Giving Voice to College Students with Autism


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Coming to College

• 1 in 50 children ages 6–17 have Autism
  • Rapidly increasing prevalence
  • Fastest relative growth among 14-17 year olds
  • 50,000/year turn 18 each year
  • Improved understanding and early intervention
    = Increasing numbers college eligible

• College experiences and outcomes poor(ly understood)
  • “considerable challenge for which we may be ill-prepared”
    (White et al., 2011, p. 697)
Challenges

Individuals
• Social
• Academic
• Independent Living
• “Co-Morbidities”

Institutions
• Identification
• Coordination
• Individualization
• Resources/Efficiency
Participants, Data Collection, Analyses

• 9 students w/ formal diagnosis

• In-person interviews
  • Video recorded
  • Synchronized transcripts
  • Questions: Input – Experiences – Outcomes

• Two rounds of coding
  • Round 1: A-priori from theory and literature
  • Round 2: recurring phenomena, representative summary statements, rich or vivid phrases, and patterns of proximal statements
## Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>ASD diagnosis/age of diagnosis</th>
<th>Co-morbidities/age of diagnosis</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Educational Status</th>
<th>Vocational Status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bipolar (Age 20)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
<td>Graduate School</td>
<td>Employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>In his 40s</td>
<td>ADDHT, Dyslexia (childhood)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Technical School</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8 or 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edmund</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15 or 16</td>
<td></td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gregg</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>ADHD (Age 9)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harper</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>GED</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 or 5</td>
<td>ADHD, Dyslexia</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings: A Critical Threshold

• “Adults go to college. Kids go to high school, middle school and elementary school. It’s really that defining moment where you’re no longer a teenager. You’re now an adult.” – Christopher

• “Since then I haven’t thought of suicide. I have a future. I felt better about myself than I have since I was a kid. That’s a good thing. I’m looking forward not backwards.”...“I hated myself for 30 years. I don’t anymore. I’m not quite to where I love myself but I like myself. That’s a big change.” Subsequently, Brian explained, “I’m excited. I will be an awesome digital artist.” – Brian
Findings: Focus on Academics

• Round 1 coding frequency
  • 129 Academics
  • 143 Social
    • 49 Faculty Interaction
    • Most peer interactions class related

• Four possible explanations
  • No Problems
  • Active Avoidance
  • Self-Monitoring, Self-Regulation
  • Ignore/Forget/Deny

• I think just maybe the safety side and also grades and stuff, my GPA and a whole bunch of other social issues and stuff.

• So grades and safety and social issues?
• Yeah
• Grades I think I understand. Safety, what is the concern about safety?
• I don’t really want to go into it.
• Okay. How about the social issues?
• I don’t want to go into that either.
Findings: Identity, Disclosure, Accommodation

- Interwoven
  Pragmatic disclosure of partial identity based on need for accommodation
  - SDRC often
  - Faculty limited
  - Peers rarely
- ...but not Integrated

“I am comfortable in my own skin and I don’t think this is – I don’t think it’s bad to have autism or anything...I usually prefer it to come up in conversation or somebody to like question, “Do you have autism?’” – Edmund

“We got into small groups and we had to talk about our race, our gender and disability came up so I did mention it quietly and quickly. I don’t think anyone noticed but I did say it.” - Daniel
“It was never used as a weapon against me until now. “

“You are to pass yourself off as normal as much as you can.”

“So I’m very proud of the fact that I’m able to fake out as many people as I do, honestly. I mean I know that’s not really a healthy way to relate to one with autism or Asperger’s.” - Adam
Discussion & Recommendations

• Ready or Not
  • Institutional Readiness
  • Student Readiness

• Accommodations in Practice
  • Formal, legal accommodations
    • No roommate
    • Test: extended time & separate room
  • Institution-wide
    • Tutors
    • Faculty/staff professional development
More Information...

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Several related projects about Autism Spectrum Disorders in Higher Education (ASDHE)