit from mentorship during school and in the workplace, respectively, from senior clinicians on how to manage challenging situations they may come across, such as patient deaths or negotiating workplace accommodations, as these were examples of stressful situations the participants encountered when navigating the unknown. Senior occupational therapists can provide mentorship in the school curriculum by discussing strategies to manage financial independence while securing work and setting professional boundaries to achieve work-life balance, thus reducing the stress these sentinel events evoked during the transition process. Furthermore, new therapists who work remotely in fields such as motor vehicle accidents would benefit from networking opportunities to meet and build rapport with colleagues to enhance transition to work and counteract feels of isolation.

**Limitations**

The province of Ontario is overwhelmingly represented by the study sample, as the majority of the participants studied and/or practiced in Ontario. As a result, the findings of this study may not be as generalizable to new occupational therapists working in other provinces. Another limitation is the time spent in practice by the study participants. On average, the participants had been practicing for 6.3 months, with many of the participants having spent 6 months or less as practicing occupational therapists. According to the stages of practice identified by Morley (2006), many new graduates in the first 6 months of practice are still within the “euphoria and angst” stage, which our data appears to reflect. More representation from participants in later transitional stages may yield additional findings and should be considered in future research.

In addition, many of the participants identified that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted their work, which is in line with current literature on the impact of the pandemic on recent health care graduates (Lee et al., 2022). However, the pandemic did not meet the definition of a sentinel event that was established for this paper, as it was ongoing because of the timing of the study. Thus, the impacts of the pandemic on the graduates’ transition have not been fully elucidated.

**Conclusion**

This phenomenographic study offers an understanding of the sentinel events that impact a graduate’s transition to occupational therapist. Five emerging themes and an array of sentinel events across personal, academic, and professional contexts were identified. A notable finding is that personal sentinel events co-occur with professional events. Mentorship, additional training in self-advocacy, and opportunities for continued professional development may support new graduates during this transition.
References


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