

Leisure; an occupation of university students with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS).

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Introduction & Background

The number of students with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) entering higher education is likely to continue to rise over the coming years as the identification of AS increases & access to services improve (Wing & Potter, 2002). Individuals with AS face a myriad of challenges on entering into college one of which is their engagement with the social aspects of college life (Morrison, Sansoti & Hadley, 2009). College life offers multiple social opportunities in which to meet new people & participate in new life & leisure experiences , however, for these students with AS this social world remains elusive .

Literature shows that individuals with AS were found to have severely restricted levels of access, & participation in leisure activities in Ireland (Autism Task Force, 2001). Individuals with AS tend not to engage as much as their peers in leisure pursuits & tend to engage in more solitary leisure activities that take place in the home environment (Thompson & Emira, 2011), partly due to a lack of social skills, as well as comprehension of social environments & opportunities for engagement.

Research conducted exploring the needs of university students with AS (Quinn, Gleeson & Nolan, 2009) found that 78.6% of students (n=14) wanted to develop and engage in new leisure pursuits. Research suggests that professionals can promote participation in leisure occupations through a supported environment (Garcia Vilamisar & Dattilo, 2010). As a result of this context, the researchers developed a three phase approach to leisure enhancement by adapting the Leisure Enhancement through Occupational Therapy approach developed by Baxter, Friel, McAtamney, White and Williamson (1995) to enhance the leisure participation of university students with AS.

Aim

Leisure is an important daily occupation, and has been found to contribute to life balance, health promotion, and wellbeing (Garcia-Villamisar & Dattilo, 2010). Occupational Therapists can support engagement in leisure occupations, and with this perspective, this research sought to explore the leisure occupations of university students with AS, it also offered the participants opportunities to participate in meaningful leisure occupations within a group context, and furthermore evaluated their engagement in these leisure occupations.

Methodology

Study Design:
A sequential, explanatory mixed-methods research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010) approach was employed by the researchers. A three phase approach to the mixed methods design study was utilised.



Phase One: Exploration: In Phase One the students completed the Leisure Questionnaire Booklet which explored their leisure occupations; additionally in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to further explore their leisure occupations and to identify their goals for leisure participation in phase two.

Phase Two: Engagement: In Phase Two of the study, the eleven participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups, in which they each engaged in six weekly group sessions facilitated by one of the researchers, which focused on participating in group chosen leisure occupations. The six week leisure group utilised the functional group approach developed by Howe & Schwartzberg, (1995) to guide the group process. Various data collection measures; were utilised to explore the group process and the participant’s engagement in the leisure sessions.

Phase Three: Evaluation: Phase Three of the research explored the participants’ perspectives on their engagement in the leisure sessions through the use of in-depth interviews and they also completed the Leisure Questionnaire Booklet to measure changes pre and post leisure group.

Participants:
Eleven participants with AS attending university were involved in the three phases; of exploration, engagement and evaluation.

Ethical Considerations:
The research had ethical approval from the University of Dublin Health Science Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis:
Quantitative Data: Phase one, two & three: The quantitative data from the Leisure Questionnaire Booklet collected pre and post leisure group (phase one & three), the demographic information, the Leisure Needs, Influences on Leisure (phase one) and other assessments (phase two) were transformed and inputted into the computer based statistics package called the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18 (2010).

Qualitative Date: Phase one, two & three: The full transcripts from the pre and post group interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using the computer package QSR-N6.

Results

The results will be presented under the three phases of this study.

Demographic Information	Participants
Gender	Male: n=11 (100%); Female: n=0 (0%)
Age	Mean = 22 years 9 months; Min= 18 years 8 months; Max= 28 years 6 months; S.D= 3 Years 0 Months
Year of Study in University	1 st Yr: n=3 (27.3%); 2 nd Yr: n=2 (18.2%); 3 rd Yr: n=1 (9.1%); 4 th Yr: n=3 (27.3%); Master: n=1 (9.1%); PhD: n=1 (9.1%)
Additional Diagnosis	Depression: n=1; ADHD: n=1; Dyspraxia: n=1; OCD: n=3 Anxiety: n=3; Dyslexia: n =2 Some students had more than one additional diagnosis
Living Situation	Living at home: n=9 (81.8%); Living away from home: n=2 (18.2%)

Leisure Occupations of students with AS: The leisure occupation most frequently identified by the students was ‘playing computer games’; this was identified by eight of the participants (72.7%) in phase 1. Reading & watching television were also rated highly by the students.

“Well I like playing video games, I play the guitar, I started recently to write, I used to draw... so I do all those things.... I usually just play alone.”

“Computer games... on my own and Xbox sometimes I would play on my own...”

The results of this study further show that very few of these students were involved in sports clubs. Additionally, the students reported that they engaged in passive, solitary activities, that they primarily did in their own homes.

“Interests with other people....no I don’t think so, I can’t think of anything, -no, not particularly no, not now anyway, not recently”

Barriers to Leisure Participation & Engagement: Three main themes emerged;

- Difficulties with social skills and social interaction
- The demands of college
- Financial constraints.

“it’s very hard to develop social skills when you haven’t really enjoyed socialising...”

“not knowing anyone there and not knowing whether I’d fit in easily, you know that kind of awkwardness or the prospect or fear of that kind of awkwardness would kind of keep me away from (social) situations”

“Well I suppose the fact that we said before, I have to do some work (college work), so I can’t only do leisure...”

Desire for Leisure Engagement: 45.5% of the students were not happy with their leisure time, they wanted to **a. try new leisure activities, b. have the opportunity to get involved in group leisure; & c. they wanted to meet new people and make friends.**

“I’d like to try something new (leisure), I’m in college, so do new things”

“It would be nice to find that I could enjoy group based activities”

“Try making friends”

- Phase Two:**
Leisure activities engaged in by the students: All of the leisure activities chosen by the students were group based & involved participation from each student. The activities engaged in included; going for dinner, going to the pub, playing board-games, a book club etc. These activities are in stark contrast to the solitary, passive leisure pursuits identified by the students in phase one..
- Phase Three:**
The main themes that emerged from the students evaluation of the group were:
- Enjoyed, trying new leisure occupations
“I did try new things, I liked some of them, “I liked doing something active rather than just sitting around talking.”
 - Got me thinking about future leisure activities
“ I’ve found that I enjoy stuff more, I’ve dropped the things I didn’t enjoy, I found swimming a bit tedious like, getting everything ready and all that, so I’ve kind of, I’m going to do another sport, like play tennis or something.”
 - Learned about the work-leisure balance
“I learnt to think more about the leisure/work balance...”
 - Got involved in the social part of college life
“What I enjoyed most I suppose was the fact that I was doing something you know with other people in the college,”
 - Developed my social skills
“I just enjoyed hanging out with people”
“ “Well I’ve enhanced my social skills.”
 - Made friends
“Well...an opportunity to make friends, that’s why I found it was most important.”
“I’ve made friends and I enjoy hanging out with them, to give an honest answer like.”
“I’ve made a friend.”
 - Got to be part of the group
““I thoroughly enjoyed being part of that (leisure group).”
“I made the tea a couple of times, I’m sounding very organised, aren’t I, that’s not very like me.”
“Even after the project was finished, the group stayed on.”

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that through the use of a leisure group, individuals with AS can enhance their engagement & participation in leisure, & develop practical skills and know how within a real life context. It can also enhance their connectedness within the college community, as well as establishing a sense of engagement and participation within a group context. Attendance, participation, enjoyment and satisfaction was very high. This is one of the biggest strengths of this study, the fact that these students with AS participated in the leisure group week-on-week, consistently is a success, given that individuals with AS experience difficulties with social communication & interaction . These findings correspond to the call by Schalock (2004), to develop services for individuals with AS to support their life occupations.

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