

**SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly delivery focused on students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) entering higher education. The whole delivery was comprised of two parts. First was a case study focused on a girl with ASD on the verge of the transition to higher education, and the choices that the education system forced her to make in terms of support. Second was an empirical study which aimed to analyze support structures and the impact these supports had on the lived experiences of students with ASD in higher education. The study used a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative coding methods to identify three areas of support: Academic, social, and familial. The research revealed an interconnectedness of support structures, with multiple implications for future researchers, educators, and students.



**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS
Letter of Approval**

May 18, 2023

Dr. Hindman:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2023.04.021 for your study titled, **“Origins of Support: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Higher Education”**, meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Use of Human Subjects in Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **May 18, 2024**.

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval.
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include

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**The Transition from High School to Higher Education and the Effect it has on
Students with Autism**

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Abstract

Olivia is a high school student with Autism, nearing the end of her senior year. She is nervously anticipating the transition to college and all of the changes that will bring. However, she learns that these changes will be more drastic than she first expected. The college she will be attending has presented her with a dilemma, and she must now choose between her own expectations and reality. This case study is a narrative of a girl with Autism on the verge of the transition to higher education, and the choices that the system will force her to make.

Keywords: special education, higher education, transition

The Transition from High School to Higher Education and the Effect it has on Students with Autism

Students in K-12 public school and special education are afforded certain rights and support through Individual Education Plans, regulated under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 (NCLD, 2021; USDE, 2019; USDE 2020a). These supports include accommodations to help students overcome academic, social, and emotional challenges to access the same opportunities as their typical-performing peers. However, once students transition to higher education institutions, which are not federally mandated to uphold these supports, the accommodations offered are typically more general and less individualized (Rein, 2021). This change of support and increase in accountability, among the other typical stresses of this transition, place a higher level of pressure on students on the autism spectrum. This case study emphasizes the fallacies of the transition from high school to higher education for a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Case Narrative

Monday, January 11th, Walker High School

High school senior Olivia Stoll walked quickly to her third class of the day, math. As she walked through the crowded halls of her high school, she swiftly dodged backpacks, lockers, and the swarms of teenagers lingering around. Her eyes were pointed at the floor. Olivia's pace was significantly heightened, as she knew there was an important exam in her class today. The hours of studying raced through her head, causing her heart to feel like it was going to climb up her throat and escape. Olivia's stride faltered as these thoughts threatened to send her into a panic attack. She slid into one of her favorite hiding places, a small crevice where four lockers were removed last year. She

often ducked into this hideaway to recollect herself from the sensory overload that was a high school hallway. As her thoughts raced, her right hand automatically reached into her jacket pocket and emerged again with a familiar rhythm. Her fingers masterfully manipulated a fidget cube, becoming their own entity, a small task force sent by her brain to refocus. She pulled the strings on her hoodie with her other hand so the opening would close, putting slight pressure on her face. Olivia let her mind drift for just a minute, humming along with the music playing softly in the earbuds she always wore in low-structure situations. She tried to imagine her heart matching the rhythm of the music, as Mr. Laramy had suggested. Of course, she knew this was preposterous. Hearts beat as a result of electrical impulses, not piano keys. However, Mr. Laramy was friendly and had helped Olivia come a long way, socially, emotionally, and in reading and math.

Math! Olivia's eyes flew open. She quickly walked the 57 steps it took to get to her math classroom and walked in the door, eyes wide and heart beating like a high-intensity symphony. The whole class was seated, and she was the last one. She walked quickly to the teacher, a petite older woman named Mrs. Wallaby, who looked up kindly at Olivia over her glasses. Mrs. Wallaby was a little shorter than Olivia, always wearing pantsuits with different colored scarves that made Olivia's skin itch just by looking at them. She had curly gray hair that was always gathered up high on her head with pencils sticking out. She had precisely 32 freckles across her cheeks and nose and one large mole tucked behind her left ear. Olivia did not like to look directly into people's eyes for very long, but she found that it was pretty close if she looked at their cheeks and nose.

"Mrs. Wallaby, I am sorry I am late," Olivia whispered breathlessly, the cardiac symphony entering the largest crescendo of the piece. Her hand flew across the buttons

and dials on the fidget cube as she waited to hear what her teacher said. "That is perfectly fine, Olivia. We have not started yet. I wanted to give everyone a chance to get settled," Mrs. Wallaby replied. Then she stepped just a little closer and whispered, "I knew you would be here; I would not have started without you. Take a deep breath, go have a seat, and get your things ready." She winked. Olivia smiled her picture-day smile because she knew Mrs. Wallaby was very kind to her all the time. She usually used her everyday-smile to get through most social situations. Her picture-day smile was saved for special things such as picture day (at her mom's insistence), visits to grandparents, her best friend Avery, getting to see the elephants at the zoo, and Mrs. Wallaby.

Olivia held her picture-day smile for exactly two seconds, a socially acceptable amount of time. She turned and went to her seat. It had taken her several tries to find the right seat in this classroom at the beginning of the year, but she found one that suited her. It was the perfect distance from the air vents, in the front row to limit distractions, but not too close to the ticking clock or the girl with the fruity perfume. Olivia sat down and got out her test day pencil, a backup pencil, three pieces of scratch paper, and one eraser. She also got out her calculator. She arranged everything on her desk neatly and switched her fidget cube to her left hand so she could get ready for her test.

Mrs. Wallaby looked over at Olivia from the front of the room, and Olivia nodded a slight nod. "Okay, everyone! Let's get this going. You have the rest of the class to finish this test. It is 35 questions. Please remember to show your work, and good luck!" Mrs. Wallaby announced as she began to pass out the tests. She gave everyone a copy of the test and then slid Olivia's test on her desk last. Olivia wrote her name deliberately at the

top, careful to stay on the line provided. She read over the notes written in Mrs. Wallaby's neat handwriting at the bottom of the page:

Olivia, do not worry about the time. You have the rest of the day to finish the test.

I have already given your next teacher a heads up. If you need any help reading the questions, please put the green card on the corner of your desk. I have also crossed out seven of the questions, and you may skip those. Also, as always, you may have a calculator and your music. Good luck!

Olivia took a deep breath and tucked her long dark hair behind her ears, so it would not brush against her hands while she was working. She ran her fingers along the soft fabric of her shirt, feeling the seam where the collar met the shirt. She took exactly five deep breaths and then picked up her pencil and began her test.

Olivia sat outside the counselor's office in one of the hard chairs with the paisley cushions that probably came with the school when it opened. She fidgeted uncomfortably, wishing she could stand. However, the receptionist had asked her to have a seat, so Olivia sat. Just then, she smelled lavender and lilac, heard the quick steps of someone running late, and her mom came around the corner. Her face was red, and her auburn hair was loosely pulled up in a bandana, spilling over like spaghetti leaving the plate. She approached the counter and had to carefully redistribute the weight of the folders and notebooks in her hands to sign in. Olivia admired her mom for always balancing the chaos, as she did with the folders precariously balanced in her arms. Olivia knew it had not always been easy for her in school, discovering new sensory situations that overwhelmed her, navigating awkward social interactions that would often send her into a

tailspin, not to mention the academic obstacles. However, through every panic attack, inexplicable outburst, and milestone, her mom had ridden the waves with her.

"Hey Olls, sorry I'm late," her mom said as she plopped down in the uncomfortable chair next to the one where Olivia sat. "That's okay, Mom," Olivia replied.

"Oh! How was your math test, sweetie?" her mom asked excitedly, dropping her armload of things on the floor and turning to look at her daughter.

Olivia replied, "I think it went great. Mrs. Wallaby had me do 28 problems instead of 35. I knew the answer to 26 of the problems she gave me. For the other two I could not figure out what to do. But instead of leaving them blank, I took a guess. It took me 78 minutes to finish the test."

Her mom beamed. Olivia knew that her mom would beam even if she only answered two questions. The fact that she was able to manage her anxiety to take a test was a big deal. Her mom opened her mouth to say something else, but just then, the counselor's door opened with a large creak that made Olivia cringe and wrap her hand around her fidget cube again.

Olivia's counselor, Mr. Jacobs, appeared in the doorway. Mr. Jacobs was a very tall man, so Olivia had to tilt her head way back even to see his cheeks. He was smiling and gesturing for them to come into his office. Olivia walked in behind her mom. Mr. Jacobs' office smelled like coffee, and he had the window open just a crack, so a cool breeze was slipping into the room. Olivia pulled the zipper up on her jacket all the way and sat down in one of the oversized blue chairs in front of Mr. Jacobs' desk. Olivia liked these chairs better. Her mom sat to her right, and Mr. Jacobs walked around to sit in the chair on the other side. His computer hummed quietly. The small waterfall he had on the

bookshelf tinkled as the water drops hit the rocks below and began their journey up to the top again. Before the door closed, Olivia heard another set of familiar footsteps, and she turned to see Mr. Laramy walking in the door. Mr. Laramy was young, Olivia thought, compared to her other teachers. She had been in his class for resource for all of high school. She had had resource classes before high school, but she liked Mr. Laramy's class the best. The smaller class for her to practice her math and reading and get help with social situations was nice. Mr. Laramy always wore a bowtie and suspenders and had long curly hair. He mainly wore it in a bun at the top of his head. He had a kind smile and always treated Olivia like she could do anything she put her mind to, regardless of her being a student with Autism.

Mr. Jacobs's voice interrupted her train of thought, "Alright so, Olivia how is everything going?" She turned back to look at him as Mr. Laramy pulled a chair up to sit on the other side of Olivia's mother.

Olivia said, "It's going good, Mr. Jacobs. I think I did well on my math test today. I was very nervous about it, but I tried to match my heartbeat to my music and used my fidget cube, which helped me calm down. Mrs. Wallaby also was very nice."

Her eyes moved to Mr. Laramy's face, and she saw him smile at the mention of her using her strategies. Mr. Jacobs and her mom were also smiling. Mr. Jacobs spoke. "That's great, Olivia. Congratulations. You have worked hard, and it shows. I think that you will be able to carry these skills with you to college next year." The whole room seemed to hold its breath all at once. Olivia knew they were waiting for her reaction. She was nervous about college next year. Very nervous. It had been hard enough to move from middle school to high school, and that was with all of the support she had in place

moving with her. At their last meeting, Mr. Jacobs told Olivia that college would be different. The accommodations she always had, like those she used on her math test this morning, would be different. Olivia knew she could not show them her level of panic. Her fingers continued the rhythm of the clicks and spins on the fidget cube in her pocket. She shifted in her chair and made herself look at Mr. Jacobs' eyes. They were brown and hidden under heavy eyebrows furrowed with worry. She felt her mom lean towards her. "Yes, college," Olivia said, adding on a small smile for good measure. Mr. Jacobs' eyebrows returned to their original resting place, and Olivia dropped her gaze to the little trinkets he had on his desk. "Yes, college," he repeated, observing Olivia's face. Luckily for her, he did not comment on whatever he saw there. He continued the conversation:

So, I spoke to the advising office again at Parker University. I know they have the Zoology program you are interested in, Olivia. They informed me that they do not have any specific programs to help students with different abilities. The woman I spoke to said they do have a Student Services office that can help draft a letter for Olivia to give to her professors informing them of some accommodations to give her. These include...

"But wait," Olivia's mom interjected. "They aren't going to speak to her professors for her?"

"That is correct," Mr. Jacobs replied solemnly. "They can give her the letter, but it sounds like asking for the accommodations and ensuring they are put in place is up to Olivia."

Her mother replied, "What happens if we run into the same situation as with the SAT, and they refuse to give her the accommodations? Will this office help her? Maybe I could speak to them-" her mom had scooted to the edge of her chair, her rear end barely with anything to perch on. Her hands were ruffling hurriedly through her stack of papers.

Olivia recalled the SAT fiasco. The school had set up the SAT to be given through an outside proctor, and the proctor had denied Olivia's request for extra time and oral administration. Olivia's mom had filled out every piece of paperwork they handed her to appeal this. Some of the paperwork they had given her multiple times. It took weeks, and in the end, her mom had called the proctor's office every two hours, every day, until they had figured out a way to get the accommodations put in place. They had thrown out every excuse in the book, from lack of resources and staff, to lack of approval from their superiors, to claiming Olivia did not need the accommodations. Her mom had stood sure-footed in the face of all of it, never wavering. Olivia tried to picture herself standing up to her college professors like that. However, she did not focus on those thoughts too long, or it would indeed cause her to panic. Mr. Jacobs had cut her mom's sentence off, and the conversation had continued.

Unfortunately, it sounds as though the college does not have a huge setup for students with disabilities. From what I understand, they don't have a lot of students who self-identify as having disabilities, and the school cannot ask. Now, the good thing is Olivia is going into this letting them know what she needs. The adjustments we will have to prepare for are that they offer fewer accommodations, and more accountability will be placed on her shoulders. I hear your concerns

Marie, but we need to stay realistic and prepare Olivia for what world she is entering. What do you think, Mr. Laramy?

Mr. Laramy replied calmly:

I agree with you, Marie. I am nervous about how different things will be next year. But I have known Olivia for four years now, and I know she has come a long way in a lot of ways. We still have six months until she goes to college, and we can work with her to prepare her. I will also always be here for you and Olivia, should you ever need anything,

Her mom stopped ruffling through the papers and sat back in her chair. Olivia looked at her mom's face and knew she wanted to say more, but she was trying to refrain. Mr. Jacobs continued, "Okay, so the other thing I wanted to bring up to you, Olivia, is well," he cleared his throat nervously. He continued:

The college advising office had some concerns, and they insisted I voice them to you. Now, I know you have come a long way, and I know you want to major in Zoology. They are... concerned because it is a fairly rigorous program.

He had been staring at the paper in his hands this whole time. Now he looked up at Olivia and he looked... she wasn't sure. Embarrassed? He stated hesitantly:

They wanted me to inform you that the classes move pretty fast, and the content is... intense is the word they used, I think. Now, you can do whatever you put your mind to Olivia, but they suggested maybe looking into their programs for landscaping or journalism. They recommended these because the class load is lighter, the pace is slower, and they have professors teaching those classes with a special education background.

Again, the collective breath was being held. Olivia's mom could not hold in her thoughts anymore. She stood up and shouted:

No. Absolutely not! That is ridiculous. Just because it is *easier* for *them* does not mean that's what she should do. Olivia has always wanted to work with animals, and it took a lot for her to choose this program. *They* need to accommodate her. It is *not her* job to accommodate them!

Mr. Laramy nodded his head, but his eyes steadily looked at Olivia, waiting for her reaction. To everyone's shock, including Olivia's, tears began to roll down her cheeks. Thoughts were racing through her mind. What did this mean? Would she not get to work with elephants? She had to have a zoology degree to work with elephants. Did the college not want her? Maybe the SAT people were right, something was wrong with her, and she shouldn't even try to go to college. Maybe she should take what she could and just go into journalism. She hated writing, but maybe that's where she belonged. She could learn to like it or survive it at least. And they said that's where the teachers are who will help her. Maybe Zoology was just too high of a goal, and she should adjust her expectations. Maybe college just wasn't for her. "Olivia?" Mr. Laramy whispered gently. "What's on your mind, kiddo?"

Olivia tried to slow her accelerating heartbeat. Her hand moved across the fidget cube as if her life depended on it. She looked around the room to all the people in her corner and burst out in a defeated voice, "It seems like if I want to get the things that help me, I have to choose a different degree. If I choose the degree I really want, I will only get a little help. How do I choose? What can I do?"

Teaching Notes

The number of students enrolling in higher education institutions has increased drastically around the world in recent years, and the rate of these students dropping out has increased by an equally alarming rate, (Pacheco et al., 2021). The reasons that students with disabilities struggle in higher education institutions are diverse. When narrowed down the difficulties can be attributed to a decrease in individualized support, an increase in social pressure, independence, and academic rigor, and a lack of specialized training by faculty.

Students with disabilities are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Act from kindergarten until high school public education, (U. S. Department of Education, 2020a). The United States has passed Discrimination laws to protect these students in higher education, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, (U. S. Department of Education, 2020b). While these laws help protect students' right to an equal opportunity at a quality education, many times students and their families are not well versed in what their rights are, (Hong et al., 2007). Janiga and Costenbader (2002) determined through a study of high school transition programs that these programs often do not do an adequate job preparing students with disabilities for the skills they will need to succeed in higher education life and courses.

Higher education coursework entails an increased amount of independent work, more abstract higher order thinking skills, and less contact with the teacher than in grade-school. All of these components present barriers for students with learning disabilities, (Hong et al., 2007). With an increase in academic pressure, students rely more on social relationships for support, which can prove to be difficult to build and maintain in a new

environment, (Pacheco et al., 2021). In academics, students with disabilities struggle to take initiative and advocate for their own learning needs, especially when they are not explicitly taught how before they leave high school. (Hong et al., 2007; Rosenbaum, 2004). An increase in communication between higher education instructors and student disability services offices would alleviate much of this difficulty.

Murray (2008) discussed the immense responsibility faced by higher education faculty members who teach students with disabilities. As the facilitators of learning, faculty are expected to uphold the integrity and rigor of the courses they teach, while also accommodating any diverse learners with documented needs. However, many faculty members do not have much experience working with students with disabilities, thus they are left to make decisions about how to accomplish this on their own, (Hong et al., 2007). Morina Diez et al. (2015) found through previous research that faculty tend to be less than enthusiastic when it comes to providing support for students with disabilities. This comes from a lack of time, a lack of monetary incentive for the extra time spent, a lack of training, and a rigidity when it comes to keeping the curriculum the same. In addition, the authors reference the lack of resources to aid faculty in supporting students with disabilities, as well as the reactive and flimsy nature of higher education policies put in place to support this population of students, (Morina Diez et al., 2015). Without an increase in the effectiveness of higher education policy, and a parallel increase in faculty support and training, students with disabilities will continue to struggle in their acquisition of knowledge at the higher education level.

Students with disabilities rely on support from schools and educators up until the end of high school. When they enter higher education institutions, this support drastically

changes and both sides of this transition are not doing enough to support these students.

The number of students with disabilities enrolling in higher education is steadily increasing, and faculty training, high school transition support, and higher education policies and supports must increase or the dropout rate will continue to rise.

Discussion Questions

1. Based on what you know about Olivia's character and needs, what are some things she needs extra support in doing?
2. Think about your own experience transitioning from high school to higher education. What are some aspects of this transition that may require more support for students like Olivia with exceptionalities?
3. What are the benefits and downsides of Olivia choosing to pursue a degree in journalism?
4. What are the benefits and downsides of Olivia choosing to pursue a degree in zoology?
5. If Olivia decides to pursue her favored degree of zoology, knowing the obstacles that will likely bring with it, what steps would you take as Mr. Laramy or Mr. Jacobs to prepare her for that journey?
6. If you were awarded an open-check grant for your school, what programs would you implement to help students in special education aspire to and prepare for higher education dreams?
7. If you were Mr. Laramy or Mr. Jacobs, how would you advise Olivia? What process or system would you use to help her make the best decision for her?

8. If you were in Olivia's shoes, what choice would you make? Why? Do you think your answer would be different if you had a learning disability?

Teaching Activities

1. Have the students role play different decisions by Olivia and her mom. These scenarios could include:
 - a. Olivia says she is pursuing zoology as her major, despite the hurdles.
 - b. Olivia says she will settle for journalism.
 - c. Olivia decides to give up on college altogether.
 - d. Olivia's mom is outraged and starts talking the legal or protest action.
 - e. Olivia continues crying and says she just doesn't know what to do. She wants you to tell her how to proceed.

Students should think about their reactions to these outcomes, and plan at least 3 next steps they would take in response.

2. Students debate which decision Olivia should make. Decisions could include accepting either degree, giving up on college, fighting the college on this ultimatum, or being undecided for now. Students are given a stance to defend in the debate.
3. Students use a word cloud website to record the aspects of college transition. Then once the collaborative word cloud is made, each student will choose three aspects. They will write an idea for how to help students with each aspect on a separate sticky note. The sticky notes will be placed on tables, grouped by the aspect they refer to. Students will walk around and read the various ideas, discussing the ideas as they walk. To wrap up the activity, the

group will discuss which ideas could be most realistically implemented, and why high schools and colleges should implement these supports.

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Origins of Support: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to analyze support structures and the impact these supports had on the lived experiences of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in higher education. **Research Methods:** Seven current higher education students who self-identify with ASD were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked multiple questions about how and where they find support, and the impact of that support on their higher education journey. Using a critical realist framework, accounts of the lived experiences of these students were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for experiential statements and thematic patterns using principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis. **Findings:** Three themes were identified through the literature and confirmed through participant interviews: social, academic, and familial. Social connection brought participants acceptance, self-awareness, and more direct support. Academic support was often better provided with help from social groups. Familial assistance provided a sense of comfort and stability. The correlation of all areas of support was addressed by participants and analyzed by the researchers to improve higher education life for future students. **Conclusion:** Support for students with ASD in higher education incorporated a multi-faceted structural system. Although social support carried significant weight within this system, many overlapping areas were found in creating accepting and effective environments for personal growth and self-discovery in higher education.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, higher education, interpretative phenomenological analysis, masking, transition

Origins of Support: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education

The number of students with disabilities enrolling in higher education institutions has increased dramatically in the last several decades, making this population one of the fastest growing in recent enrollment years (Gil, 2007; Hong et al., 2007; Mull et al., 2001; Newman et al., 2010). For this study, higher education included colleges, universities, and community colleges. Across the globe, great strides have been taken to improve access to higher education for students with disabilities (Borland & Sue, 1999; Palan, 2021). Significant gaps in support have been identified for students with disabilities in higher education compared to high school (Moriña, 2017). Students with disabilities in high school are provided with more intensive and monitored support, as EC-12 schools are regulated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). As students with disabilities transition from high school to higher education, their role in education morphs from participant to manager. When transitioning from high school to higher education, students gain much more independence and autonomy over their educational experience (Eastman et al., 2021). For students with disabilities, this can be a daunting shift in responsibility. Without support in all aspects of this change, students will struggle unnecessarily in their transition into higher education.

To better understand how to provide this support, educational institutions and educators need to understand the experiences of students with disabilities. The transitional period for students with disabilities begins no later than the student's 14th birthday. A special education committee addresses the student's specific needs and goals. The committee makes plans to help students prepare for their lives after high school. This

includes providing the student and their families with skills and resources to help support the student's future educational and career endeavors (Shaw, 2009). For this research study, the transition from high school to higher education referred to this shift in responsibility and support. Although many researchers have sought to analyze the transition from high school to higher education for students with learning disabilities, a more limited breadth of research exists on the experiences of students with ASD during this transition (Van Hees et al., 2015).

According to the literature, one strategy that decreased the challenge of the transition to higher education was to build a community of support among students (Dutta et al., 2009). Although entering higher education can be intimidating, the transition can be even more daunting for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) when entering alone. Providing students with a community of advocates and increasing social connections helped students self-advocate and stay more engaged in their higher education experience (Borland & Sue, 1999; Griffin, 2010; Holloway, 2001). Students with disabilities who had a network of advocates were found to self-identify earlier, seek help and support through higher education institutions, and overcome obstacles (Lightner et al., 2012). This study aimed to explore students' experiences and identify areas and origins of support in higher education. This information will contribute to the current field of study focused on students with ASD in higher education. Findings from the research are anticipated to improve the experiences of future students with ASD attending institutions of higher education.

Statement of the Problem

The transition to higher education posits many different challenges. A qualitative study by Van Hees et al. (2015) determined what aspects of higher education were a particular struggle for students with ASD. The results were summarized into five main categories: less structure and routine, increased social pressure, time management, sensory overload, and worry about disclosing their disability to staff and peers. Students with ASD often have increased social and sensory needs, a higher need for structure, and resistance to change (Lambe et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2018). Without sufficient support to help students with ASD transition from high school to higher education, students felt overwhelmed and lost. Similarly, Cai and Richdale (2016) concluded that students with ASD were being supported academically but not socially or emotionally in their transition to higher education. Van Hees et al. (2015) determined that more research was needed encompassing students with ASD and their experience transitioning into higher education.

Purpose of the Study

This research study aimed to explore and understand the experiences of students during the transition from high school to higher education who self-identify as an individual with ASD and evaluate supports provided.

Research Questions

1. How do people with ASD experience the transition from high school to higher education?
 - Where does support come from for students with ASD as they enter higher education?

- What are the most formative aspects of the transition to higher education for students with ASD?
- What challenges, if any, do people with ASD face as they transition to higher education?
- From the perspective of students with ASD, what does a supportive environment on a university campus include?
- How important are social, academic, and familial support systems, and how do those support systems interact with or impact each other?

Definition of Key Terms

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autism is a neurodivergent disability typically associated with increased social and sensory needs, a higher need for structure, and resistance to change (Lambe et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2018).

Higher Education. Higher education includes institutions of postsecondary learning such as colleges and universities (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a type of qualitative methodology that seeks to understand a person's experiences through their first-hand account (Smith, 2023).

Masking. Masking refers to camouflaging by hiding personality traits or beliefs to gain more social acceptance or fit into perceived social norms (Hull et al., 2017; Petrolini et al., 2023).

Transition. Transition refers to a change in a given time period, such as that between high school and higher education, including social, academic, and emotional evolutions (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Review of Literature

To understand what the transition from high school to higher education entails for students with ASD, this literature review first explored the barriers students with ASD face during this change. Once barriers were identified, the literature narrowed into how students with ASD overcame obstacles. Intending to identify the origins of support for students with ASD in higher education, the literature review analyzed each significant barrier and the impact of barriers upon students.

Barriers

Many students with ASD found even the most minor changes in the transition to higher education daunting. College campuses are generally much more expansive than high school campuses (Kim et al., 2021). Students in EC-12 special education programs received support on an individualized basis. In higher education, there was an increase in the need for time management, study skills, and academic discipline (Hitchings et al., 2005; Lambe et al., 2019). Explicitly teaching skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, organization, and accountability of one's learning benefited students with ASD as they transitioned to postsecondary education (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Morningstar et al., 2017). With less structure and more academic accountability, college was an overwhelming experience for students who previously had a large amount of structure provided by their K-12 schools.

Aside from the physical differences between high school and college campuses, there was also significant social change in relationships and support. Students with ASD with substantial social support often fared better in transitioning from high school to higher education (Van Hees et al., 2015). Social support groups provided comfort and

confidence for students with disabilities and created a network of resources and shared experiences.

Postsecondary education was not a strictly academic experience, and academics alone were not what students with disabilities found challenging. In EC-12 public schools, many decisions were made and managed by educators. With that responsibility shifting from the faculty to the student after high school, the relationship between the teacher and student shifted when leaving high school and entering higher education (Hitchings et al., 2001). Although the teachers in EC-12 schools anticipated their students' needs and provided support anonymously, the students were required to seek this support for themselves in higher education. Establishing positive faculty relationships strengthened students' overall communities of support. When students had positive experiences with staff, they were more willing to seek help and had a more positive outlook on college (Cai & Richdale, 2016). When this positive support was not provided consistently and intentionally, students with ASD were left with overwhelming feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and anxiety (Van Hees et al., 2015). These feelings had the potential to worsen, leading to students dropping out or giving up on their post-college goals.

Self-Disclosing and Self-Determination

For students with disabilities in higher education, self-advocacy refers to accepting and advocating for oneself (Pfeifer et al., 2021). Self-advocacy has much to do with self-image, self-acceptance, and knowing how to ask for what one needs. Many misconceptions and barriers in college stem from a need for more understanding about seeking help. Once students leave high school and enter postsecondary education

institutions, they must self-identify as a student with a disability (Gil, 2007; Murray et al., 2008; Office for Civil Rights, 2011). Disabilities may carry a negative stigma, making students want to hide this part of themselves. Among the layers of this stigma existed a fear of how peers and professors would perceive the individual (Hong, 2015). However, with authentic and positive staff and peer support, students with disabilities found success and comfort in who they were (Pfeifer et al., 2021).

Creating more rapport between college disability services offices and students before transitioning to higher education may ease some hesitancy, allowing students to seek the help they need. Information and trust frequently dispel the fear of the unknown. Students who did not disclose information about their disability may not have had a trusted faculty member with whom they felt comfortable sharing this information. Another reason students with ASD did not disclose disabilities was a lack of awareness about how to disclose this information (Grimes et al., 2019). Once students self-identified and filed the necessary paperwork to receive accommodations in higher education, there was an inconsistency in how that support was given and maintained across schools (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018). Self-advocacy is more than simply being able to speak up for oneself. Students must also know what to ask for to help them find success. While this success is possible, it took initiative from the student fueled by the support of loved ones (Yssel et al., 2016).

Masking

Students with ASD often struggle with social interactions and demands in a neurotypical society. Although many individuals adopt positive coping strategies to help them overcome these difficulties, adapting to the point of camouflaging one's true self

has been shown to have adverse mental health effects (Petrolini et al., 2023). This idea of camouflaging personality traits is commonly known as masking and recently has been a topic of literature in connection to individuals with ASD. Hull et al. (2017) explored the outcomes of long-term masking and the results it had on individuals' self-perception and mental burnout. Masking may be detrimental to the social, emotional, and mental well-being of students with ASD. Individuals reported feeling as though they were hiding their true selves when they masked to "fit in" and connect with their neurotypical peers. Existing barriers in higher education could perpetuate these negative effects and students' urge to mask themselves.

Faculty

Students with disabilities in higher education repeatedly cited the relationship they had with the faculty as an essential key to success or failure (Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016; Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Moríña Díez et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2008). When faculty seemed to care for students' well-being, socially and academically, students felt more comfortable disclosing their disability and seeking help (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020). Faculty had a direct impact on the success or failure of any student, as they directly monitored how well their students understood the material. High school and higher education faculty significantly influenced students' classroom experiences (Moríña Díez et al., 2015). Educators can be advocates or antagonists along the path of students' education.

The idea of tiptoeing around students with disabilities has been replaced with a more inclusive mindset centered upon a proactive approach to crafting accessible and engaging educational environments for all students (Moríña Díez et al., 2015). Modern

faculty mindsets have been found to focus on deconstructing barriers and replacing them with bridges (Hitchings et al., 2001). This steadfast encouragement offered a wealth of support for students with ASD as they navigated new educational environments and experiences.

Family

Parents were often the most prominent advocates for students and played an essential part in planning their futures (Shaw, 2009). Students experienced different teachers' classrooms and various educational environments across each transition while they were in school, yet parental figures maintained a constant sense of comfort and support (Cheatham et al., 2013; Van Hees et al., 2018). Family was a significant source of support to bridge the gap between high school and higher education. However, with more autonomy on the part of the student in higher education, the role of the family also changed, which led to a potential natural shift in support (Gil, 2007).

Community of Support

A community of supporters and advocates strengthened self-advocacy skills (Borland & Sue, 1999; Holloway, 2001). Providing students with a community of supporters increased social connections that ultimately had positive outcomes concerning engagement in the higher education experience (Griffin, 2010). Students with ASD with a network of advocates were found to self-identify earlier, seek support through higher education, and overcome social and emotional obstacles (Lightner et al., 2012). This community of support included peers, family, faculty members, and virtual communities. This study aimed to define the community of support and explore its components.

Literature Findings

The literature revealed a gap in research that holds strong relevance in today's world. As educational systems continue to learn more about how to accept and support individuals with disabilities, more research has been conducted surrounding students with profound disabilities and learning disabilities (Van Hees et al., 2015). Less information is currently available regarding the experiences of students with ASD in higher education. There is a need to understand how to support this population of individuals and which types of support are the most impactful. As diverse as the world is, college is no longer a one-size-fits-all experience. Understanding the experiences and needs of students with ASD will allow for a more individualized and inclusive higher education structure. This study aimed to contribute to this gap in the current body of knowledge.

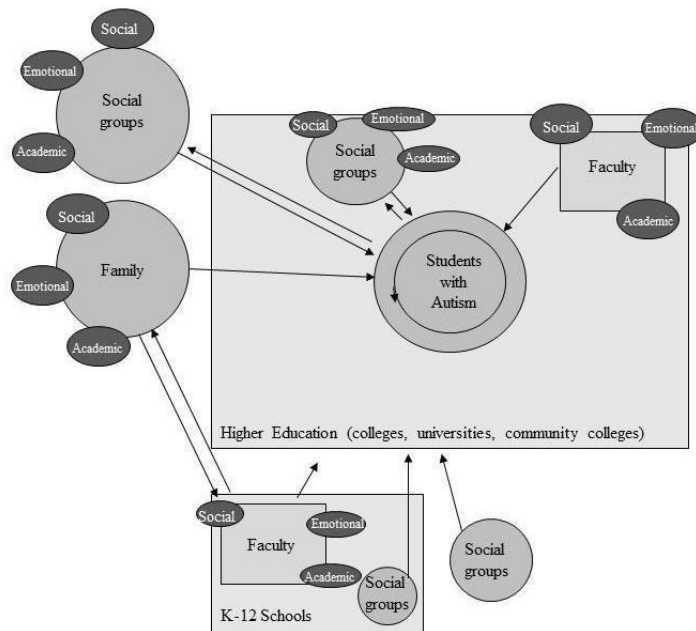
Method

The methodology for this research employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) analyzed the usefulness of IPA in qualitative research. The purpose of IPA is “explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith and Osborn, 2003, p. 53). The foundational basis of IPA research aligned with this research study's exploration of the experiences of students with ASD as they transitioned from high school to higher education environments. A conceptual framework in contrast to theoretical framework aligned with the study purpose and the researchers' endeavor to analyze the experiences of students with ASD. Conceptual frameworks seek to explain aspects of human experiences and emphasize connections that define these experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). The purpose of this study was to better understand

the experiences of students with ASD as they navigated higher education. The IPA methodology employed met this goal. As Figure 1 illustrates, support comes from multiple places for students in higher education. The methodology used in this study aimed to explore those avenues of support through the experiences of individuals, and conceptual frameworks aim to explain the importance of the connections made within these experiences (Miles et al., 2014; Smith, 2011).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Note: Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework based on the study and the assumed areas of support for students entering higher education.

As the figure indicates, certain avenues of support may be assumed, such as those between family and students or faculty and students. The conceptual framework lacks the definition of which supports carry the most weight within the students' journeys as they transition from high school to higher education environments.

The current study aimed to determine which of these avenues of support act as the most vital bridges to help students with ASD overcome the spaces between high school and higher education settings. Current literature suggested that connections to various sources of support are imperative for students with disabilities as they surmount this transitional period. With these connections, at what point do students feel safe enough on the other side of this chasm of educational transformation that they can safely untether previous lifelines?

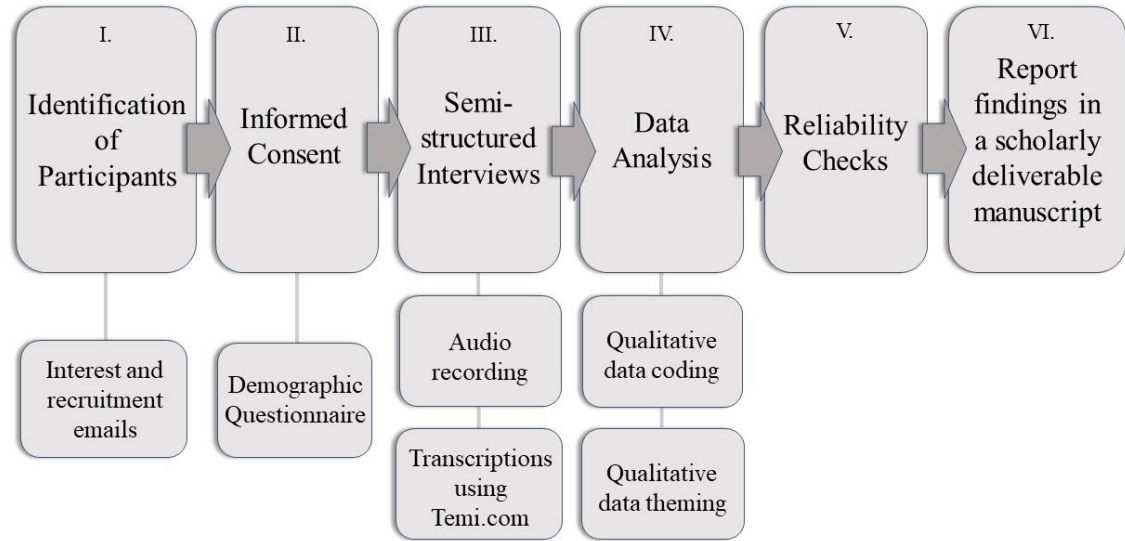
The researchers used semi-structured interviews to understand how and where students with ASD in higher education environments found support and what impact this support had on the journey through their higher education experiences. The approaches within this methodology allowed for more subcategories to be addressed during the interviews. Support is an umbrella term with a great variety of definitions and interpretations. Allowing participants to define this concept through IPA rather than the researchers defining support through more structured study methods allowed for a raw and holistic explanation of this concept (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Research Design

The research design used for this study is illustrated in Figure 2. The descriptive design in the figure shows the steps followed by the researchers, including planning, participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis. The execution of each stage of the design is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

Figure 2

Research Design



Note: Figure 2 illustrates the data collection and analysis procedures for the study.

Participants

Participants recruited for this study were students currently attending a college or university who self-identify as individuals with ASD. These participants were selected from two public Texas universities through an email invitation to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. Emails were sent to potential participants through a social club of students with ASD attending one public university (U1). The emails were also sent to a special programs director at a second public university to invite potential participants (U2). The email invitation included a link to a Qualtrics questionnaire. This questionnaire served as both informed consent and a demographic questionnaire. The answers to these questions were securely stored and used by the researchers to classify participants further to establish patterns in their experiences. After receiving completed questionnaires from participants interested in being interviewed, the researchers intended

to select up to 15 participants to be interviewed for the study. Eight participants from U1 completed the questionnaire, and seven agreed to be interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Information

Identifier	University	Current Level of Education	Received ASD Diagnosis	Interview Location/Length
P1	U1	Undergrad (In Progress)	Elementary School	Face to Face (23:34)
P2	U1	Doctorate (In Progress)	After High School	Zoom (1:23:52)
P3	U1	Undergrad (In Progress)	After High School	Zoom (27:39)
P4	U1	Undergrad (In Progress)	Self-Identified	Zoom (48:16)
P5	U1	Undergrad (In Progress)	Self-Identified	Zoom (26:00)
P6	U1	Doctorate (In Progress)	High School	Zoom (1:04:52)
P7	U1	Doctorate (Completed)	After High School	Zoom (30:06)

Note. This table displays demographic information recorded during participant interviews, for the sake of giving context to each participant's stage of education.

Data Collection

The seven study participants were interviewed in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. One interview was face-to-face, and the other six interviews took place over Zoom. Each participant and the researchers determined the format. Audio from each interview was recorded and later transcribed via Temi.com. The interviews occurred within four weeks after receiving signed, informed consent from participants. Interviews required approximately 30 to 45 minutes for each participant, with some lasting past one hour.

Semi-structured interviews follow a more open-ended format of questioning in which the interviewer can skip questions or add questions. Using this interviewing style allowed the researchers to adjust the interview protocol in real-time based on the

interviewee's responses (Galletta, 2013). Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to understand a person's experience through their account and interpretations (Smith, 2011, 2023). As a method, IPA allows researchers to gain detailed, first-hand accounts of a participant's experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interview structure was guided by an interview protocol and adjusted in real-time based on the flow of conversations and natural pathways formed by the participants' experiences. Consequently, the IPA methodology aligned with this study's focus on human experiences for students with disabilities.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed and transcribed, the researchers used qualitative coding methods to analyze the transcripts for experiential statements (Smith, 2023). These experiential statements were then coded for thematic patterns across the participants' experiences using MAXQDA 2022 software (VERBI Software, 2021). The researchers searched for patterns identifying primary sources of support for students with ASD in higher education.

The researchers used member checking as a technique to ensure the credibility of the findings. Researchers sent the corresponding participant a summary of the themes identified based on each interview transcript. In response, the researchers requested the participants rank the information from the transcript summaries using a scale from one to four, reflecting how accurately the summary represented the interview content. Three participants responded with a four, indicating full approval of the summary. Three respondents responded with a three, agreeing with the summaries and adding additional points to clarify and elaborate on pieces of the information provided. Two participants

specified the importance of financial support for students with disabilities in higher education. The third participant rated the summary a three and a half. This participant elaborated on the importance of acceptance in social support networks, the benefit of material support, and the vitality in failing and learning strategies to overcome struggle.

The coding process involved three levels of analysis. First, the researchers printed the transcripts in a Word document for each interview and coded them by hand. Next, the researchers highlighted the codes identified in the first phase in the Word documents for each transcript. At this stage, the researchers used the CTRL+F feature of Word to locate similar words missed by hand. The last stage of coding used the Word documents to code the transcripts using qualitative coding software MAXQDA 2022. After the transcripts and codes were uploaded into this system, the researchers used document portraits, histograms, and other visual tools to identify the most prominent areas of support. Once all seven transcripts were coded based on types of support identified through the literature and the benefits of those supports, the researchers grouped those codes into themes and subthemes (Table 2).

Table 2*Identified Themes and Subthemes*

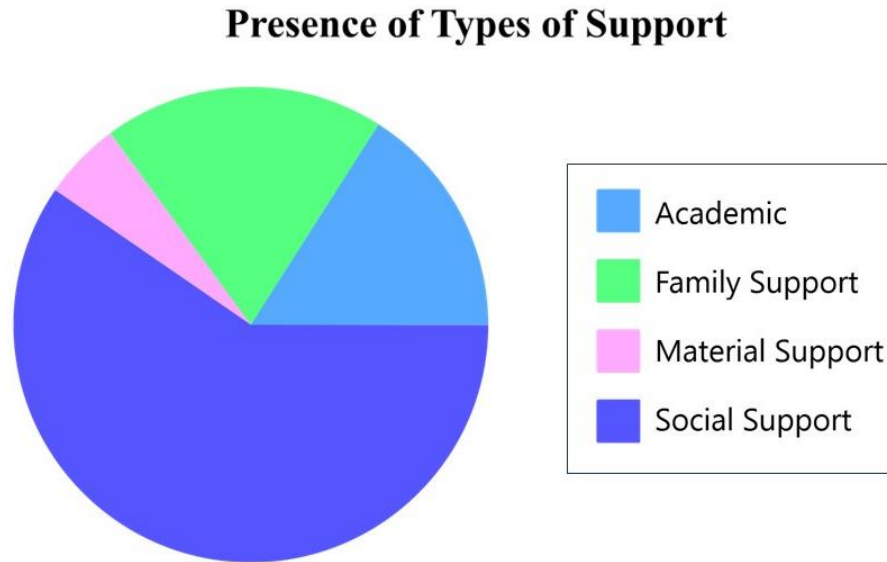
Research Question	Theme	Subthemes
Where support comes from Most formative aspects	Social support	shared experience, understanding, connection
Most challenging aspects	Masking/Unmasking	trust, acceptance, self-awareness, boundaries, discovery of self
Where support comes from	Material support	lifelines, connection
Support system description	Academic support	college prep, accommodations, jumping through hoops, access, professors/advisors
Where support comes from	Familial support	independence, preparedness
Where support comes from Support system description Overlap of supports	Intersectionality/Independence	balance of all supports, self-awareness, boundaries, time management

Findings**Social Support**

Social support was represented in most themes compared to familial, material, and academic support (Figure 3). Participants discussed the emotional, tangible, and systematic benefits social support yielded in their higher education experience.

Figure 3

Presence of Types of Support

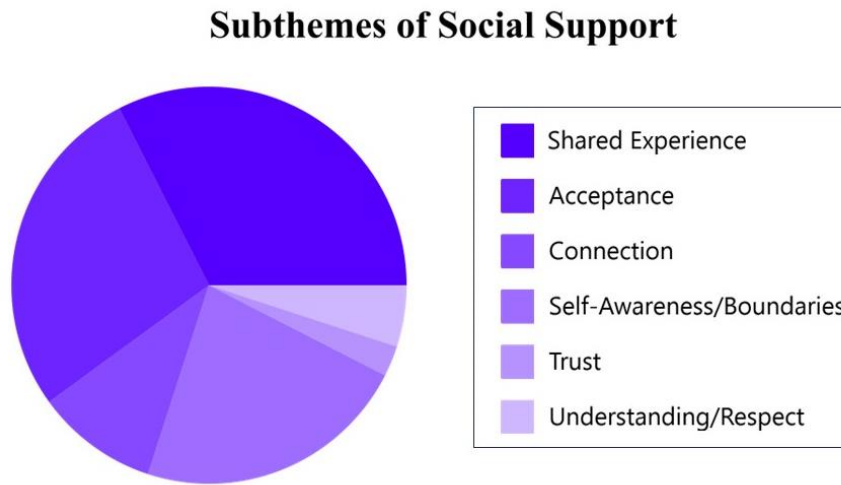


The value of social support that participants described included emotional support, self-awareness, and comfort. P1 stated, “I think the way it's impacted me is that I'm more likely to find support less with the school itself and more with my peers.” While P2 stated, “Social support has been really good for just learning to be myself and learning that that's okay.” P4 reinforced this by stating, “I think friends are sort of the glue that, that keep you from going like, frothing at the mouth insane in college.” P7 mentioned, “I seek comfort from them more than I would my own family.”

Participants discussed multiple characteristics of the benefits social support provided. The researchers coded these attributes into subthemes illustrated in Figure 4 and discussed in the subsequent sections.

Figure 4

Subthemes of Social Support



Shared Experience

Shared experience was the subtheme of social support that appeared most frequently in all interviews. Participants discussed the benefit of having like-minded people in their lives to offer support and first-hand advice. P7 discussed how to find people with shared experiences, and how this process can be different than what the structures put in place predicted. In this portion of the interview, P7 discussed the Living Learning Community at their college, designed to house individuals in similar majors together. P7 stated:

I feel like that's like one of the worst mistakes you can make as a college freshman. Because it puts you in a situation that's exactly like high school where, oh, I see these people every day. And that prompts you to like stay in that high school mindset of these are the people that I'm going to be surrounded by for the

next however many months. I have to make friends with these people specifically.

And your people might not be in the, the Living Learning Community.

P2, P3, and P5 described a similar sentiment, as they discussed finding people with similar experiences and the emotional benefit this presented. P2 stated, “So we all just kind of found each other as kindred spirits and left it at that.” P3 also stated:

Our friends are wonderful. And it's not even talking about autism stuff all the time, it's just having somebody who like has the same brain as me and is on the same wavelength in terms of like how we function and stuff like that.

P5 reinforced by stating. “It’s really nice to be able to talk to other people who are Autistic and stuff like that.” P3 and P4 expanded on this idea by describing how being surrounded by social groups comprised of people living similar experiences had more systematic and emotional benefits. P3 explained, “Friends that struggle in the same ways that I am, discuss what they have done to deal with the problems they have and find solutions to them.” P4 stated:

I do have friends and other people who are familiar with the accommodations process who have offered like, you know, hey, if you do need to do this at any point, reach out to me and I can help you.

Social connections produced benefits in navigating academic and systematic structures that may otherwise be inaccessible. There were also emotional benefits in finding social groups comprised of people who had an inside understanding of how one’s mind worked. This idea of kindred spirits and the benefit of that mentality is explored further in the next subtheme section.

Acceptance

A significant piece of the benefit of social support was centered upon the concept of acceptance. P2 mentioned finding comfort in the social groups they joined in higher education by stating:

But what actually allowed me to recover from depression was being in an environment where I felt safe and comfortable. Learning to open up and be vulnerable, learning to heal and eventually cultivating an environment in which it was safe for me to do those things, safe and possible for me to do those things. Just pretending to be neurotypical, pretending to be normal, trying to fit in, I was doing that level of performance all the time and it was destroying me. It was so exhausting. And so being around other Autistic people on a regular basis in a space where they are also being Autistic, and it really let me let go of that mask.

Participants shared that having a social group of people accept them as individuals then translated into feelings of self-acceptance. Multiple participants shared their hesitancy regarding being labeled Autistic and how that hesitation dissipated with social support.

Self-Awareness

Finding a healthy and supportive social group led to a sense of self-awareness and understanding. Entering higher education involved expanding one's social circles and experiences in the world and creating a new understanding of self in the real world. One challenge of the higher education experience for individuals with autism was trying to fit into molds of neurotypical expectations while also trying to satisfy one's own needs. P1 shared, "I think the way I'm different now is that I'm a little more respectful of my own

boundaries. Here in college I'm much more self-aware of like what I'm comfortable with and what I'm not." P2 echoed these feelings:

And especially Autistic people just going into higher education should be mindful of that and to try and know yourself and what works for you and what is easy for you, what is hard for you and listen to yourself first.

P4 described the deep feeling of self-awareness they found after joining an Autism Social Club at their university. This social club provided insight into who P4 is and led them to a deeper understanding of self. P4 described this experience:

The autism support group that I'm a part of has been immeasurably helpful and positive in not only, I mean in, in every way. I have more friends, I understand myself better, I have a social outlet. I learn a lot about not only myself, but other people. I think those things have been far more, more valuable to me than like any kind of like, I don't know any, anything else in university. They're an invaluable group to me. I can't really imagine university life without them. I can't really imagine outside of university life without them.

Based on the participants' insights, finding a social support system was invaluable for students with ASD. This support system led to a deeper understanding of their identity and needs.

Masking/Unmasking

P2 brought up the concept of wearing a mask and described what it was like to wear the mask through the following analogy. P2 stated:

Like neurotypical people for them, they mask when they're like at a retail job, you know, you're doing customer service, you put on your customer service looks, you put on your customer service smile, and then your customer service personality.

This metaphorical mask was something that P2 described becoming aware of from a young age and something they used to hide parts of themselves they did not understand.

P2 elaborated:

Like my self-esteem was really bad in high school because like I thought deep down I was a monster and I was unlovable because I was constantly pretending to be something that I wasn't and people liked that. And so I assumed that whatever I was hiding must be terrible and unlovable. And so finding a group where I was able to unmask and then be accepted and loved for who I am was like super duper helpful for my sense of self, my sense of self-esteem and self-worth and everything. And I still felt like there was something deeply wrong with me, you know, as an autistic person. I don't feel empathy in the way that a lot of other people do. Like I care about what other people feel, but I care about it on a moral intellectual level where I'm like, I understand that it is bad when people are hurting and I want to be a good person. And so I don't want to people to be hurting, but I'm, I don't feel the emotional pull. Like if I see someone crying, I don't feel an emotional reaction to that. I'm just like, I understand that that's bad. And so I'm coming to ask them what's wrong and try and help because that is what I should do. That is the right thing to do. So it's an ethics rather than emotion kind of motivation there.

Because I didn't have that emotional response. I still had that lingering sense of there's something deeply wrong with me. I'm a sociopath, whatever. And, and that tied into also that sense of masking and hiding who I am, hiding my autistic traits. And so it all kind of meshed together to make me extremely resistant to anyone trying to help, especially on like an emotional level. So I had really high walls.

P2 attributed a large portion of the ability to be comfortable unmasking to the fact that the social club meant being surrounded by people who inherently understood what it was like to be in many situations. Part of being able to unmask was not explaining or justifying reactions to situations. The thoughts expressed by P2 when they discussed learning to unmask suggested that understanding others could help lead to a deeper understanding of self that then may lead to an internal acceptance. P2 elaborated on the feeling of masking and unmasking:

And the support that I've gotten from the Autism Social Club has been really good. It's just been a place where I've learned to unmask. I spent so many years like really forcing myself to like wear a mask all the time. And so being around other autistic people on a regular basis in a space where they are also being Autistic, and it's fine really let me let go of that mask and really allowed me to, like, nowadays I'm better at masking because I'm not exhausted all the time. I can turn it on and then turn it off and it works a lot better. I have more room to do that.

The material support mentioned by P2 was an unexpected aspect of support not anticipated by the researchers when reviewing the literature. This additional origin of support is discussed further in the next subtheme section.

Material Support

When asked about the ideal support structure for a student with autism in higher education, P2 mentioned social, academic, and material support. They defined material support in the following way:

And then material support. So someone who will help you when you are in crisis.

Both someone that you can talk to if you're freaking out or whatever, and someone who will let you crash on their couch or buy you groceries. Someone who will take care of you when you are at rock bottom.

This idea of material support opened a new origin when the researchers analyzed support structures. P2 referenced this type of support multiple times throughout the interview, citing their personal experience of needing support in this way and finding it through previously formed social connections. When asked the same question about an ideal support structure, P6 did not use the same term but discussed a similar concept. P6 described, “Like if you need someone to help you move if you have access to that, that's an important support system that is often overlooked.” This new subcategory of social support suggested a new branch of understanding into what an effective social support system provided.

Understanding, Trust, and Connection

The last three aspects of social support voiced in the participant interviews were understanding, trust, and connection. Similar to the interviewees' ideas iterated in the Shared Experience section, participants emphasized the importance of finding peers who had a first-hand understanding of one's needs and actions. P1 stated, “They also

understand and respect the fact that some of those more extroverted things aren't really for me." P6 described social benefits of the club:

The Autism Social Club provides a social connection. And it provides that core access to social support and like discussion. We constantly have questions and people asking for advice and stuff. But then we'll discuss something if someone's really struggling with something that week they can ask for help.

In summary, all participants voiced the benefits of having social support in higher education, with many concluding that social support was the most beneficial and necessary area of support for them. Having a peer group of kindred spirits who shared similar experiences fostered an environment of trust, understanding, and acceptance. This acceptance was internal and external, often overlapping the two. Favorable social support structures also provided essential benefits in real-life applications when physically navigating life's events or defining one's self-identity. Social support and, in turn, material support were just pieces of the support system discussed in the interviews. Participants also discussed their experiences with academic support.

Academic Support

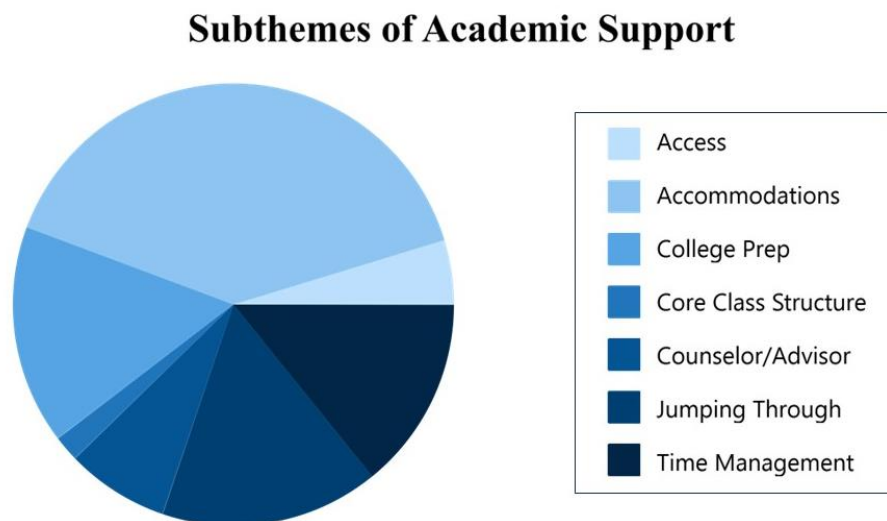
When asked questions about support received from higher education institutions, six of the seven participants talked about accommodations and their decision to either seek or not seek accommodations. Topics also arose regarding the support participants had in high school to prepare them for college and the burden of time management. While participants expressed difficulty in seeking official help from their university, four cited positive relationships with professors and support in high school as beneficial in their transition to higher education.

P5 talked about an ideal academic support system and specified that the support offered should be specific to the individual. P5 stated, “I think it's imperative that it has to be designed for like one-on-one with every student because obviously everyone with autism is different and needs different support for different things.”

Figure 5 shows the subthemes within academic support, as discussed in further detail in the succeeding sections.

Figure 5

Subthemes of Academic Support



Accommodations, Access, and Jumping Through Hoops

Accommodations was a commonly iterated topic during the interviews. Participants discussed apprehension about seeking official accommodations through the university and reasons why they chose not to go through the process. P4 described this process:

Because a lot of the responsibility lands on the students approaching the office and requesting accommodations, which like isn't completely unreasonable, but

also like, if you are to the point where you require accommodations and they're making you, you know, like go through this whole kind of bureaucratic process in order to get them, it's kind of putting you in the same position as the position that you're in where you need accommodations.

P3 went into further detail:

I am very not looking forward to that with having to like ask to get like letters from my practitioner and then go. I'm not looking forward to the process, honestly. It feels like it's really burdensome to deal with all of that.

P4 identified the reason behind the feelings of discomfort by saying, "I also don't like going through bureaucratic. Like, I don't like having to explain and prove to people like things that I need." P1 echoed the feelings of discomfort:

I think the way it's impacted me is that I'm more likely to find support less with the school itself and more with my peers. I think I've grown more trusting of my peers cause they'll, I guess be more direct with me, whereas finding support from the school can involve jumping through a lot of hoops, you know? Which is kind of why I never really bothered seeking support from the university's disability office.

The researchers asked P1 what they meant by their statement that the process can involve jumping through hoops. P1 described:

Well one thing is that they often ask for documents and forms that I don't know how to access or where they're being kept and also I tend to have a pretty busy schedule. So that often sort of sidetracks me from getting the support cuz I have more immediate concerns to deal with.

Other participants also discussed obstacles in requesting, obtaining, and using accommodations at the university. Some referenced a lack of awareness of what supports and resources were available. P5 identified a need for more awareness about available supports by stating, “I think there would be like a lot of like making sure they have access to like resources because like, you know, if you don't know that those resources exist, you're not gonna go seek them out.” P3 also brought up a similar idea by saying, “I wish it was like more known with like what, like support, like in terms of like accommodation the school could offer. It's just like, it feels kind of opaque.” P2 shared their experience with the university accommodations office:

Yeah, so I asked around and I looked on the website and figured it out. But when I actually went into the office, I didn't know much about the actual process. I just figured out where the office was and that like, okay, I'm gonna need some kind of documentation. So I went to the office and I was like, Hey, I'd like accommodations. And they were like, okay, I'll, let's sit down and and figure it out. And so they told me exactly what kind of documentation I needed and I was so, so lucky because if I had gone two months later, my documentation would be out of date and I would need to be reassessed. Because it needs to be within the last five years, even if it's a permanent disability that does not change.

P4 shared their feelings about seeking official accommodations:

I think like it's, I guess it's intimidating, intimidating in the sense that like, I don't wanna do it unless I absolutely have to. Instead of just, you know, thinking like, oh, this is something I can do at any point it's like, no, this is something you, you should only seek out if you really, really, really need to. And I think the reason I

feel like that is because I've heard people talk about how difficult it can be to get a response from them sometimes.

P5 explained the point when they decided to seek official accommodations by saying, “I only started seeking accommodations when I got into college because I ended up like doing really bad on my first math test because I didn't have enough time.” P6 received official accommodations but shared that they chose not to use them because of an internal conflict. They explained these feelings by stating:

I have those accommodations, but I never really used them in undergrad. I believe that I probably would've benefited from it. I think I had internalized ableism towards like not wanting to use any accommodations that I didn't need or that would be unfair for me to use. And I mean, a lot of times I didn't need them, but I know that there were certain times that if I would've had them, it would've been a lot better. (P6)

P4 shared a desire to have the accommodation system structured in a more direct and personable fashion.

It's like, do I have to, like, can't I just say, “Hey, I'm having trouble with this thing. Would you mind trying this or doing this or letting me do this if I'm, you know, in this class or for these assignments?”

P6 summarized their thoughts on the accommodation system by stating, “It's a complicated process to get your accommodations, but once you have them, it's also a complicated process to use them.”

The accommodations system at the university level was not always accessible. There were ways to circumvent the system, but overall, participants expressed a lack of

desire to go through a process that seemed to involve jumping through hoops.

Participants expressed various opinions regarding the value of having accommodations in an official capacity, with the consensus leaning towards accommodations being beneficial but inaccessible in the current system.

College Prep

The degree of college preparation varied across participants in terms of high school style and then pathway to higher education. Of those participants who had more direct preparation for college, the conclusion was that it was beneficial. P2 stated, “So I had a bit of an easier transition than a lot of people because I started taking classes early on.” P4 shared, “I think using a two-year institution as a stepping stone into a four-year institution kind of kept me sane.”

P5 mentioned in their interview that they attended an early college high school. As a follow up the researchers asked what impact that had on their transition to higher education. P5 shared:

I think it made it a lot easier because I was already like used to it. So when I got to college, I was fine cause I was like, that is, oh this is the exact same thing, just not with my family.

P6 also attended a high school that offered college-level classes. They shared that this experience positively impacted the transition from high school to higher education. P6 stated:

Knowing what a college class was like was definitely good. Because you knew a different dynamic. And the flexibility of having the abnormal schedule was in

good sort of when I, when I did my transition to college, the most difficult things was not necessarily the coursework, it was the life stuff.

Taking college classes in high school led to a more predictable and smooth transition for participants, eliminating some variables of the unknown. P6 shared their high school teachers and advisors' had an impact on their path to higher education, discussed further in the next section.

Professors, Advisors, and Counselors

Faculty support from advisors, counselors, professors, and high school teachers was mentioned by multiple participants. Input from these professionals served multiple purposes for participants, from assisting in self-advocacy to navigating higher education processes. P1 stated:

I joined the Texas Workforce Commission, which was called DARS at the time. I don't actually remember what that stands for. But like, essentially they helped Autistic people who had recently graduated high school, like sort of find their footing in college. They helped me get my college education started. If I remember correctly my counselor told me about that.

P5 shared where they received help by saying, "My psychologist had been already talking to me about accommodations. P6 also had help in preparing for higher education, as they shared:

Mrs. Keye was one of the most instrumental helpful teachers in high school because they were one of the special ed coordinators in at our high school who actually focused specifically on autism and helping students understand. One of the things I did was I was like, I was practicing how to actually approach

professors. Because like Mrs. Keye, who was like very, very instrumental to me understanding the world made sure that during the transition out of high school, we did a bunch of different things. And one of them was if we were going to college, that, that's one of the things we focused on. I was very fortunate to have access to that.

In higher education, the variety of professors and teaching styles was sometimes an asset, and other times another obstacle. Having such a wide range of teachers raised some challenges for participants. P7 reflected on their feelings by saying, “If I felt like friendly enough with the professor, I would ask. Otherwise, I'd probably just like, not even, I would just struggle.” P4 discussed academic obstacles as well, by saying, “Some professors are easier to work with than others.”

Participants shared the benefits of having teachers or counselors guide them in their transition to higher education. Part of the support provided included starting conversations that participants did not necessarily know the value of in the moment, such as seeking accommodations and self-advocacy.

Time Management and Core Class Structure

When asked about the most challenging aspects of the transition from high school to higher education, all seven participants named time management as one of the most challenging parts. Participants described difficulty in managing their schedules and having to adjust to being in control of their own time. Some adjusted by strictly managing their routines, while others struggled more with adapting to the change. P2 described, “I obsessively parceled out all of my time and, and made a hyper rigid schedule and wore myself into the ground basically.” P7 shared, “I'd actually say my time management

probably got worse. I think the flexibility, the having the flexibility of a schedule like made it worse somehow.” P6 elaborated on their experience:

And so I had terrible time management skills, something that when I was back at home, my parents helped me a lot with. So the transition from high school to college was never really an issue with was not primarily an issue with coursework. It was an issue with self-living.

The sentiment expressed by the participants was that time management was a difficult but necessary skill when transitioning to higher education. P4 summarized this by saying, “Time management. It's an invaluable skill. You have to learn it.” P6 made a statement linking time management to motivation, stating, “It was the things that aligned with what I was interested in that I was always able to get done.” A similar idea was echoed in P2’s interview:

Generally speaking, there's this perception in culture that school gets harder the farther you go along. That doesn't always apply to Autistic people. College was easier than high school. And grad school has been easier than undergrad. Part of that is that generally you are allowed to spend more time and energy and focus on the things you are specifically interested in.

When discussing the impact of academic support compared to social support, P3 concluded that social support outweighs the support academic offices can provide. P3 shared this conclusion by saying:

The ability to like, discuss techniques, friends that struggle in the same ways that I am, discuss what they have done to deal with the problems they have and find

solutions to them because in a sense practically it's more impactful to have, people that understand.

P6 reflected on the benefits of seeking out and using support that already existed. They stated, “I never joined it, but I definitely should have. Because there are supports that exist out there and you don't have to do it without them.”

Some aspects of the transition to higher education required each person to figure out a system that worked for them. Time management and class structure are two such areas that are so unique to each person that it could be difficult to prepare students for these topics.

Familial Support

Familial support played an instrumental role in the higher education experience for multiple participants. P1 shared the benefit of familial support by saying, “I received most of my support through my family.” P2 stated, “The first person I called was my dad. And, and he got me to calm down and figure out another path and keep up hope at everything. So yeah, family support has been kind of instrumental.” P3 described, “My parents helped me a lot through this process. The school, not so much unfortunately.” P6 echoed the sentiment shared by other participants by saying, “So my parents was one of, that was one of the things I could rely on.”

This support from family helped participants accept their diagnosis and navigate the process of transitioning to higher education. In P6 and P4's experiences, family support was a driving factor in choosing their college location. P6 shared:

And when I chose the college I went to one of the big things was that it was close to where my dad grew up. And therefore my grandma was there and there was a lot of family support around there.

P4 elaborated on their feelings:

I didn't want to just immediately cut ties after graduation. With my family, with my community, long-term friends that attended the same community college. So I would see them on a weekly basis, which is great cuz that provided a sense of like familiarity and comfort.

Familial support provided a sense of familiarity to create a pivoting point for the transition to higher education. A positive familial support system directly impacted choosing a higher education institution and relieved external societal pressures.

Intersectionality and Independence

Intersectionality arose amidst social, material, familial, and academic support. Participants shared a belief that while one area of support may carry more weight than others, there was an interconnectedness that did and must exist. P4 shared:

I feel like if you have any huge gaps anywhere in there, it can throw a wrench into things. Like if you're not getting academic support, if your home life isn't that good, if your social life is not very fulfilling or very active, even if you're just struggling with like a personal insecurity or problems sort of on an individual level, having huge gaps anywhere in there can be kind of a problem cuz they do really work in tandem. Let's see, I don't know if I can say any one particular one of those is more important than the other.

P2 summarized, “That’s an important thing for a lot of us. So yeah. Intersectionality, school culture, accommodations, material support, social support.”

Independence in higher education was a topic noted by the researchers in several interviews, whether stated or implied. Participants shared their thoughts on increasing independence in higher education in terms of making choices and building their educational path. P5 shared their experience by stating, “I was just not doing great, being in a very structured environment where I didn't have a, like a lot of like independence.” P6 described, “I overloaded myself to do too much. It's okay to not go at the same pace as everyone else. You don't have to get out in four years just cuz that's what is expected of you.” P2 elaborated on the aspects of independence they found most helpful. P2 stated:

Like one thing that's really helpful is not having people that reinforce the shoulds. So as I mentioned, when people were like, you should be exercising, you should be doing it this way, you should be doing it that way. That was really harmful for me.

P6 shared that the change in support from high school to higher education was drastic and figuring out how to merge previous supports with the creation of new supports proved be a daunting task. P6 stated:

The biggest thing that I've dealt with was transitioning out of having the previous support structures that I have had forever in my family and being able to access that to having to build those own support structures myself and deal with them from mostly the ground up.

Participants reflected on their experience specifically as students with ASD, and the convergence of perception versus reality. P6 shared, “You can't just rely on the university

support systems that exist for standard students.” P2 summarized, “Neurotypical society emphasizes doing things the right way and doing things like the hard way, no man, do things the easy way and surround yourself with people who accept that and people who support that.”

According to participants’ reflections, an ideal support structure was a multi-faceted creation that productively fostered independence. Transitioning from high school to higher education was not necessarily about building an entirely new support structure, but instead adjusting previous support and existing structures to fit the ever-changing needs of the individual.

Discussion

Analysis

Although researchers took care to remove as much bias as possible, there did exist an inherent level of subjectivity to the analysis of this qualitative study. One of the researchers involved in this study is an elementary special education teacher with a personal connection to one of the participants that may have influenced the level of subjectivity to the codes chosen. The researchers used the experiential coding analysis style discussed by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) to approach the coding process with as much objectivity as possible. After the coding process commenced, the researchers noted that the process of coding these participants’ experiences may have produced statements through the lens of the researchers’ perceptions, experiences, and conclusions.

At the conception of this research study, the researchers created a conceptual framework based on the origins of support identified through the literature. At that stage of the research design process, the researchers wanted to learn about how these most

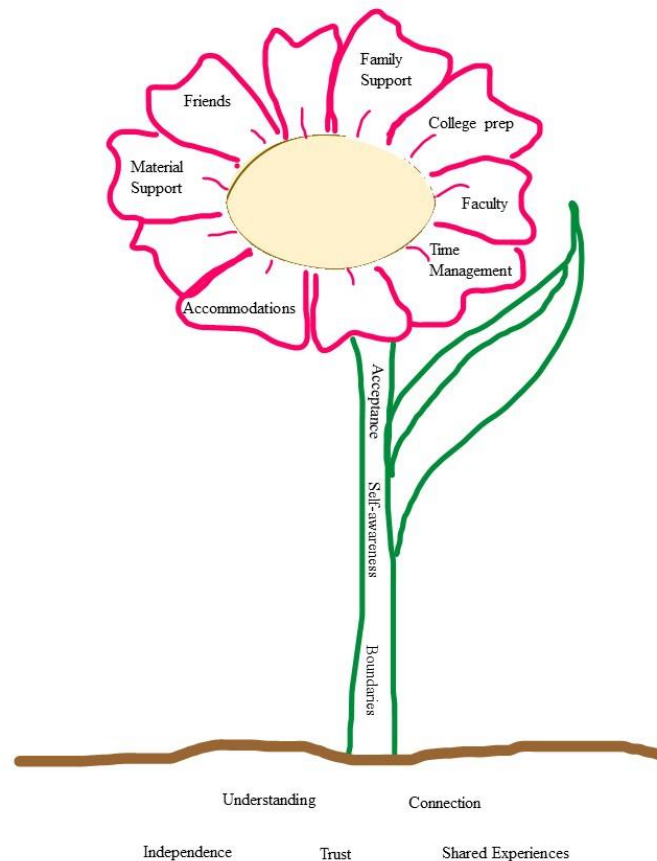
definable supports impacted and interacted with one another. This research study was anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, with an understanding that individuals construct their own reality based on experiences. After the interviews were complete and the idea of intersectionality was addressed by participants, the researchers decided to shift from a flat ontological paradigm to further explore this interconnected nature of supports.

Critical realism is a layered ontology chosen by the researchers as they sought to identify and understand the causal mechanisms that interacted to make the most visible phenomena exist.

As participants expressed in the interviews, support is not one singular thing, but rather a complex and layered compilation of causal mechanisms. Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) used a flower metaphor to illustrate the concept of layered ontology. The researchers incorporated this metaphor in the final analytical stage, exploring the experiential, inferential, and dispositional themes of support within participants' experiences (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Illustration of Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) metaphor for understanding a stratified ontology, applied to the themes from this research study.



The petals of the flower represented the most concretely visible support, such as skills training, accommodations, and material support from faculty, social groups, and family. These supports comprise the experiential themes that emerged during the first stages of the coding process. The themes represented by the petals were reinforced by the conceptual framework that made up the foundation of this study, and the origins of support the researchers discovered through literature. The stem of the flower, which

would be less visible in the top-view of the flower described, represented the inferential themes derived from connections between participants' experiences. These inferred aspects included increased feelings of acceptance, self-awareness, and boundaries. The soil that fed the flower, which represented the least concrete concepts, was made up of the facets of each participant's experience that were necessary for the other themes to flourish. The soil made up the dispositional themes, such as understanding, trust, shared experiences, and connection. The themes of the soil strengthened the inferential and experiential themes the researchers uncovered. The inferential and dispositional themes were the causal mechanisms necessary for the most visible supports to be successful. In sum, the flower metaphor illustrated the connection between the themes identified by the researchers. When the dispositional themes were pinpointed in participant's experiences, the stronger the inferential themes became, which reinforced the already known experiential themes. Referring to the conceptual framework used as the backbone for this research, the flower metaphor summarized the answer to the question posed at the conception of this study. The most visible means of support are fed by acceptance and self-awareness, which are best fostered by an environment of understanding, trust, and connection.

This second analytical approach took the researchers' understanding of support beyond the literature by seeking to understand what causal mechanisms must be in place to create an environment in which support structures can flourish. Critical realism allowed the researchers to take a more in-depth look into the causal mechanisms beneath the supports previously identified in the literature. These findings were also used to complete the analysis and answer the original research sub-questions.

Where does support come from for students with ASD as they enter higher education?

Participants discussed multiple origins of support throughout the interviews. Based on the coding done by the researchers, social support was mentioned most frequently. When discussing social support, all participants referenced the Autism Social Club they attended at their university. Belonging to this social club comprised of people with shared experiences allowed participants to learn more about themselves, accept who they were as individuals, and unmask in a safe space. Participants mentioned that this social club led to self-awareness and self-acceptance about their own needs and perceptions of disabilities. Multiple participants described being more comfortable seeking help and advice from peers rather than navigating official avenues for help from the university. These reflections validated Lightner et al.'s (2012) findings regarding the emotional benefits of social support.

Not all participants had official accommodations through the university they attended, but many shared that seeking help through the university came with difficulties. Participants shared that it was preferable to seek help through peers who could offer more direct and efficient advice or through faculty members directly. There was a positive outlook on faculty's willingness to work with students individually, reflecting the conclusions Hitchings et al. (2001) drew from their study. The academic help participants mentioned came from the university writing center or high school teachers and advisors who prepared students for the transition to higher education. Taking college classes prior to attending college helped ease some of the unknown aspects of the transition. Staff members who explicitly taught skills that would be beneficial in higher education, such

as approaching a professor for help, positively impacted individuals in higher education. These concepts confirmed those of Moriña Díez et al. (2015) regarding the positive influence of high school educators on a student's transition to higher education.

Participants also mentioned family support in making decisions about where to attend college. Participants' families provided a familiar support system as the students decided where to move for school physically and discussed support as participants navigated new academic and social structures. The literature revealed a similar notion about family being a constant among many other changing variables (Cheatham et al., 2013; Van Hees et al., 2018).

What are the most formative aspects of the transition to higher education for students with ASD?

For participants, finding the Autism Social Club at the university was one of the most formative aspects of attending college because of the benefits the club yielded. Participants shared in their interviews that belonging to the social club grounded them in higher education's turbulence and offered social and material support. The social club led to a degree of self-awareness and acceptance that did not exist in high school. This newer self-awareness and self-acceptance allowed participants to identify their needs and boundaries better and embrace who they were as individuals.

Participants discussed self-discovery in terms of learning more about their identity as individuals and what support they needed to succeed. Having more space to make their own choices and do what they needed while being in a safe and accepting environment allowed participants to understand themselves better. Participants shared that having the freedom to manage their schedules and do what they were interested in proved one of the

more positive aspects of transitioning to higher education. Once individuals were able to take classes of specific interest to them, the work became more meaningful and less burdensome. While there were complex parts of constructing a new support system in higher education, participants shared that embracing the independence that came with higher education fostered a new sense of self within the context of a traditionally neurotypical system.

Masking was a concept referenced by multiple participants. The freedom and independence in higher education combined with the support of the autism social group allowed participants to discover their own preferences and interests. Participants indicated that the point was not about learning how to eliminate the mask but instead identifying the need for the mask and learning when and how to wear the mask more comfortably. The Autism Social Club allowed a safe place to unmask, giving individuals room to understand when the mask was needed. As Hull et al. (2017) and Petrolini et al. (2023) found, masking can have adverse mental and emotional effects on an individual. A similar sentiment was reflected in the interviews, as participants described the feeling of being able to recognize and remove their masks. The same participants attributed the Autism Social Club as a primary catalyst for having the courage and confidence to be more authentic versions of themselves.

What challenges, if any, do people with ASD face as they transition to higher education?

The challenges faced by students with ASD in higher education result from an incomplete interaction between the causal mechanisms discovered through the critical realism analysis. When the necessary interactions and environments were not present, the

phenomena seen in participants' experiences could be likened to petals on a flower planted in ineffective soil.

The most mentioned difficulty in the transition from high school to higher education was time management. Participants confirmed the findings of Van Hees et al. (2015) as they shared the difficulty of managing their own time in higher education. While responses varied in handling this change, participants concluded that adjusting to the new demands of higher education took an extended amount of time. Time management skills came with trial and error and social and family support.

Participants shared a similar belief about seeking official accommodations from their university. While the experiences were mixed with this topic, the conclusion was that obtaining accommodations from the university involved confusing systems that created a feeling of 'jumping through hoops.' Participants agreed that accommodations were or could have been helpful, but the process was unclear or inaccessible. The paperwork students needed was often not readily available, and even then, part of the process had to be repeated for each semester. Participants needed clarification about the process's steps and mentioned that the steps had recently changed. The lack of awareness about this process confirmed the findings of Grimes et al. (2019). More preparation for how to obtain accommodations would allow students and their families the foresight to collect the necessary documentation earlier. Referring back to the flower metaphor presented by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021), the researchers followed the flow of causal mechanism interactions to explain this challenge faced by participants. Participants shared a lack of access or understanding regarding the accommodation process, describing it as opaque. This lack of understanding led to feeling less accepted by their

university or an internal conflict of self-acceptance, which resulted in academic struggles because of a gap in visible support.

From the perspective of students with ASD, what does a supportive environment on a university campus include?

When asked to describe an ideal support system in higher education, participants mentioned that all areas of need must be covered when creating a support system. An ideal support system does not just include academic or social support but rather a collection of different types of support to help students navigate the increase in independence and discover the path to self-acceptance.

Acceptance was a vital aspect of a support system. According to participants, a critical part of any support system was finding circles of accepting, supportive, and understanding people. Finding people to connect with based on similar interests or needs and building on those relationships created support networks. That, in essence, was a large part of the purpose behind the Autism Social Club the participants belonged to at their university. The club was a safe place for students with ASD to connect and support each other in higher education and adult life. The connection between members of the club provided many benefits for participants including emotional, social, material, and systematic support.

An additional point made about the process of finding people with shared experiences was access to that connection. Many participants found the social club through activity fairs at the university, while some were introduced to the club directly through existing members. Giving students a voice in more vulnerable populations, such as those with ASD, and a platform would increase awareness and outreach for new

students considering attending college. One participant mentioned specifically through the reliability check stage of the research design that they learned more about navigating the higher education experience by reading online about the experiences of other students with ASD.

During the reliability check stage of the research design, two participants responded with additional clarification about financial support. Both participants emphasized the importance of financial support, either through family, scholarships, or programs designed to support students on their road to college. The financial strain had a steep negative impact on students in higher education who were living independently for the first time in addition to managing all other aspects of college life. Creating stable financial support structures alleviated some of this strain.

How important are social, academic, and familial support systems, and how do those support systems interact with or impact each other?

Participants shared that while social support was critical, each area of support must be addressed. There needs to exist a level of intersectionality for students to be supported in their experience in higher education. A social support club provided students with a group of peers who understood precisely how others experienced various situations and phenomena. Academic support in high school helped participants prepare for aspects of higher education they did not even know would require preparation. Family support provided a sense of familiar support and foundational understanding. While certain areas of support may become more prevalent for individuals at various times, all are significant in their interaction to form a cohesive and successful support system.

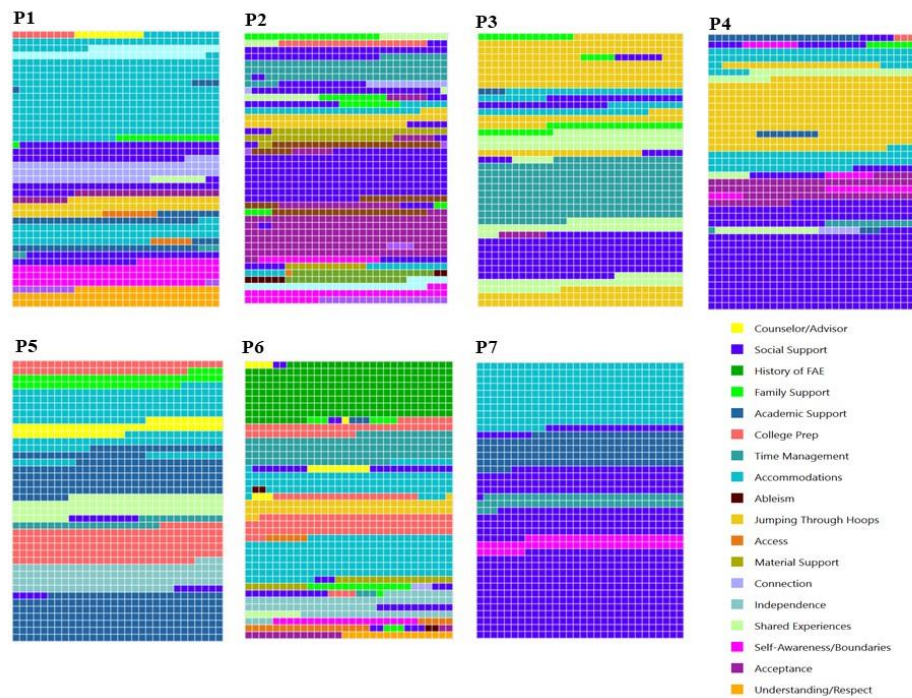
Conclusion

The primary research question used to guide this study asked how people with ASD experienced the transition from high school to higher education. The researchers sought to answer the primary question by analyzing the themes and follow-up research questions.

The document portraits in Figure 7 were created using the codes input into MAXQDA 2022 software. The portraits visually illustrated the culmination of topics presented in each participant's interview. From the examination of all seven portraits, different patterns emerged. There was a heavy presence of social support and accommodations across the interviews.

Figure 7

Interview Document Portraits



Support systems in higher education were multi-faceted and involved multiple overlapping components. As Figure 7 illustrates, social support carried significant weight in support structures, though many other aspects made up the whole system. Preparation for the transition to higher education through classes and skills training gave neurodiverse learners, like students with ASD, the opportunity to experience a more gradual transition. Family provided constant support, eliminating some variables in the transition to higher education. While beneficial, academic support from universities could have been more comprehensible and consistent. In some cases, help was best found through direct faculty connections and peer support.

Social support networks helped to circumvent some difficulties of higher education life. Social support involved finding a group that fostered a sense of understanding, acceptance, and belonging. This social system incorporated material and physical support, as well as emotional and moral support. Most significantly, this social support provided individuals a safe place to unmask and be their most authentic and vulnerable selves. In all, when looking at the origins of support for students with ASD in higher education, the researchers found that the truth was multi-layered. The most impactful areas of support were not directly related to the academic side of higher education, but rather to the side of self-discovery in a transition beyond high school.

Since the Autism Social Club participants referenced began in 2016, the club has become a supportive organization for all students. Most members identify as students with ASD. The group meets weekly to discuss individual needs, followed by dinner. The group also plans social outings such as karaoke, movies, and game nights. Recently, the group has been invited to speak at various educational panels to share their experiences as

students with autism in higher education. The group advocates for the needs of individuals with autism, and their talks have encouraged educators to change their perspectives about those with diverse needs.

At the conception of this research study, the conceptual framework was created based on identified areas of support found in the literature, with the expectation that one area of support would outweigh the rest. Through the course of this study and the analysis of participant experiences, this was not found to be the entire truth. Multiple areas of support interact with one another, and many causal mechanisms exist and interact underneath these visible supports. The benefit of a structure such as the one unearthed in this study was that the various areas of support coalesce to fill in gaps left by others. The support structure for a student with ASD in higher education is not a two-dimensional system, but rather a three-dimensional tower of intertwined aspects of support. The current education system seeks to understand and address the top of the metaphorical flower, and the most visible areas of support (Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021). However, based on the findings of this research study, there is a need to expand the scope of understanding and look at the causal mechanisms underneath to create the most successful and inclusive experience for students with ASD in higher education.

Implications

This study aimed to better understand how students with ASD find and use support in higher education. The use of the IPA methodology driven by a conceptual framework allowed for a more in-depth examination of the experiences of these participants. Understanding the experiences of students with ASD will help educators in high school and higher education provide more intentional support to benefit students. Participants who

had specific help through college preparation classes shared the benefit of this preparation. Groups such as the Autism Social Club provided many benefits for students with different needs as they entered higher education. As participants shared in the interviews, the best way to help a particular group of individuals is to understand their experience by listening to their voices. Tapping into the most impactful origins of support will help pave pathways for more diverse learners in the future to pursue their higher education goals. The findings from the study will allow the education system to be more accessible to all students.

Limitations

Generalizability was not possible for the purposes of this study. The participants interviewed for this study were enrolled at one public university in Texas. Due to the intensive nature of this study, the goal was not to generalize, but rather to deeply understand the experiences of one population of individuals. Future studies could replicate the methods for this study at other public universities to discover if the same causal mechanisms are identified. Thus, making the findings from this study more generalizable.

Delimitations

This study did not account for extenuating factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, or size classification of school districts where participants attended high school. Due to the human nature of the study, numerous variables impacted a student's experience transitioning from high school to higher education. These variables included the level of familial support and awareness of rights, access to resources depending on the wealth and size of grade-school districts, and the degree to which each student's disability affected their understanding and coping skills.

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