

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Sarah McGinley

Hannah Spencer:

Hi everyone and welcome to this podcast recorded and produced by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.

This is one of a series of podcasts which really focus on hearing and sharing the career narratives of our diverse workforce and highlight a whole range of possibilities in occupational therapy.

My name is Hannah Spencer and I'm an occupational therapist that's had the absolute pleasure and privilege of facilitating and capturing these conversations with members of our occupational therapy community.

Cool. So let's start with some introductions. Do you mind introducing yourself and role or roles?

Sarah McGinley:

Sure. So, my name is Sarah McGinley.

I'm an occupational therapist, admissions tutor and lecturer at the University of Southampton. I'm also a part time Doctorate of Education student.

So, yeah, few roles, few hats.

Hannah:

Well, thanks for joining me today, Sarah.

So the purpose of our conversation is around your career journey and your experiences of getting to this point. And I kind of have used the Kawa analogy, the analogy of career journey as river to kind of guide the questions a bit.

Sarah:

Lovely.

Hannah:

So let's start right at the beginning. What drew you to occupational therapy? Can you pinpoint the source of that river?

Sarah:

I can absolutely pinpoint the source. I wish I knew where this person was, because I've thought many times about returning and just saying thank you.

So I was travelling in New Zealand and I was working for a litigation company in administration, and little did I know that I was working with occupational therapists because they weren't called occupational therapists, they were called case managers. And one day, completely out of the blue, one of the case managers literally just sat on the edge of my desk and just said, 'I think you'd be a good occupational therapist'. And I just went, 'oh, what's one of them', not knowing... that typical story of stumbling across the profession. I was 26 at the time and she told me, and it was like someone had just switched a light on in my brain. And, yeah, I did some reading, did the rest of my travelling, came home and applied for university and that was the start of my journey.

So whoever that young woman was, I often think about her and wish that I could reach out and say thank you.

Hannah:

It's awesome, isn't it, thinking that we often meet people, have those little conversations that have a huge impact on our lives and then never see the people again.

Sarah:

I know.

Hannah:

So, thinking about your kind of career journey to this point, what's kind of contributed along the way? Where have the tributaries has been?

Sarah:

That's a good question.

So I guess I was quite traditional in terms of I did my three years training, came out and did a band five basic grade rotation, predominantly in physical health. And then about a year into being a band five, I saw a very, very tiny advert, it was literally about this big, in the back of the BJOT by a little known to me at the time charity called the Elizabeth Casson Trust, promoting a Master's programme in Boston at Tufts University. And I had known about it. It was the reason, actually, I chose Oxford Brookes University at the time, but never in a million years thought I would actually get to go. I just saw that they had a connection with Tufts. Thought yeah, that's cool. So it was between Canterbury and Brookes, and that's why I went to Brookes ultimately.

So, yeah, fast forward four or five years and there was this little advert and it said it was fully funded. I thought, wow, that's a bit of an opportunity. I thought well, shall I apply? Shan't I? And I guess that was the that was the first point in my career where I really where I really realised you just got to chuck your hat in the ring and just see what happens and just push and see what comes back.

And so, yeah, I was amazingly chosen to be the scholar that year, to go to Boston on a fully funded Masters, which is huge privilege, huge honour for a year. And so got to do my Masters in Boston for one whole year, completely funded books, education fees, flights to and from. I even managed to the end of the programme, go travelling for about six weeks up the west coast of America. So it was all thanks to the Elizabeth Casson Trust and their vision at that point.

I concentrated... at that point... it's 2006 and I was really interested in traumatic brain injury and return to work. And I'd had an experience as a band five where I'd gone to the job centre and it was quite a tricky experience for myself and the service user I was with. And I came away feeling really

disillusioned and really disappointed. And that kind of triggered my curiosity and my need to want to do something around... Hang on, could OT be working in job centres? Could they be doing something? And it's a long time ago and I suspect things have moved on massively since then.

And so that was what I focused on. And then came back to the UK and pitched that to the Trust that I worked for, who were hugely interested but as is often the way, there was no money. So it kind of got shelved for a few years and I carried on my journey, went through again the traditional kind of bandings. Became a band six, did a neuro rotation and then became a band seven in stroke. I set up a stroke OT service on the ward that had not had OT before. So I often used to joke that these green people had landed. Who are these green people? But that was an amazing experience and that was definitely a contributory.

And then I took a break to have my first daughter and returned to clinical practice, but in palliative care. So I worked for a specialist palliative care team in a hospice and I did that for about two years. And then this opportunity again and just a little advert as I think about it, one of these just little things that just came up in my inbox, that Southampton University were looking for clinical skills trainers. It wasn't in OT, it was across health sciences. So basic life support, hand hygiene, like core skills of all health professions. And I thought that looks all right, I'll give that a go. I did it. It was one day a week and then literally just made a bit of a nuisance of myself with the OT team. Just came and found them and just sat there and hi, as you do, and got talking to them and they were like, oh, well, we've got an opening for a secondee.

So I actually ended up doing that four days a week and moving out clinical practice. And it was there that, again, a complete visionary Theresa Job, who's amazing, she was our programme lead and I got chatting to her about my shelved project from six years previous, probably at that point, and she just went, 'why don't do a role emerging placement for students? Give it a go'. And that's where it started. I set up a role emerging placement with Southampton Job Centre and students ran sessions there with service users that were referred into the Job centre who had invisible disabilities, so predominantly traumatic brain injury, mental health conditions, and they did a really successful job and that ran for about two or three years.

And then I took some time out again and had my twin boys, who are now eight, and my secondment ended sadly at that point. So I went back into clinical practice for a few months in the community setting and then again, another little advert came up at Southampton for a permanent position as an educator. Again, I threw my hat in the ring coming at it, knowing that this particular institution prefers educators to be educated to a doctoral standard, which I didn't have, so I just thought I'll give it a go anyway, chuck my hat in. So at the time, my boys were nine months old. I was very sleep deprived and I had the interview and they said, we'd like to offer you a job, but you'll need to do a doctorate. And sleep deprived me went, yeah, okay, that's fine. And here I am, gosh, how many years later?

So that was in 2016, so seven years later. Now I'm five years into my doctorate.

So, yeah, that's kind of my journey.

Hannah:

Brilliant. Thank you for sharing that.

I'm thinking about that river. I always think about the visual in my head and I think, blimey, that river leaps across the Atlantic.

Sarah:

Yeah, it certainly does. Yeah, absolutely. It's definitely a pivotal moment, that, for me, like I say about just thinking, what's the worst that can happen? The worst that can happen is someone's going to say no or like what you've got, but you're not quite there yet, so go away and do this. And I guess that's the way I try to tell this to students as well, is like, what's the worst that will happen if you do this? And will you regret not doing it?

Hannah:

Absolutely. Just taking the opportunity.

Sarah:

Yeah, definitely.

Hannah:

How has your environment around you kind of enabled or restricted that career journey?

Sarah:

So I guess having a hugely supportive network, family, friends, is massively important and I appreciate that privileged position that I come from, where I do have that support and I have that network and I guess people that believe in you and that just say, go for it. I'm first generation university in my family, so people were hugely proud, but didn't necessarily understand or have the skills or knowledge to support to support me on that journey. I wouldn't say it was I guess it's difficult, isn't it? Was it a barrier? I don't think it was. I think my parents particularly were just like, you can achieve, you can do whatever you want in life. So I think that was certainly an enabler. I don't believe that being first generation was a barrier, but I do often think about because now I'm an admissions tutor and my doctorate is centred around admissions and the process, and that's completely I appreciate that's inextricably linked to who I am and my own experience and my own journey. On paper, as a 26, 27 year old, I had no experience, I hadn't studied for nearly ten years, had really rubbish A levels, didn't really know what OT was. I'd had a coffee with an OT, literally, and that was it, really. So on paper, I wasn't really a good bet. And so I reflect on that a lot in terms of it's not just about the academic skills or the professional skills that you come with, it's about the motivation, it's about the intrinsic energy that you bring.

And I guess up until the point when I came to do my training, I'd done lots of stuff, but never really with joy or with love, you know what I mean? It's like I was a bit lost, I didn't really know what I wanted. And I guess people, when I went to train as OT, I could almost see people be like, here she goes again, do you know what I mean? It was like, it's another thing, another thing that she's not going to finish or that she's not going to complete. And that's fine, because I had this long history of being a bit flighty, going off travelling, not really knowing what I wanted to do. But it was when I came to do my training that I realised I really want this and it brings me a lot of joy and brings me a lot of love and it means a lot to me.

So I guess that was really pivotal and that came from, I guess when I reflect came from within; it came from that narrative of just go for it, you can do whatever you want, you can be whoever you want. So I guess when we think from an OT point of view in terms of that doing, being, becoming, belonging, without even knowing it, that had kind of helped shape me, I guess, through my childhood.

And then I guess it is having those people along the way. I can think of people. And again, I did reach out to the admissions tutor from Brookes not long ago, actually, because part of my journey

and my doctorate, I just needed to say thank you to her. And so I did it's probably this random person emailing me, but I just felt like I needed to say thank you because it was like... you were pivotal at that point in getting me to where I am now. And then I think if I think about people along the journey, there's role models, isn't there? There's people that you go, yeah, you taught me X, or, you helped me believe in myself, or you helped me go, yeah, you've got this, give it a go, when you don't necessarily believe it yourself. And we all know impostor syndrome is really real and we all know that we need people along our side to go, yeah, it's real and it's hard, but just do it. So I guess in each role that I've had every step of the way, there's always at least one pivotal person that I could pinpoint as that inspirational person.

And I guess now I'm thinking about it, I'm still in touch with every one of those. So that's nice.

Hannah:

So I guess leading on from that, what about supervision as a kind of pillar in that support for you?

Sarah:

Supervision? My experience of supervision is very positive, I have to say, particularly in clinical practice, it's like really all the way through my training, even when I worked in the hospice where I was just on my own, I was the lone OT and I really struggled because you know what it's like, you need to find your tribe, don't you? You need to find your clan, as it were. And so that's when, at that point, I reached out to the South East regional group and became a member of that committee because I just felt like I needed that connection with other OTs and I was really missing it. And I reached out to another OT in practice and we gave each other peer supervision, which was really helpful.

But, yeah, all the way through clinical practice, certainly it's been prioritised and it's always been drilled into me that it's really important, but not just professional supervision, that space to be able to talk about other stuff. You obviously have your clinical supervision around the communities that we're working with, but then actually what's also going on for you and how is that impacting the work that you're doing? And having that kind of reflexivity to be courageous, I guess, to say, you know what? I'm not all right at the moment, or this is really challenging, or I'm really struggling with this, but always having being lucky enough to have supervisors again, to give you a safe space and to be able to talk about that.

And I guess in education, we've been reflecting on this as a team, we don't have formal supervision and... We have lots of informal... We're a really great team and we're really close, but there isn't formal supervision and I don't know, I miss it. It's something that I think we need to introduce and I think we have a responsibility to do that, not only to ourselves, but to the students that we're working with. And we obviously have teaching observations and feedback on how we're doing in that sense. But because I don't work clinically anymore, I often worry that I'm not current and I just wish there was more hours in the day. I'm working full time in education, I'm admissions tutor, I'm doing my doctorate, and I feel like the missing piece of the puzzle sometimes for me is that I don't have my foot in clinical practice so much anymore. And that's the bit for me that hopefully I would like to get back to.

Hannah:

So what about boulders along the way? What have been the challenges for you, Sarah?

Sarah:

I guess I'm my own best critic, I probably see myself sometimes as a bit of a boulder, but again, just trying to push through that and just go, chuck your hat in and see what happens. What's the worst that can happen? Be brave, have some courage. I guess being a cisgender female, taking time out to have a family while it was amazing, and I don't regret any of that, and I absolutely would not change any of it. I felt a bit lost, I guess, in terms of my identity and becoming a mum and then going back into work and where do I sit? And oh my God, I'm not doing a good job in either camp; I'm not being a good mum and I'm not being a good therapist and all of those... I swear to God, we have an extra gene, the G gene I call it, the guilt gene, and it's about releasing, I guess, that guilt. So maybe that's a bit of a boulder, actually now think about it, guilt is a bit of a boulder for me personally.

And I guess, making that transition from clinical practice to education, I really knew where I was in clinical practice, I felt really secure. It's like putting on a nice comfy pair of slippers. I know where I am here, I know the systems, I know the processes, I know the procedures, I might not always agree with them, but I know what they are and know how to navigate them. And then I came into this world of education and I was like, oh, my goodness, this is like a whole new world that I've got no idea about; new language, new style of working... just dipping my toe into things like research, understanding things like authorship and stuff like that. What is going on? What are you talking about? I don't understand. Why is everyone getting so...? I appreciate I understand now. Why is this even a thing? You know, can we just all work together and be this, you know, utopian workforce? And so, you know, it was it was kind of like a whole new world. And I guess that was continues to be a bit of a boulder because I still have to navigate that system, all those processes, on a daily basis. And I feel, as an admissions tutor, particularly, negotiating those barriers is tricky, not just your institutional ones, but then you've got the RCOT, you've got HCPC in terms of recruiting people into their profession, and I feel like sometimes that they are unnecessary barriers. And as one person, it feels like it's difficult to change that.

Hannah:

Do you feel that you've been able to bring your authentic and best self to occupational therapy?

Sarah:

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I think, yes, but I think we all wear masks on a daily basis, so there are certain things, of course, that people won't know about me in a professional space. But I do feel that I can be my authentic self, that I can be my true self because of what we talked about, because of those colleagues that create that safe space. Certainly within occupational therapy, I would say. And again, I guess that's something about feeling comfortable with your tribe and that connection. I guess, within the institution that I work in now, sometimes I feel a bit intimidated by the hierarchy, I guess. It's so hierarchical and there's so many hoops to jump through in terms of how you're assessed, how you're viewed, I guess, in terms of your ability as an educator, as an academic, as a researcher... That's quite challenging, I think, to unpick.

Hannah:

So back to that kind of career river. Have there been points where your river has kind of changed course or changed direction in a way that you've not really anticipated?

Sarah:

Oh, yeah, 100%.

I absolutely would never have imagined the girl with two Ds and an E at A level doing a doctorate.

Hannah:

Wow.

Sarah:

And sorry, that makes me the emotional.

Hannah:

It's amazing.

Sarah:

Oh, I guess it's that narrative, isn't it? Even though I had a really strong family connection, who would constantly say, you can do whatever you want, the education system did not say that. So the education system repeatedly told me, you're not academic enough, you're not clever enough. Whether they used those words or not, that's what I heard.

And now I reflect on it, and I hope this doesn't happen for my daughter or my sons is I kind of got pushed down this road, particularly a gender stereotyped road that I didn't want to go down. Which is why I think I then ended up on this journey of not succeeding because it wasn't meaningful, it wasn't purposeful. And now I can see that so clearly.

What I really wanted to be, I guess, when I was a kid, was I wanted to be a writer. I loved writing and loved reading and I wanted to be a journalist, actually wanted to hear people's stories, I wanted to tell stories. So it's like, wow, if someone at that point has been able to channel me and say, what about this over here? This is about narratives. But I was just constantly told, you're not academic enough, you can't do that. Why don't you go and literally, this is what I ended up doing, 'why don't you go and be a nursery nurse?' So it's really gender stereotype and that's... I know, it's a valuable career and profession, gosh, I've had my three children go through excellent nursery nurse educators, but it wasn't for me, it wasn't purposeful, it wasn't meaningful. And I feel like it was a complete, if I'm honest, it was a bit of an 'I don't really know what to do with this young girl sat in front of me. Let's just push her off down this vocational route because she's not academic enough'.

So, again, that stays with me as an admissions tutor. That's really powerful in terms of when I'm sitting opposite somebody, interviewing someone and thinking, what is your story, what's your narrative and what are you bringing here? And thinking about the questions we ask as admissions tutors, and I use that as a collective. The questions we ask are so important, but they're obviously viewed through a particular lens. And again, I come back to the rules of the game and power and all of those things, and so those questions, we have a responsibility to make sure those questions are not excluding people. I think.

Hannah:

What's been most important or helpful for you in terms of development and progression in occupational therapy?

Sarah:

Again, I think I have to come back to Elizabeth Casson Trust, bless them, they've been absolutely instrumental in where they've been instrumental in going, we believe in you and we believe in what you've got to say is important or what you've got to look at and research is important. So I guess the Elizabeth Casson Trust have been instrumental at that point through my masters and then along the way. I've been really hugely privileged that they've supported me four years now into my doctorate, so helping pay my fees, which, again, I get that gives me a place of privilege and I have to acknowledge that, but just really grateful for that and also the spaces that they provide. So the mentorship programme, the leadership programme that they offer, the inclusion space that... they've recently just again given me an opportunity to apply for more money to look at the student voice in the admissions world, particularly around minoritised students in admissions, which I'm hugely excited to start. Haven't started it yet, but it's in progress and it's going through ethics and all those sorts of things, because my doctorate doesn't have a student voice in it, and I regret that massively. It's around admissions tutors perceptions and views of the world, which again, I appreciate... Now, if I go back five years, I might change my proposal. Again, comes from a place of privilege and comes from a place of knowing the rules and actually, I really like to hear the student voice in that. So I've worked really hard to kind of try and get that within the curriculum that I work in and working with undergraduate students to hear that student voice. And now Elizabeth Casson Trust are funding some work which is really helpful. So it's definitely, definitely them, 100% them.

Colleagues, hugely helpful. Informal, formal, just thinking about my journey in this last year, some really helpful colleagues who have taken time out of their day to meet and chat and for no reason other than we see you and we hear you, and that's really valuable. No agenda on their part, there's absolutely no gain for them, really, other than hopefully feeling that altruistic 'I've helped someone, mentored someone along their journey' and again, that's why I am really keen to give back and pay it forward with the mentorship scheme and things with Elizabeth Casson and stuff. So I think that's really important, that you don't just take from this system that we actually actively return and we give back. They have been really helpful and colleagues have been really helpful.

And I guess doing a doctorate outside of OT has been really helpful. So my supervisors are not occupational therapists, no one on my programme is an occupational therapist, so it's really helped me kind of see the world and broaden my vision, really, but also shout as loud as I can about OT within that area. And I think I really passionately believe, and you know that I believe in this Hannah; as OTs, we're brilliant at telling other OTs about what we do, but they already know what we do, they already know how great we are, they already know how brilliant the profession is and the philosophy of seeing people as occupational beings, they already know that. But people outside of OT don't know that and they need to know that. And we can't continue complaining that no one knows what OT is if we just stay within this echo chamber of our own safe bubble. And I get that because it feels safe, we have to challenge ourselves and push ourselves to go out and talk about the work that we do and that it has value and it's transferable.

Hannah:

Absolutely.

What do you wish you'd known as an early career OT or prior to joining the profession? What would you say now to your early career self?

Sarah:

It's a big question.

Hannah:

Yeah, it's a big question.

Sarah:

I'd absolutely say be brave 100%. I'd absolutely say push the door. Even when you think it's closed, push it. I'd say throw your hat in the ring. I'd say that you literally have a golden ticket in your hand, so use it and go and see and do and be and become all those things. I would say just be, just be brave and see everything that happens as an opportunity. And even when it's a big boulder and you don't know why it's there, at that point it will become clear, and you will know later on why it was there. And it will be absolutely pivotal. It will change the way you view the world, how you look at things. That's what I would say. Be brave.

And I guess also, don't be afraid of this, of tears, because that will happen. Sometimes you'll expect it. Other times, you'll be like, whoa, where did that come from? Like, now, where did that come from? No idea. And that it's okay. And you just have to just make sure that you keep safe and that you have someone that has your back or people that have your back where you can go, I don't know what's going on, but I feel this, and I don't understand. And someone can help you unpick it, definitely.

Hannah:

Is there anything else you'd add to anything we've talked about today?

Sarah:

I don't think so. I think just what I was saying there about boulders. And actually, sometimes it's those... we know this, don't we, as therapists? It's those really tricky moments that become the most pivotal and become the most seismic in terms of the way you see the world, the way you think, the way you move forward. Because when everything's rosy, when everything's all just ticking along, I don't know, there's something about those moments that will stay with you, and you will learn so much from them, and they will help you help others as well, who then you might encounter along the way who experience not the same, and you can never sit there and say I understand completely what you mean, but you might be able to share your experience and say, this happened, this is where I took it, or have you thought about this? Or have you thought about it, painting it in a different way?

I know that I can be a bit Eeyore about things sometimes, and I have to fight that. I have to go, okay, let's think about this differently. Let's paint this picture differently. What will this bring to me? And sometimes you have to sit with the hurt and the pain. Don't you have to sit there and feel a bit wounded and feel a bit hurt by it? But then it's what you do from there and how you take that with you. And I guess you carry it with you, don't you? Metaphorically, you carry it. And if you can use that experience for your own development but also for others, then that's really powerful.

Hannah:

Ultimately, it's what makes us who we are.

Sarah:

Yes, definitely.

Hannah:

So a quick fire, finish the sentence kind of question to finish with.

Sarah:

Okay.

Hannah:

Being an occupational therapist is...

Sarah:

Good one.

So I really do think being an occupational therapist is having a golden ticket 100%.

I think being an occupational therapist is a lifelong journey. It sounds cliché, but I think it's a lifelong journey into discovery of yourself, of the communities that you work with.

And I think being an occupational therapist is like being a kid in a candy shop. You can literally go, oh, shiny thing, and go and have a look at that shiny thing and stay there for a bit and then decide, oh, there's another shiny thing over there, and you might stay longer in some areas than others. And that's okay.

But that, for me, is the lovely thing about OT is that you can write your own script, I guess, if you have the courage to do that.

Hannah:

Thank you, Sarah. Thank you.

Sarah:

No worries. Thank you so much.