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Social Interactions of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder on College Campuses:
Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to use an occupational therapy perspective to examine possible social barriers, current programming, and possible considerations to improve social support resources for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) on the campus of a small, midwestern, private university.

Methodology: Convenience sampling included individuals diagnosed with ASD currently enrolled in the university. Interview questions were created based on relevant literature, and a semi-structured voice recorded interview was completed with the participant. Data analysis included pattern coding, substantive categories, and member checking.

Results: The emergent themes focused primarily on the participant's positive experiences rather than social barriers and university supports. The five themes regarding the participant's perception of social supports and interactions on campus include: 1) Desire to Improve Social Skills, 2) Desire and Personal Motivation for Increased Belonging in College, 3) Appeal of Creative, Multisensory, and Themed Social Events, 4) Interest in Learning Opportunities, and 5) Importance of Family Encouragement Regarding Social Support.

Conclusion: Occupational therapists have the skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate effectively with social skills programming on university campuses to facilitate success of students with ASD. Occupational therapy's holistic approach to client care including knowledge pertaining to sensory integration, promotion of family support, and facilitation of interpersonal relationships provides a distinct lens to address the students' support system throughout the educational transition. Further research and advocacy would be beneficial in promoting occupational therapy practice in the higher education setting.

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Literature Review

The passing of recent federal policies has contributed to a growing number of individuals with disabilities attending college, including the population of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Korbel, Lucia, Wenzel & Anderson, 2011). Dipeolu, Storlie, and Johnson (2015) found that individuals with ASD tend to struggle with social participation, communication, and interpersonal relationships. It is important to gain better insight into the social experiences of college students with ASD in order to best serve this population.

Social Barriers

Insight into social barriers can be obtained by studying the occupation of social participation. Within the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, social participation is defined as “the interweaving of occupations to support desired engagement in community and family activities as well as those involving peers and friends” (Gillen & Boyt Schell, 2014, p. 607). Viewing social participation through this lens could provide an additional perspective to address the unique needs of students with ASD.

Social interactions on college campuses allow for collaboration between peers, interpersonal development, and a sense of group identity (Jackson, Miller, Frew, Gilbreath, & Dillman, 2011). Social barriers experienced by college students with ASD that limit social interactions may impact the student’s overall outcomes at college (Pingry O’Neil, Markward, & French, 2012). According to a recent article, several barriers were identified including social

exclusion within a group setting, lack of interactions with others, lack of familial support, and feeling excluded by the entire community (Van Asselt, Buchanana, & Peterson, 2015).

Transition to College

As students with ASD transition from high school to higher education, they experience increased challenges as compared to other students (Glennon, 2016; Pinder-Amaker, 2013). Challenges to this transition process may include students experiencing more independence, challenging classes, unpredictable schedules, and new peer groups. Based upon these challenges throughout the transition process, students with ASD may struggle to navigate college campuses academically and socially, directly impacting their roles as a university student.

Higher Education Programs

Before the transition to higher education, students were more likely in an environment of constant support and services (Pinder-Amaker, 2013). In a survey of 149 higher education programs, 3% identified “social skills” as the primary focus of their program, while “independent living/life skills” and “employment” were reported as the primary focuses at 34% and 32% respectively (Grigal, Hart, Weir, 2012). A focus on social skills through this transition, particularly with the help of occupational therapists, may facilitate student success by improving GPA and student perception of success and satisfaction (Schindler, 2017).

Staff from the students with disabilities office at the university used within this study suggested physical accessibility is not a prominent issue on campus; however, there is a distinct lack of resources providing social support and social skills training to students with disabilities, particularly those students with ASD (D. Spinney, personal communication, September 14, 2016). As a result, staff communicated a need to improve university programming to support students in the various aspects of social participation.

Social Participation and Leisure

The role of being a college student includes an emphasis on leisure exploration and social participation, both of which are directly impacted by social barriers. A researcher found that students who were more willing to participate socially within their community were also more willing to explore leisure opportunities (Devine, 2016). Individuals with ASD may be less likely to participate in social activities due to barriers overlooked by the general population, such as large groups of people, over-stimulation via sensory input, and lack of awareness regarding events (Clince, Connolly, Nolan, 2016).

Occupational therapists are still examining new ways to define their role in encouraging social participation in students with disabilities, such as peer support programs that increase GPA and positive self-perception (Leigers, Myers & Schneck, 2016; Schindler, 2017). Support from peers, faculty, and staff is critical to success for college students with disabilities. Based upon research, college students with disabilities self-reported that these relationships were vital to their college experience and/or degree completion through increased motivation and sense of belonging (Barber, 2012; Devine, 2013; Gibson, 2012; Mullins & Preyde, 2016; Pingry-O'Neil & French, 2012; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, Newman, 2015).

Introduction

Social barriers for students with ASD in higher education may be better identified through the use of an occupational therapy lens. The purpose of this qualitative study was to use an occupational therapy perspective to explore the experiences and perceptions of social barriers and current programming through semi-structured interviews with a college student who has a diagnosis of ASD in order to provide some possible considerations to improve social support

resources on campus for students with ASD. The purpose of this study was accomplished through the following research questions:

1. What social barriers, if any, do students with ASD perceive at a small, midwestern, private university?
2. What current social support resources provided by the university do students with ASD recognize?
3. Based upon the experiences and perceptions of students with ASD, how can this university improve social support resources to address social barriers in the future?

Methodology

Participants

Potential participants were recruited through purposeful convenience sampling. In order to protect the identity of students with a disclosed disability, inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study were emailed to a staff member of the university's academic success center. Potential participants previously disclosed a diagnosis of ASD to the office of students with disabilities, were 18 years or older, completed at least two semesters of full-time coursework at the university, were currently enrolled, and spoke English. Individuals under guardianship or power of attorney were excluded.

The staff member identified students meeting the above criteria and distributed the recruitment letter developed by researchers via email, including a consent form to review prior to participation in addition to information regarding session dates and times. Approximately fifteen to twenty students were identified and received a recruitment letter from the staff member. One student agreed to the consent form and to participate in this study.

Procedure

The researchers utilized a qualitative case study design via a semi-structured interview and member checking to collect data in order to explore the social experiences and perceptions of a college student diagnosed with ASD. The study was submitted for human research protections review and was approved under an exempt status. Human research protections review was conducted by the Human Protections Administrator, who is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of people participating in research that is exempt from Institutional Review Board review. Additionally, researchers completed protection of human subjects training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program.

Data collection. A semi-structured interview was held with the participant in a private room on campus for 11 minutes until saturation of data was met. The semi-structured interview was based on questions developed by the research team prior to the session. Researchers developed the questions based upon a review of literature about college-aged students with ASD. Questions were carefully worded to avoid leading questions that could have created bias. These questions utilized within the study are located in the Appendix. The interview was voice recorded for transcription purposes.

Data analysis. After the initial interview, 3 members of the research team transcribed the meeting verbatim. Researchers held a separate meeting where common themes were identified collaboratively through utilization of pattern coding to develop substantive categories. After categories were developed, researchers completed a member checking session with the participant. The participant confirmed the common themes identified by the researchers.

Results

The emergent themes focused primarily on the participant's positive experiences rather than social barriers and university supports. The five themes regarding the participant's perception of social supports and interactions on campus include: 1) Desire to Improve Social Skills, 2) Desire and Personal Motivation for Increased Belonging in College, 3) Appeal of Creative, Multisensory, and Themed Social Events, 4) Interest in Learning Opportunities, and 5) Importance of Family Encouragement Regarding Social Support.

Desire to Improve Social Skills

Desire to Improve Social Skills was most frequently noted, as the participant mentioned a desire to improve her own social skills several times throughout the interview process. This is evidenced by comments including:

I think that social skills is [important], because that was what [university staff] has been drilling us with recently. Like next week [there will be] a whole lesson on eye contact, so we don't spend it looking at the floor or staring at someone. But... I figured out a couple of pretty cool tips, so you can make eye contact and it looks natural. My sister says to try and see what color eyes somebody has.

This quote demonstrates a desire to seek improvement in social skills, both via university programs and personal time working on these skills. Additionally, the participant displayed self-awareness in terms of improving these social skills deficits. Self-awareness and the participant's desire to improve these skills is further noted in the participant's explanation: "Mostly [I need more work] with my emotional reactions, because I still have a trouble putting things into perspective... I always use the 1 to 10 scale, and I don't want to act like it's a 7 when it's only a 3."

Desire and Personal Motivation for Increased Belonging in College

Desire and Personal Motivation for Increased Belonging in College is a theme that emerged following the participant's frequent mention of this desire. This was evidenced by the following:

With high school there weren't a lot of social events aside [from] clubs and sports games and I didn't belong to many clubs and wasn't interested in sports, and I had a lot of trouble taking the initiative and asking people if they want to hang out...I had a lot of trouble making friends in high school but now there are so many more opportunities on campus and so many different clubs.

In this comment, the participant revealed an increased desire to experience a sense of belonging. The participant additionally revealed this theme by stating, "I think there is a personal change in me too because I'm starting to get more involved and checking the [school event] website more often." This participant is reaching out to resources in hopes of improving her experience of social interaction in college.

Appeal of Creative, Multisensory, and Themed Social Events

Appeal of Creative, Multisensory, and Themed Social Events was noted when discussing types of activities and events that appealed to the participant. The participant stated events with themes were particularly inviting due to their unique nature. The participant noted:

There are two that I went to that I liked. One was themed around the five senses so you had to put on this tableau that appeals to everyone's senses, like the theme was Alice in Wonderland for sight you would have painted playing cards. For smell and taste you would have tea and cookies, for touch you might have a game of Wonderland croquet.

The second event was called Snapback to the Future, and there wasn't any specific goal

but it had to be retro. So maybe you would pretend to have a child's playroom from the early 20th century so you might have a teddy bear, Lincoln Logs, and maybe a couple books from that era.

These social opportunities provide a unique experience which participants may not be able to partake in throughout their everyday life. Additionally, a pull towards creativity in activities was noted throughout as the participant stated, "I enjoy attending the lecture and performance events...because I see a lot [of] creativity behind my classmates and that's [also] why I like the XD events (the experience design)," as well as, "I like to do a lot of creative things like reading, writing, [knitting, and coloring]."

Interest in Learning Opportunities

Interests in Learning Opportunities was noted by the participant as being very important. The participant noted these as appealing by saying, "Sometimes I go to learn if it's a lecture, sometimes I go so I can spend time with friends." This quote from the participant interview suggests a combination of learning and social interaction which appeals both to the interests and desires of the participant. Many of the events the participant chose to attend are more academic and structured in nature, such as lecture series events and documentary viewings. These events are traditionally less attended than social events available on campus, such as sporting events or open mic nights.

Importance of Family Encouragement Regarding Social Support

Importance of Family Encouragement Regarding Social Support was mentioned previously in the quotes supporting the theme Desire to Improve Social Skills, when social skills tips from a sibling regarding eye contact was mentioned: "I figured out a couple of pretty cool

tips, so you can make eye contact and it looks natural...my sister says to try and see what color eyes somebody has.” In addition, the participant spoke on help from a parent:

I made a lot of progress when I was little, my mom called it social skills boot camp. Just because she was very rigorous with how I had to learn how to talk to people and conduct myself. I feel like I need a little bit more work in college.

The participant noted in these instances how family advice in her past and present better prepared her for the current social situations she faces in the college environment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use an occupational therapy perspective to examine possible social barriers, current programming, and possible considerations to improve social support resources for students with ASD on the campus of a small, midwestern, private university. The research questions included: 1) What social barriers, if any, do students with ASD perceive at a small, midwestern, private university? 2) What current social support resources provided by the university do students with ASD recognize? 3) Based upon the experiences and perceptions of students with ASD, how can this university improve social support resources to address social barriers in the future?

Through a semi-structured interview, the following themes emerged: Desire to Improve Social Skills; Desire and Personal Motivation for Increased Belonging in College; Appeal of Creative, Multisensory, and Themed Social Events; Interest in Learning Opportunities; and Importance of Family Encouragement Regarding Social Support.

Social Barriers

Due to the limited participation in this study, no specific social barriers were verbalized. However, the literature revealed several barriers students with ASD experience on

campuses across the United States, including social exclusion within a group setting, lack of meaningful interactions with others, decreased familial support, and feeling excluded by the entire community (Van Asselt, Buchanana, & Peterson, 2015). With a larger sample size, similar barriers may have been found within the interview.

One shared difficulty of transitioning to college noted by students with ASD is the decrease in parental support (White et al., 2016). Parents of college students with ASD acknowledge that their child will need more parental support than their peers; however, they note difficulty finding balance between supporting their child and impacting the child's independence (Morrison, Sansosti, Hadley, 2009). According to Murray, Lombardi, and Kosty (2014), students with disabilities who adjusted poorly to college had significantly less familial support. In contrast, the participant within this study had strong familial support, likely easing her transition into college life.

The participant in our study indicated a strong desire and personal motivation for increased belonging. College students with disabilities in a study by Vaccaro et al. (2015) expressed similar desires to increase feelings of belonging. Students relied on their ability to self-advocate in order to increase their sense of belonging on campus (Vaccaro et al, 2015). Self-advocacy included being viewed as a "legitimate" student through peer integration and being recognized for success (Vaccaro et al, 2015). The students reported that some areas that increased their sense of belonging included being involved in activities and clubs, studying in public places, and being outdoors (Vaccaro et al, 2015). The participant in our study expressed that there are more opportunities to be involved in these types of activities in college as compared to high school. This is one advantage that helped the participant in our study to feel a greater sense of belonging on campus.

Social Supports

The participant frequently mentioned the university's programming for students with disabilities. At this university, services for students with disabilities are offered at two different levels. Any student with a disability is provided reasonable accommodations through the office of students with disabilities in concordance with Americans with Disabilities Act.

More intensive programming is available for students with disabilities at an additional cost. Additional programs, including “one-to-one tutoring with professional tutors, specialized courses in English and math, private study areas and adapted test-taking accommodations,” help create a “unique, cooperative community” and promote self-advocacy for students with disabilities (“Services for Students with Disabilities”, 2016).

Programs focused on the improvement of social skills are common for individuals with intellectual disabilities similar to students with ASD (Grigal et al., 2012). However, these social skills programs are suggested to be only moderately effective (Gates, Kang, & Lerner, 2017). Students within these programs reported conflicting perceptions regarding the effectiveness of social skills programs, further outlining the indecisiveness about such programming (Gates et al., 2017). These conflicting perceptions are due to students reporting positive results in relation to social skills knowledge, rather than the implementation (Gates et al., 2017). This suggests that our participant, who is in a social skills group and demonstrates a desire to increase knowledge in this area, may only gain knowledge of social skills rather than application of skills.

Improvement of Social Supports

The university may assist in overcoming social barriers on campus by providing more social opportunities that appeal to the interests of individuals with ASD on campus. The student

in our study indicated interest in creative, multisensory, and themed social events. Individuals with ASD have been shown to differ in patterns of sensory regulation as compared to the general population (Cline et al., 2016). Specifically, individuals with ASD often seek sensory input (Cline et al., 2016). One of three major themes revealed in a previous study indicated that sensory preferences were a factor considered by individuals with ASD when choosing desired leisure activities (Cline et al., 2016). This thematic outcome could further explain the initiative our participant has to participate in multisensory themed events. The participant may have sensory seeking tendencies that make these types of activities more exciting or inviting. Much of the research for this population indicates difficulty with various conceptual and academic skills (Berg, Jirikowic, Haerling, MacDonald, 2017). Some students with ASD indicate that academic stress is one of the top difficulties in college (White et al., 2016). Our participant however, did not mention learning or academics as areas of concern. Rather the participant expressed interest in social events on campus that provided additional learning opportunities such as diversity lectures, informational workshops, and round-table discussions.

Limitations

As this study included one participant, the results are not generalizable to a large population or campus. In order to further understand the application of this information to different college campuses, larger and more inclusive sample sizes should be utilized. Furthermore, the questions used throughout the research process were created by the researchers and were not standardized or tested on a sample population prior to our interview. Considering two of the researchers were also students at the same university and an additional researcher was a professor at the university, the participant's willingness to disclose may have been affected.

Future studies should utilize a wider range of college campuses to increase understanding of the social experiences of students with ASD.

Conclusions

The university's office of students with disabilities currently offers programming to address potential social barriers for students with ASD, including social skills education. Despite the literature suggesting minimal effectiveness of these programs, our participant's outlook was positive regarding the current programs related to social skills. Therefore, the office for disability services should continue these programs in hopes to minimize social challenges for students with ASD. Specific barriers related to the social challenges were not mentioned during our study, however, the participant noted several social opportunities she enjoyed at the university. It may be useful for professionals in higher education to further identify the unique interests of students with ASD to encourage further social participation.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

Occupational therapists have a role in higher education to facilitate client centered practice for students with ASD transitioning from high school to higher education. Within this role, it is crucial for occupational therapists to consider potential challenges specifically related to social interaction. Occupational therapists can promote success of the student through education, resources, and integration of familial support throughout the transition process. The following are specific implications for occupational therapy practice related to the findings of this study:

- When working with students with ASD, it is important to remember that each student's experience is unique, therefore it is critical to be completely client-centered.

- Occupational therapy may provide a unique lens to address the various social participation barriers individuals with ASD experience.
- Occupational therapists have the skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate effectively with social skills programs which may already exist on college campuses.
- Occupational therapists have the skills to integrate sensory and creative activities related to students' interests into social experiences that can be beneficial to students with ASD.
- Occupational therapists have an understanding of familial support in relation to roles and routines. This provides a unique lens to address the students' support system via education related to continued support throughout the educational transition.

Occupational therapists have the skills necessary to practice in higher education focusing on the transition to a university setting, specifically regarding social support and interaction among students with disabilities. Further research and advocacy would be beneficial to promote occupational therapy practice in higher education to facilitate best client-centered outcomes for students with ASD.

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Appendix

Question
What do you consider a “social event” to be here on campus?
Tell me about the last social event you attended on campus.
What social events do you enjoy attending?
How do you find out about the events you go to?
Why do you go to the events you go to?
How does your social experience here on campus make you feel (Happy, sad, frustrated, uncomfortable, etc.)? Why?
What kinds of things do you like to do for fun?
What type of events would you go to that we don’t currently have on campus?
Where would you prefer to go to events (specific location)?
Are you more likely to go to events with a group, one or two friends, or by yourself? Why?
How would you compare college to high school in regard to social events?
Is there anything at social events that makes you uncomfortable?