



Evidence Summary

There Can Be No Single Approach for Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Academic Libraries, but Sensory-Friendly Spaces and Clear Policies May Help

A Review of:

Anderson, A. (2018). Autism and the academic library: A study of online communication. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(5), 645-658. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.5.645>

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate how people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) discuss their experiences in academic libraries in an online community of their peers.

Design – Qualitative content analysis.

Setting – Online discussion forum.

Subjects – An unknown number of registered members of *Wrong Planet* (wrongplanet.net), who self-identify as having ASD and have posted about academic libraries on the public discussion board since 2004.

Methods – Potentially relevant *Wrong Planet* public discussion board threads posted between 2004 and an undisclosed collection date were retrieved using an advanced Google search with the search strategy “library; librarian; lib; AND college; university; uni; campus” (p. 648). Each thread (total 170) was read in its entirety to determine its relevance to the study, and a total of 98 discussion threads were ultimately included in the analysis. Data were coded inductively and deductively, guided by the research questions and a conceptual framework which views ASD as being (at least partially) socially constructed. Coding was checked for consistency by another researcher.

Main results – *Wrong Planet* members expressed a variety of views regarding the academic library's physical environment, its resources, and the benefits and challenges of interacting socially within it. Many members discussed using the library as a place to escape noise, distraction, and social interaction, while other members expressed the opposite, finding the library, its resources, and its patrons to be noisy, distracting, and even chaotic. Social interaction in the library was seen both positively and negatively, with members appearing to need clearly defined rules regarding collaboration, noise, and behaviour in the library.

Conclusion – While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting students with ASD in academic libraries, the findings suggest it may be beneficial to provide sensory-friendly environments, designate defined spaces for quiet study and for collaboration, clearly state rules regarding noise and behaviour, and provide informal opportunities to socialize. The author also suggests libraries raise awareness of the needs of ASD students among the entire academic community by hosting events and seminars. The author plans to build on these findings by surveying and interviewing relevant stakeholders.

Commentary

This study adds to the small body of literature exploring how to support tertiary students with ASD. The author has positioned the research within a paradigm that views ASD as "a neurological difference that has been socially constructed as a disorder" (Molloy & Vasil, 2002, p. 659), while still accepting ASD as a legitimate diagnosis. Through this lens, the author has focused on how we can make environments more inclusive rather than on how the behaviour of those with ASD can be modified.

The article was reviewed using a critical appraisal tool (Glynn, 2006), a qualitative content analysis trustworthiness checklist (Elo et al., 2014), and advice found in Schreier (2014). Several strengths and weaknesses were found.

The method used was appropriate for answering the research questions. The use of existing data from a third-party website was pragmatic and no doubt cost-effective, but this has led to some limitations. Specifically, readers do not know how many individual users contributed to the data, nor do we know their demographics or diagnostic status.

The author reported her findings logically and made judicious use of quotations. The suggestion, however, to educate neurotypical staff and students about ASD by hosting events in the library does not appear to come from the data. Indeed, the author has not provided any quotation in support of this recommendation, and it appears to come more from a position of advocacy than a position which "seeks to understand experiences as described by the individuals themselves" (p. 648).

Further, the researcher did not outline details regarding the amount of data collected and analysed (e.g., number of responses per discussion thread). Readers, therefore, cannot know how much data the researcher used in drawing her conclusions.

The author states her coding was double checked by a volunteer, but she has not disclosed the degree of consistency between herself and the checker. Further, the author does not describe what specific actions she took to improve her coding in response to this checking. Additionally, the researcher has not provided detailed definitions of the coding themes used. Particularly, the theme "library as place" could be further defined and differentiated. For these reasons, it is difficult for readers to judge the validity and overall quality of the coding frame (see Schreier, 2014).

A goal of libraries globally is to provide equitable services for everyone in their communities (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA], 2016), and this study contributes to this goal by bringing attention to a potentially underserved user group. Additionally, the contradictory nature of the results highlights the importance of recognizing the differences

between individuals within a group. The study also demonstrates a practical, useful and unobtrusive way to use extant data to gain insights into our user communities.

References

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