Support Services for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education

Bunnie Claxton, Russ Claxton, Deanna Keith, and Russ Yocum

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify the factors that impact learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a postsecondary setting. The central research question is: What factors of the disability support services offices impact learning in university students with ASD? The subquestions include: (a) How do students with ASD describe their experiences with the University's disability support services offices? (b) How do University faculty describe their role in supporting students with ASD? (c) What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as having a positive impact on student learning? (d) What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as lacking or ineffective? This single case study included six student participants with autism spectrum disorder and four disability support services office faculty members from the University. Data were collected via individual interviews, an online focus group, and documents/archival records. Data analysis consisted of categorical aggregation, development of naturalistic generalizations, and development of themes.

Statement of Originality

The current research has been the basis of a presentation and poster, but it has not been published elsewhere and it has not been submitted simultaneously for publication elsewhere.

Overview

Due, in part, to accommodations through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), many students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have demonstrated greater achievement at the secondary school level and have expressed a desire to pursue higher education (Roberts, 2010). Increasing numbers of students with ASD are enrolling in higher education learning programs (Gelbar, Shefcyk, & Reichow, 2015). Since an increasing number of students with ASD are pursuing higher education, it is important for university faculty and staff to understand the systems necessary to help this student population successfully transition into the postsecondary setting, and to retain these students through

Bunnie Claxton, Ed.D., Liberty University.
Russ Claxton, Ed.D., Liberty University.
Deanna Keith, Ed.D., Liberty University.
Russ Yocum, Ed.D., Liberty University.

program completion. Therefore, this study focused on factors that impact learning for students with ASD in higher education.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify factors that impact learners with ASD in a university setting. Exploring the perceptions of students with ASD and support services faculty is crucial to gaining a comprehensive understanding of what factors impact learners with ASD in higher education. A case study design was utilized because it allowed investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within a real world setting (Yin, 2014).

Background

According to the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2016), enrollment in higher education among students with disabilities has increased considerably. For example, since 1978, the percentage of college freshman reporting disabilities has tripled (USDE, 2016). Additionally, diagnosis of ASD has increased (Gelbar et al., 2015; Herbert et al., 2014). The latest findings report that one in 68 children are diagnosed with ASD annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Researchers report that an increase in diagnosis will likely lead to an increase in the number of students with ASD enrolled in higher education (Armstrong, 2011; Matthews, Ly, & Goldberg, 2015). However, an understanding of the factors that impact learners with ASD through a university's disability support services has not been thoroughly researched. Therefore, further research was warranted and sought to provide insight to better support students with ASD in higher education.

Wei et al. (2014) reported that many variables contribute to the success or failure of obtaining a college degree and further contended that more research is needed to fill this gap. Troiano, Liefeld, and Trachtenberg (2010) reported that students may not be prepared for the level of self-control, diligence, self-evaluation, decision-making, and goal setting required for success in college. The problem is that learning opportunities are hindered in higher education for students with ASD because students with ASD are characterized by cognitive and social deficits (Matthews et al., 2015; Volkmar, Reichow, & McPartland, 2014; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2013).

Review of Literature

As diagnosis and higher education enrollment for students with ASD increases, so does the demand for effective support services. Upon entering postsecondary education, the students' rights and responsibilities change considerably from that in the high school setting. IDEA guarantees a free and appropriate education in the K-12 setting in the least restrictive environment, and schools are legally accountable for identifying students' needs, determining modification and accommodations, and implementing a specific Individual Education Plan (IEP). However, the legal aspects of disability shift to the Americans with Disabilities

Act (ADA) of 1990, ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which emphasize educational access (Thomas, 2000). In order to obtain support and services, postsecondary students must pursue services by self-identifying as a student with a disability to the disability support services offices. Documentation of the disability is then submitted along with a request for accommodations. Universities do not alter coursework or degree requirements, but they enlist the disability support services offices to ensure barriers are removed in order to offer equal opportunity for students with ASD to participate in postsecondary educational opportunities (Thomas, 2000, pp. 248-257).

Though students may have received certain accommodations through IEPs in high school, this does not necessarily indicate eligibility at the university level. However, students may self-initiate some of these accommodations by serving as a proactive self-advocate. For example, a student whose IEP accommodation included preferential front row seating may be expected to arrive early to secure a preferred seat in a college classroom (Ackles et al., 2014). Many students with ASD require unique and customized accommodations and may have received them throughout high school. However, "while institutions of higher education have developed pathways and supports to meet ADA requirements for students with disabilities, some of the unique supports typically needed by students with ASD are often not addressed within the traditional accommodations or college support services framework" (Ackles et al., 2014, p. 7).

Transitions

ASD is a lifelong developmental disability that affects an individual's ability to make sense of the world, process information, and relate to other people (NAS, 2014). Since autism is a spectrum disorder, individuals' abilities are impacted in different ways and in varying degrees. Some individuals have significant learning disabilities and require high degrees of support while others are high functioning and require little academic support. Though often high-functioning academically, individuals with ASD are still likely to experience communication and social challenges. Transitioning from the supportive environment of high school to the challenging expectations of being an independent learner in postsecondary education can be challenging for the student with ASD (Rydzewska, 2012). "There are expectations of increased independence, greater demands for self-directed learning, self-management of time, and less structured timetables, as well as new peer groups and social situations" (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014, p. 152).

Students transitioning from high school to college need to be prepared for the multitude of changes that occur upon graduation. However, little is known about the types of high school to college transition and orientation policies and interventions that may lead to increased enrollment rates and retention. The literature reveals a disconnection between the transition planning process in high school and the support services offered at universities. Research specifically focusing on the transition from high school to postsecondary education for

students with ASD is limited (Schindler, Cajiga, Aaronson, & Salas, 2015) and thus warrants further investigation.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research question: What factors of the disability support services offices impact learning in university students with ASD? Subquestions of the study are as follows:
1. How do students with ASD describe their experiences with the University's disability support services offices department?
2. How do University faculty describe their role in supporting students with ASD?
3. What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as having a positive impact on student learning?
4. What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as lacking, ineffective, or limiting to the student with ASD?

Setting, Participants, and Procedures

Setting

The setting for this single case study was the disability support services offices of a large university on the east coast. The University offers over 545 programs of study in both an online and residential format. Residential enrollment exceeds 15,000 students. Males represent 41% of the student body while females represent 59%. All 50 states and 85 countries are represented at the University. The University is accredited and awards associate's, bachelor's, master's, specialist's, and doctoral degrees. The disability support services offices at the University serve over 600 residential students with at least one identified disability, and over 400 students enrolled in an online program.

Participants

This qualitative study included six student and four faculty participants. Student participants were required to be residential students 18 years of age or older. In order to qualify, student participants had to satisfy one of the following conditions: a) currently attending the University, b) dropped out of the University within the last year, or c) dropped out and then returned to the University. Students that transferred from another university could participate, but only if they had completed a minimum of one full semester at the University. Five student participants were female and one was male. Females were disproportionately represented as compared to ASD diagnosis.

Student participants were determined through purposeful sampling via an

emailed questionnaire (Creswell, 2013) sent from the disability support services offices. Respondents were purposefully chosen based on students with ASD currently enrolled in the University or enrolled in the University within the last year. Self-reported ASD candidates were considered for participation in the study; however, a sufficient number of officially diagnosed candidates responded and, therefore, received priority. Faculty participants were chosen based on current employment at the University in the disability support services offices or in association with the disability support services offices (e.g. employees of assistive technology department, testing center, or hearing or blind services).

Student participant solicitation required a faculty member generated email to all potential participants to ensure confidentiality. Respondents then took the online survey at www.surveymonkey.com for purposeful sampling. The public directory of employees at the University served to identify four faculty participants. Student and faculty participants were limited to those with firsthand experiences with the disability support services offices. As with student participants, faculty participants were interviewed. Interviewing faculty participants provided a different perspective on support services and revealed information unknown to student participants. All participants engaged in the same online focus group at www. classchatter.com. Faculty interviews and the online focus group also corroborated some student data as themes developed, which increased trustworthiness. A concerted effort was made to accommodate each participant's time and schedule since an inquiry can present a burden to a participant (Stake, 1995).

Procedures

Once both student and faculty participants were secured, each participant was interviewed in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. Students were asked 14 pre-determined questions, while faculty were asked 11. Participants were then asked to participate in an online focus group and were provided an additional nine questions. All interviews were video and audio recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews in order to ensure accuracy during transcription. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Because the online focus group was conducted using text as the communication medium, participants' responses were accurately and automatically recorded.

Data analysis included identifying and developing patterns, themes, and content analysis. Data collection and recording included the use of memoing, bracketing, open coding, enumeration, and member checking to identify themes throughout the data collecting process. Office of Disability Support Services policies and procedures documents, job descriptions, and applications were also reviewed to provide triangulation of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Findings

The findings of the study will address both the central question, and the four sub-questions used to guide the study. The central question of the study was: What factors of the disability support services offices impact learning in University students with ASD? The data were analyzed to identify recurring code words, and then the code words were extracted and grouped into common themes. The results of the study revealed the following five themes:

1. Factors based on Accommodations - Most of these comments had to do with academic support such as test-taking options, tutoring, note-taking assistance, and extended time for assignments.
2. Factors based on Accountability - Participants identified the importance of someone helping to hold the students accountable for completing tasks and meeting deadlines.
3. Factors based on Compassion and Individuality - Participants mentioned the importance of students with ASD having someone who cares and understands their challenges, and treats them as an individual.
4. Factors based on Professors - How students with ASD are treated by their professors can have a significant impact on their success. Furthermore, a professor's actions and perceived attitude toward accommodations and assistance can be very important to the student.
5. Social Factors - The need for social opportunities, social support, and assistance with appropriate relationship building and conflict resolution was a common theme throughout.

Frequency of the code words used to develop these five themes is indicated in the table below:

TABLE 1

Frequency of Codes Across Data Points

Themes	Code Word	Occurrences Across Data
Accommodations	Accommodations	87
	Study	11
	Tutor	29
	Support	23
	Stress	15
	Quiet Environment	7
	Quizzes/Exam/Test	96
	Request	4
	Notes	17
	Extended Time	22

	Disability Services	63
	Disability	57
	Counseling	14
Accountability	Partner	4
	Parent/Mom	37
	Mentor	8
	Help	8
Compassion/Individuality	Understanding	14
	Student	153
	Self-disclose	4
	Individual	14
	Guilty	5
	Feel	13
	Compassion	18
Professors	Training	15
	Teach	27
	Professor	63
	Email	19
	Communicate	9
Social Factors	Social	34
	Social Anxiety	11
	Spiritual	6
	Dorm/Roommate	28
	Loneliness	8
	Friend	24

The subquestions of the study allowed the participants to describe their personal experiences in more detail and are as follows:

1. *How do students with ASD describe their experience with the University's disability support offices?*

   In general, the students were very positive about the support services provided by the University. Although they appreciated the academic support provided, several of them stated that they wish the university

provided more social and emotional support. One student stated that she was annoyed by how much emphasis was placed on testing and tutoring when what she really needs is social skills. Conversely, one student suggested that her success was not the University's responsibility and stated, "People are born into situations that they can overcome." One student stated that she thought services were underutilized because not all students with ASD sought services. She added that she knew several students with ASD who did not seek services because of the perceived stigma attached to receiving services, but her view was that it was no different than going to the doctor if you have an injury.

2. *How do university faculty describe their role in supporting students with ASD?*

    Answers to this question revealed that although faculty believed that the services provided by the University were beneficial to students with ASD, there were many needs faculty and staff were unable to meet. For example, one employee felt that providing a quiet, calm, and distraction-free testing environment was beneficial to the students academically, but was concerned that the students' social and emotional needs were not being met, and even suggested that services should be extended to the students' home life. Another employee focused on policy issues and ensuring that they met all legal and ethical requirements. Faculty members mentioned that they often serve as liaisons between students and other faculty. Although all of the employees seemed to have an awareness of the limits of the services that are provided, they all emphasized the importance of letting the students know that they care about them as individuals. It was also noted that some students with ASD need encouragement because they do not always believe or realize that they can experience success in college.

3. *What factors of disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as having a positive impact on student learning?*

    Both groups mentioned testing accommodations as being a beneficial academic service. One-on-one assistance such as tutoring or note-taking assistance was also mentioned. One student who was close to graduation mentioned that he wished he had been aware of all of the services offered earlier in his college career. Another mentioned the benefit of the one-on-one connection with support services faculty. Almost all participants mentioned the benefit of having a caring and supportive environment. They all wanted to be treated as individuals and feel that their voices are being heard.

4. *What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as lacking, ineffective, or as limiting to the student*

with ASD?

Although both students and faculty described the office of disability services in a positive light, all participants indicated that there was significant room for improvement. Both students and faculty mentioned the need for the University to provide more support for students with ASD, while the faculty defined many of the financial, personnel, and overall limited resources as being some of the most significant challenges. One faculty member mentioned that although there is a need for more support of students with ASD, the office is also trying to meet the needs of close to 1000 total students with various other disabilities and needs. Another faculty member addressed the importance of being able to steer students in the right direction when the office was unable to meet a need or provide a requested service. Students mentioned a desire for additional services, but also emphasized that better communication regarding the services currently offered would be beneficial.

Almost every participant in the study emphasized the lack of, and need for, social and emotional support in addition to academic support. One student stated that he felt capable academically, but his inability to deal with roommates, and their lack of understanding about his disability, made it almost impossible to live in the dorms. Another student stated that she was in gifted classes in high school and that her test scores were "off the charts," and that almost all of her challenges were social or emotional. Although the participants were not confident in defining how these social needs could be met by the university, they did provide some general suggestions. Some of the student suggestions included more casual communication such as text messages, organized socials, providing "panic rooms," or allowing therapy pets in the dorms.

Another area that several participants mentioned as lacking was assistance in coping with stress. One student mentioned that the fear of classroom presentations, or even working in a group setting, caused them to panic and often avoid going to class. Another student mentioned that the self-advocacy required, such as the process of seeking test accommodations, just added to the test anxiety she was already experiencing.

Summary

The findings of this study provided five themes to assist in identifying factors that impact learning for students with ASD. Of the five themes, accommodations and social supports were most notable. Accommodations, whether provided or lacking, impacted outcomes in the form of grades, even to the point of failure. Although individual accommodations such as test taking or lecture notes may be provided, there is little assistance for significant classroom challenges such as

fear of group work or class presentations. Recognizing that all students with ASD have unique accommodation needs is critical for success, as provision of specific supports that meet the individual student's needs will best enhance positive outcomes.

Many students struggle with the transition from a supportive K-12 setting to a more independent postsecondary environment. For a student with ASD, the struggles can be multiplied, and can even become overwhelming. To address these needs, universities must make a concerted effort to identify incoming students with ASD, effectively communicate services provided, and seek to enhance these services when possible. These services should be emphasized during a student's first year in order to identify needs and establish a positive academic and social foundation; services may then be reduced or revised once a routine is established. However, it is important to note that students may need comparable services all four years, as not all ASD challenges can be reduced through routines and coping strategies. Some students in this study were able to experience some academic success early, but later became frustrated and discouraged trying to sustain their efforts long-term.

One of the most significant findings of this study, which was most prevalent in the student responses, is that social support can be as important as academic support for students with ASD. Unfortunately, specific social supports for students with ASD are almost nonexistent in most postsecondary settings. This lack of social support caused one student in the study to drop out of a residential program and pursue an online degree. Other students felt exceptional degrees of loneliness and depression as a result of lacking social supports. Several students mentioned their inability to develop positive social relationships often resulted in the misconception that they do not desire these relationships, or that they want to be left alone. Most of the students in the study desperately wanted to fit in, but believed that they lacked the social skills to do so. Even when students receive academic support sufficient to help them achieve success in a postsecondary educational setting, social challenges or unmet social needs can undermine academic progress and may result in course failure or program drop-out.

Although a student with ASD may be aware of their academic or social challenges, this does not mean they can overcome these challenges with effort or support. Some of the students in this study were aware that some of their actions could be interpreted as rude, inconsiderate, lazy, or unmotivated by those around them. Educating faculty, staff, and even students, on some of the common characteristics of students with ASD may help to promote an environment of patience and understanding in a postsecondary setting.

Parents, students with ASD, educators, and professionals who work with students with ASD can use the information gleaned from this research to make informed decisions regarding educational opportunities. Knowing what factors impact learning, whether positively or negatively, will help parents, students, university faculty, and other professionals working with students with ASD make informed decisions regarding supports or services. Being able to identify factors that impact learning may potentially be the difference between the success or failure for the student with ASD transitioning into, or persistently pursuing

completion of, a postsecondary degree or program.

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