

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder experience deficits in social-emotional ranging, nonverbal communicative behaviors, and developing relationships. Therefore, it can be difficult for students with autism to participate and engage in a classroom setting, much less a college classroom. With the increasing rates of diagnosed autism in 2018, the number of students with autism going to college is increasing. This paper outlines the Photovoice methodology and how it was used to choose the photo used in this study. A semi-structured interview was conducted to better understand the experiences of the student in the photo and to determine which accommodation would best suit this particular student and other students with autism in higher education.

In the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in students with special needs entering college. However, the symptoms associated with special needs diagnoses can make it almost impossible to function in a higher education classroom setting. In conjunction with this idea, the prevalence of students being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder has increased greatly within the past 40 years. In 1980, the Centers for Disease and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring had reported that 1 in 10,000 kids are diagnosed with autism. In 2018, this number shot up dramatically to now show that 1 in 59 children are being identified

with having the disorder (Baio, 2014). Additionally, the American Council on Education has stated that between the years of 1978 and 1991, the number of students with learning disabilities or special needs entering university has risen from 2.2% to 8.8%. This figure is continuing to increase (Heiman & Precel, 2003). Based on these numbers, it is logical to conclude that many students with autism are entering a higher education setting. However, the symptoms of autism include deficits in social-emotional ranging, nonverbal communicative behaviors, and developing and maintaining relationships (McPartland, Reichow, & Volkmar, 2012). This can make it

extremely difficult for students with autism spectrum disorder to function in a classroom.

When accessing the disability services website of Indiana University, it stated that students with disabilities should “call or visit” the office of disability services for students within their junior or senior year of high school (Indiana University, n.d.). However, some students with disabilities may not have the social skills to talk to someone who could assist them. This can make it difficult for these students to access accommodations that could be necessary for their enrollment and education. Along with this, accommodations may not always accompany students to success. According to Mader and Butrymowicz from The Hechinger Report, only about a third of students with disabilities, including ADHD and autism, who enter a four-year college or university will graduate in eight years (2017). However, this is not because these students are unable to handle coursework or grasp academic content. It is often due to the lack of support and help where it is needed. I will be conducting a semi-structured interview with a student diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder currently attending college. Through transcribing, coding, and analyzing the content, it can be better understood how students with autism spectrum disorder are supported by accommodations present in higher education classrooms. The questions answered in this study will be: What accommodations for students with autism spectrum disorder in higher education should be given? Which accommodations are most applicable to those with autism spectrum disorder in college classroom settings?

Literature Review

To understand how accommodations could help students with autism in a higher education setting, it is important to first understand the symptoms associated with autism. According to the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5, 2013), individuals with autism spectrum disorder will experience difficulty in social-emotional and noncommunicative behaviors. These could include having normal “back-and-forth” conversations, eye contact, understanding gestures, as well as difficulties in creating, maintaining, and understanding aspects of relationships (McPartland et al, 2012). These symptoms can make it extremely difficult for students with autism to focus, comprehend, and actively participate in a higher education classroom.

Students with special needs are shown to have more difficulties in humanities subjects in which they are expected to read longer passages and write longer texts. They also prefer visual and oral materials more often than neurotypical students (Heiman & Precel, 2003). This can prove to be a problem considering that liberal arts colleges, such as Indiana University, require classes that apply humanities aspects in order to encourage broader thinking. Although liberal arts requirements are considered beneficial because they allow the discovery of unknown interests and expands the student past their major (Bain, 2012), these classes can ultimately hinder a student with special needs from achieving success. Students with special needs also tend to prefer more oral and visual studying techniques, while students without disabilities lean towards written studying techniques

(Heiman & Prechel, 2003). This can make it difficult for students to write and comprehend notes during lectures, as this heavily depends on writing and reading. Professors can tend to move quickly through subjects, which can be a hurdle for students with special needs and autism, as it can be difficult for them to keep up.

However, academic support for students with autism spectrum disorder is present within some college campuses. Retrieved from the Indiana University Bloomington website, it is stated that the following accommodations are offered for students with autism: the providing of an instructor's lecture notes or a note taker, study guides for tests, longer verbal response times from students, the ability for important exchanges of information to be done in written form instead of verbally, including short breaks during class for the students, allowing "social buffering" objects such as books or music, and allowing sunglasses, ear plugs, and headphones to help students deal with sensory overload. Other accommodations include providing alternate writing instruments for tests and assignments such as the use of a computer instead of hand-writing, allowing work assignments to be done at a slower pace, pairing with a peer-mentor and providing hands on learning models and visuals, and open communication with the student, such as directly asking the student if they are overwhelmed and if they would like to leave the classroom when it appears that the student is overwhelmed (Wheeler, 2014). These accommodations can prove to be beneficial in a student with autism's education process. However, these accommodations are not provided to every student with autism. It is difficult to determine which accommodation a

student with autism or special needs should receive. Should there be a cut off for students of certain severities? How do we know which accommodations will be most beneficial for a particular student? This is where open, honest communication with the student and their parent or guardian is necessary and pivotal in a student's success.

Section 504, part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects students with disabilities within education. In Section 504, "the law defines a person as disabled if he or she: has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activity, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment. 28 CFR Sec. 36.104" (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Because of this law, students who have autism or any other disability in higher education have the right to request accommodations that they may need. Section 504 specifically says that "a free and appropriate education must be made available to all qualified students with disabilities. The educational needs of students with disabilities must be met as adequately as the needs of students without disabilities" (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). The section includes options for accommodations, such as extra time when taking exams, services such as tutoring after school, and exceptions may be made based on specific student needs. However, even though Section 504 exists, many professors and education systems may not provide proper accommodation to students with disabilities. This is mainly because they do not understand what accommodations each student will need to receive due to every disability presenting in different ways between each student.

Methodology

Photovoice is a process in which photographs are used to better understand life. Through using content analysis techniques, photovoice can further comprehension of what is occurring within the photo. In this study, one photo is being used to represent a student with autism spectrum disorder. The photo is of a page of notes that belongs to the student diagnosed with autism. In the photo, it can be seen that only half of the page is filled with notes that were taken during a finite math class. The notes are brief and simple; there is little content that would help the student understand the material. The picture of the notebook is being used to show the student's experience in a higher education setting and show the general public the struggles students with special needs may experience in a modern classroom setting. The showing of the notebook makes the photo personal and relatable to students who also participate in a higher education classroom.

The process of conducting a semi-structured interview is derived from Alshenqeti's review of interviewing as a data collection method (2014). A semi-structured interview "allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses" (Alshenqeti, 2014). This study asked the student represented in the photo questions concerning her experiences and thoughts on the accommodations she has received thus far during her higher education. The focus of this study was on the expression of positive or negative responses to questions provided relating to accommodations made for the student. This interview was transcribed. The process of coding

the observations into usable data is derived from Gorden's study on basic interviewing skills (Gorden, 1998). The coding categories included the negatives and positives that the student has associated within themselves, the courses or professors, the classroom, and the accommodations. Relevant words and phrases were underlined, and these underlined fragments were given an identification number. These identification numbers were placed in the appropriate cells of a coding sheet in which the columns represent the positives or negatives, and the row headings represent the student, the professors, the classroom, and the accommodations. An analysis was done by considering the amount of statements the student had said that ended up in each category, determining if the student's experience surrounding accommodations has been more positive or negative, and examining which accommodations should be more implemented.

Results

Relevant words from transcription of the interview with the student with autism in higher education were aligned with whether they were associated with a positive or negative view of the student herself, her courses/professors, her classrooms, and the accommodations she received or the accommodations the interviewer questioned her about.

During the interview, the student used the word "accommodations" nine times, five of which were in a positive context and four of which were negative. She used the word "student" positively once and negatively three times. She said either "courses" or "professors" in a positive context one time, and in a negative context twice. She also used the word

“classroom” twice, both of which were positive.

Discussion

The accommodations this student receives at her college currently includes receiving 200% time on exams and being allowed to take it in a separate room. The student states that her finite math class that she had to withdrawal from was too hard to follow. Similarly, she stated that her textbook did not provide enough step-by-step material. What can be seen through these statements is that this student needs material to be broken down for her at a deeper level than is currently being provided. The accommodation of a peer mentor or a tutor could be beneficial for this particular issue, as they would be able to break down material that the professor may not have time to in lecture. The student reacted positively to the idea of a peer mentor. However, the student seemed to not have past positive experiences with a peer mentor. She stated that the assistant did provide her with help, but not exactly in the right places. The idea of a peer mentor in a higher education classroom could be adjusted, such as making sure that the student and the peer mentor are properly paired, and the student feels comfortable enough to ask questions when needed. The student also responded positively to being allowed longer response times when asked verbal questions, allowing important exchanges of information to be done in written form, and being provided extra time to finish assignments. The student did not have any trouble with the professors or the physical classroom setting, and even said that college classrooms feel more engaging to her.

A trend is seen throughout the interview: it was very hard for this

student to fully say she would like any accommodation because her idea of a “college student” was someone who did not need accommodations and could work independently. She said that “it would be awkward with an adult helping an adult... adults expect adults to be responsible for themselves.” This raises the idea of needing to make accommodations for college students with autism more normalized so that this student and many other students do not need to feel this way. The reality is that these students do need the help, but the setting of higher education makes this student feel as though she does not deserve it. Due to the rising number of autism diagnoses, the likelihood of those with autism entering higher education is becoming greater, meaning the need for accommodation is increasing. It is important for all college campuses to allocate more resources to promoting the accommodations they offer.

Conclusion

A “one size fits all” approach to accommodations will not work for those with autism spectrum disorder (National Disability Authority, 2015). The accommodations each student will need differs and can change as they grow older. The interview that had been conducted and the conclusions made are only an example of what a student with autism in higher education may benefit from. However, as discussed, there are accommodations that have been found to be beneficial for many students with autism. The conversation of accommodations in college needs to be more normalized and all students should be educated about it so that students who do require these accommodations do not feel uncomfortable receiving them.

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