Educator perspectives on the postsecondary transition difficulties of students with autism

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Abstract

Addressing the challenges of adolescents and emerging adults with autism spectrum disorder is crucial to improving the outcomes of these students in the postsecondary setting. Although secondary and postsecondary educators and staff are critical to helping these students access services, there has been little investigation into the perspectives of this stakeholder group, with respect to the needs of postsecondary students with autism spectrum disorder. A series of focus groups was conducted with secondary and postsecondary educators to understand educator perspectives related to the challenges faced by postsecondary students with autism spectrum disorder. Competence, autonomy and independence, and the development and sustainment of interpersonal relationships emerged as primary areas of difficulty and corresponding need. Results suggest that targeted interventions addressing these areas should be implemented, prior to and during enrollment in a postsecondary setting, to facilitate transition in a comprehensive manner.

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) represent a growing contingency within the postsecondary setting (White et al., 2011), underscoring the importance of understanding the characteristics that may be unique to this population. The core impairments of ASD may manifest among postsecondary students in distinctive ways, that is, difficulty understanding instructions, stress related to increased independence/structure, poor planning, and difficulty completing assignments (Cai and Richdale, 2016), which could influence outcomes related to postsecondary success. These challenges for students with ASD span several domains and suggest the need for educator-informed support.

Within postsecondary settings, supports and accommodations addressing the learning needs of students with disabilities are generally initiated with the postsecondary institution's

disability support staff. While students with learning disabilities might sufficiently be supported through academic supports alone, those with ASD could benefit from social supports, guidance, and explicit instructions to follow during the counseling process (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Postsecondary students with ASD felt supported in the academic, but not social domains (Cai and Richdale, 2016). Consequently, educators may feel unprepared to assist those with ASD who are seeking support services (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Although educators may not feel competent in their knowledge or ability to deliver accommodations (Dona and Edmister, 2013), they are often in the best position to help students access and implement services. Many students with ASD report feeling ill-prepared for postsec-ondary life (Cai and Richdale, 2016). Despite need, students with ASD and their parents report little student engagement in formal transition planning prior to college (Elias and White, 2017).

Taken together, educators at the secondary and post-secondary levels can help identify needed supports to address the expected or experienced challenges students face in college. Given their direct interface with students, educators are well-situated to help students access needed services. However, there is little research regarding what educators feel are challenges when assisting students with ASD in the postsecondary setting.

Method

Study design

Given that the goal of the study was to understand respondents' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes related to the perceived challenges of postsecondary-bound and postsec-ondary students with ASD, a focus group design was adopted (e.g. Halcomb et al., 2007). Qualitative studies in ASD populations can complement quantitative research methods, when gaining an understanding of human experiences (Bölte, 2014). To increase credibility and convergence, four focus groups representing between 4 and 6 postsecondary and secondary educators were conducted over the course of 1.5 years. A purposive sampling design was implemented. Interviews averaged 45 min (Figure 1). To minimize bias, peer debriefing occurred between the first author and an external researcher at multiple phases of the research study (i.e. design, implementation, and analyses). This study was approved by the institution's human research ethics committee.

Participants

Educators (i.e. administrators, instructors, and educational/academic support staff) were eligible to participate in the study. Recruitment occurred via mail, posted flyers, and direct contacts with special education and disability support offices in three school districts and several post-secondary institutions in a rural region spanning a radius of 65 miles around the investigator institution. In all, 25 participants consented and participated in the focus groups (females = 75%).

Participants averaged 47 years of age (*range* 25–75 years, $SD = 13$ years) and had approximately 16 years of experience working professionally with individuals with ASD (*range* = 2–39 years, $SD = 12$ years). The sample was fairly homogeneous; all endorsed

"White" for ethnicity and 90% completed graduate school. However, these educators worked in schools with varied socioeconomic status (Table 1).

Procedure

Four focus groups, led by one moderator and recorded by two note-takers, were conducted. The moderator was a clinician and researcher who had experience working with postsecondary students with ASD. To facilitate openness among group members, specific examples/stories were encouraged. Focus groups varied between 4 and 6 participants, all of whom were educators who interacted with students with ASD (Table 1), with no overlap across groups. Groups were audio-recorded.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed. Techniques were used to improve the accuracy of the transcribed material (MacLean et al., 2004). To couch this study within the broader literature on postsecondary student acclimation, the Seven Vectors of Student Development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993) was chosen as the theoretical model of the coding scheme because of its use as a schematic of identity in typically developing college students. The coding scheme was informed by independent reviewers who examined the data to identify prominent themes. Definitions for each code were created and a coding manual (Elias and White, 2017) was applied to the full set of interviews. To reduce bias, negative case analysis was conducted to ensure that the coding manual encompassed all participant opinions and an audit trail was maintained. The transcripts were imported into NVivo (version 10; QSR International, 2012) and subject to line by line coding by two trained raters. Inter-rater agreement was established by examining selections (totaling 25%) across all available transcripts to assess for the fit of coding themes ($\kappa = 0.873$). After deriving the inter-rater coefficient, discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion and amended.

Results

Three vectors emerged as the primary themes discussed by participants: moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing competence, and developing mature interpersonal relationships. Themes were derived from examining the codes most endorsed throughout the focus group interviews, as determined by a code intensity matrix.

Moving through autonomy toward interdependence

Educators cited difficulty in the self-sufficiency of students, particularly in knowing when to separate from parents and educators, yet achieve balance by appropriately utilizing and requesting supports as needed. Educators reported high reliance of students on parents while still in high school and that this reliance often fails to cease in a developmentally normative way after postsecondary matriculation. Specifically, one university educator noted,

> Their parents don't put them in situations where they allow some autonomy, I think is the biggest problem. They should be, by the time they arrive to be sophomore or juniors in high school, they should be allowing them to do things on their own and

> letting them make decisions, even if they're bad decisions because I think they still learn from that.

Another university educator reported, "One of the hurdles too is that they are depending on parents to tell them what to do at every turn and some students are just lost … They are away from home and relying on parents to navigate college."

Educators also noted difficulties with executive function or the ability to initiate and solve problems independently. Educators specifically commented on perceived difficulties with time management, organizing activities, and relying on others to manage their schedule. One university educator reported, "… they get stuck with problem solving." A community college educator noted that

> that [creativity and problem solving] tends to be where they get into trouble … I [teach] network administration and trouble-shooting, and there's no cut and dry answers in a lot that, it takes some creativity and it takes some problem solving.

Developing competence

Interpersonal competence is the ability to listen, cooperate, and communicate needs, wants, and desires effectively. Chatting casually with peers was cited as a main area of perceived weakness. One community college educator noted,

> They have trouble chatting—small talk—yeah, it's got to be like the memorization of dates and data, it can't just be, "How are you doing?" "I'm good, how was your weekend?" Small talk is so difficult, and that's the one thing that comforts everyone in the room, if you can do small talk and chatter and just talk about the latest nonsense then you're one of us, welcome to the fold.

Another high-school educator noted that,

> Often times if you … have multiple students with disabilities who all struggle with the same thing … you're facilitating everything. You can facilitate a first step—how to start a conversation with someone—and then you're also facilitating the next step so it doesn't give you the real-world scenario.

Despite difficulties mastering social situations, educators noted strengths from an openness to suggestion, for example, a university educator stated,

> I think one of the strengths comes from them being really open to suggestions and listening to rationale as to why you don't raise your hand and speak out in class fifty times in one session, whereas I think a lot of other students would get offended.

Developing mature interpersonal relationships

This vector, which can also be thought of as capacity for intimacy, is defined as establishing and maintaining long-lasting relationships (friend or romantic) that endure through crises, distance, and separation. A desire for reciprocity in relationships in those with ASD was identified. One secondary educator reported,

> We have a student who's a senior [and] just starting to take interest in his peers …
> and I think that's … because he knows he going to start college soon. And so, he's
> at the homecoming dance in a corner by himself and … he did ask a girl to dance
> but he didn't even know what a slow dance was. He wasn't even sure, "what do you
> do?" "How do you do that?"

Another university educator stated, "we had students come in and talk about being lonely …
wanting a boyfriend or girlfriend … and being really worried about their [lack of] social
relationships."

Discussion

Educators perceived challenges for students with ASD in postsecondary education in the
areas of competence, autonomy and independence, and the development and sustainment of
interpersonal relationships. Given the critical role played by educators in helping students
prepare for post-secondary matriculation, their perspectives in this regard are important. The
perceived environmental and intraper-sonal difficulties identified by educators relate closely
to postsecondary challenges identified by parents and students with ASD themselves (Cai
and Richdale, 2016; Elias and White, 2017). Parents of those with ASD cite difficulties with
self-advocacy, managing emotions, and adaptive skills as primary challenges for their
children in higher education (Elias and White, 2017; White et al., 2016). Collectively, this
body of research suggests increased need to foster skill development to promote
independence *prior to* postsec-ondary matriculation, along with supports for students once in
college. Future studies should consider examining the relationships among the opportunity
to experience failure in achieving independence, and competence in students with ASD, as
failure attribution is related to learning.

The themes identified by educators align closely to the diagnostic criteria of ASD. Given
that social-communication impairments persist into emerging adulthood in ASD and appear
to affect success in college as well as diminish age-appropriate independence, this study's
results underscore the importance of both continuation, or gradual fading, of existing
supports during this transition and systemic change within postsecondary change (e.g. policy
reform) to address the needs of neurodiverse students, including those with ASD.

It is of utmost importance that knowledge about, and acceptance, of students with ASD in
postsecondary education be promoted to foster broader change. This is particularly salient as
educators appeared to tie problematic behavior to the ASD diagnosis, which in most cases is
not treated to remission. Educational initiatives related to acceptance and neurodiversity
along with participatory practices from students themselves may benefit students with ASD
as well as others (e.g. those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)).
Additionally, administrators may benefit from understanding how certain regulations (e.g.
Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972) may impact those in the ASD community.
For example, educators indicated that students with ASD desire meaningful interpersonal
connections, but a host of related factors including heightened social anxiety, lack of self-
determination and ability to assert self, and poor self-regulation may contribute to both

heightened risk of sexual victimization in college as well as risk for perpetration of offenses such as stalking (e.g. Schry and White, 2016).

The primary limitation of this study is the relatively small number of discrete groups and minimal data saturation (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Additionally, although not unique to this study, studies utilizing focus groups introduce the possibility of specific members of the group pressuring others to conform (Dimitroff et al., 2005). Despite these limitations, this study systematically gathers the opinions of educators from distinct educational institutions. It appears that independence-related training, social competence and relationships, and planning/problem solving should be incorporated into transition planning for students with ASD, beginning in the high-school years.

Acknowledgments

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1. Tell us about yourself – your first name, your job title, the type of institution you work at (i.e 2 yr/4yr college)
2. Please talk about your experience in working with 16-25 year old students who have ASD
3. What do you see as the biggest hurdles, or challenges, encountered by students with ASD preparing to transition out of high school and into post-secondary schooling? (please think about the students themselves and their parents or caregivers)
4. In your experience, what are some strengths that you see in students who have ASD?
5. What areas of life and schooling are most problematic, where they may need the MOST help?
6. If money and staff were no issue, what types of supports and services would you like to be able to provide to help students with ASD transition out of high school and into post-secondary education?
7. What would you like to tell parents of students with ASD about transition (e.g., what they should plan for and help with)?

Figure 1.
Focus group questions.

Table 1

Demographic information of participants.

Demographic Information	High-school focus groups		Postsecondary focus groups	
	Focus group 1	Focus group 2[a]	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
N	6	4	5	5
Female (%)	50	100	80	80
Years of experience with ASD (M, SD)	18.33 (15.05)	11.75 (10.70)	11.90 (13.77)	22.40 (8.17)
School classification	High school (educators from one school district in attendance)	High school (educators from two school districts in attendance)	4-Year university	2-Year community college
Student total enrollment[b]	2941	3544; 4694	25,384	5207
Free and reduced meal (%)[c]	37.38	74.78; 26.35	N/A	N/A
Financial aid (%)	N/A	N/A	39	76

ASD: autism spectrum disorder; SD: standard deviation.

[a] Educators from two neighboring school districts participated in this focus group.

[b] High school: students per school district; postsecondary: undergraduate students only.

[c] Free/reduced meal percentages are collected annually in the United States and serve as a proxy for household income. Access to free or reduced-price meals is determined by household size and income as they relate to federal poverty guidelines. The reported percentages indicate the number of students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meal benefits. However, it does not report the number of students who access the service.