Autism & Higher Education: Nested Hidden Curricula

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Positionality
A few words on autism

Autism acceptance movement

Medical model
A few words on autism

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Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder

- **National Autistic Society* (UK)**
  - Around 700,000 autistic people in the UK (1.1% prevalence).
  - Recognised that autism in women is underdiagnosed.

- **US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** (2018)
  - 1 in 59 children diagnosed with ASD (1 in 37 boys; 1 in 151 girls).

- **9770 students (0.4%) with social communication/ASD in UK Higher Education in 2016/17*** (Advance HE, 2018)

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*** Although note an additional 27695 students (1.2%) have “two or more impairments” which may include ASD.
Hidden curriculum in the autism literature:

- Unwritten rules of social behaviour that exist in the world at large.
  (Myles, Trautman & Schelvan, 2004)

- “Social information that is not directly taught but is assumed that everybody knows.”
  (Endow, 2010)
Autism & The Hidden Curriculum of the University

“The hidden curriculum, as a whole of informal and explicit demands, appears to be alive and active in university next to the formal and explicit demands.” (Bergenhenegouewen, 1987: 541)

In a survey of autistic HE students in the US;

- 80% stated that they had the academic skills to succeed in university;
- 41% stated that they had the required social skills.

(Gelbar et al., 2015)

In a recent UK study:
- “The constant struggle to look “normal” can lead to increased levels of anxiety and social withdrawal...”

(Gurbuz et al., 2019)
Autism & The Hidden Curriculum of the Course

“...information processing speed, time management, group work, presentations, motivation to study, following lectures, and asking questions can all be significant challenges [for autistic students]”

(Gurbuz et al., 2019)

- What are expectations in class?
- How to formulate questions?
- How to focus in over-stimulating spaces?
- Understanding what is required.
- Not reading between the lines.
Autism & Higher Education: Nested Hidden Curricula

World

University

Course
Some thoughts on autism friendly curricula

- Activate deep interests and provide spaces in the curriculum to explore them.
- Offer choice, but balance that with structure and guidance.
- Think carefully about the role of collaborative learning: scaffold engagement and support the building of social networks.
- To help build routine and predictability, establish a course portfolio of types of classes, learning activities and assignments and allow time for students to become familiar and comfortable with these.
- Don’t underestimate the typical anxiety load for an autistic student - try not to add too many additional stressors.
- Provide space for decompression and down time between classes, assignments...
- Work beyond accommodations towards inclusion.
The challenge...the potential

“In order to have a positive college experience, individuals with Asperger syndrome need to have experiences that are free from fear, anxiety, and excessive stress.” (Glennon 2001)

“Postsecondary institutions are in a unique position to use the insight from disability studies to help all students, including autistics, forge positive identities.” (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016)

To achieve this we need to appreciate the nested hidden curricula experienced by autistic students, and develop open curricula within which they can enhance and channel their autistic attributes towards their interests and goals, rather than one which conditions them to function in a neurotypical world.
The challenge...the potential

Who will be your next autistic student?

What will you do to help them achieve their potential?

https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1112954917826842624
References


Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (no date) Data & Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder [online] https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html [Date accessed 10/07/19]


