Electronic Theses and Dissertations

2020

College Experiences of Individuals with Mild to Moderate Intellectual Disabilities: Stories of Our Success

Lisa Lynn Bryant

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd

COLLEGE EXPERIENCES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH MILD TO MODERATE

INTELLECTUAL DISBILITIES:

STORIES OF OUR SUCCESS

by Lisa Bryant

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Instruction and Curriculum Leadership

The University of Memphis

December 2020

Abstract

This article presents a case study of four participants diagnosed with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities, enrolled in support programs for neuro-atypical students at four-year private Christian universities in the Southeastern United States. Further, this article examines how these participants measured success in said programs, as well as whether success was achieved. This program aimed to provide students with opportunities to learn and grow alongside their neuro-typical peers in a rich academic environment. Through this case study, it was found that there are three primary criteria for success: class attendance (both general population and support-program classes), independence (including independent living, sustained employment), and social involvement.

Key Words: Case Study, Mild to Moderate Intellectual Disabilities, Post-Secondary Collegiate Programs

Table of Contents

College Experiences for Individuals with Mild to Moderate Intellectual Disabilities:

Stories of Our Success

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), passed in 2008, provides federal support to Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) that meet defined criteria (Moore, 2014), including increased access to college for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Griffin & Papay, 2017). Another change brought on by HEOA that impacts students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities is the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) program, which provides grants to IHE to promote the successful transition of students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities from high school into collegiate programs (Public Law 110–31 Aug. 14, 2008). This article is a case study that examines the experiences of four students enrolled in a support program for students diagnosed with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities, which was funded through TPSID. The program was housed a private four-year Christian institution in the Southeastern United States, and its mission was to provide students with opportunities to learn and grow alongside neuro-typical peers, while also providing necessary support. The following research questions guided the study:

- How do individuals with mild to moderate disabilities who have completed a collegiate program define success?

    - How did the completion of the collegiate program affect the participants' ability to live independently?

    - How did the completion of the collegiate program affect the participants' ability to sustain a job independently?

- How did the completion of the collegiate program affect the participants' ability to maintain meaningful social relationships?

The case-study model is used in hope that criteria for success established through this study may be extrapolated to future studies measuring the success of TPSID-funded programs embedded in four-year IHEs.

Literature Review

The experiences of college students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities are rich and complex, but research in this emergent field has mostly been comprised of quantitative studies focused on students diagnosed with narrow sets of learning disabilities (Mazzotti, et al., 2020). This case study and analysis expands by using qualitative methods to capture the experience of college students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities. The choice to use qualitative methodology is rooted in the notion that those with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities, having successfully completed four-year college programs with the support of TPSID-funded programing, should have a voice in the future of such programs (Griffin & Papay, 2017). This review, then, tethers these students' experiences to past quantitative literature in the field and CDT (Ingram, 2018).

CDT views disability as both a lived reality, in which the experiences of people with disabilities are central to interpreting their place in the world, and as a social and political definition based on societal power relations (Griffin & Papay, 2017, Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Emergent in the 1970s, this area of study involves both academics and activists, representing multiple disciplines and perspectives (Reaume, 2014), who challenged approaches that pathologize physical, mental, and sensory difference. Instead of codifying difference as pathology, CDT advocates for both accommodation and equality for people with disabilities in

all areas of life. CDT seeks to change the images of disabled people as pitiable, tragic victims who should adjust to the world around them (Ingram, 2018). This charity model is criticized for providing badly needed services without engaging the underlying causes of social exclusion (Erevelles, 2012). Barriers to higher education, employment, transportation, and a host of services, both public and private, all come under the scrutiny of critical disability studies, a field that works toward universal accessibility (Reaume, 2014).

Changing public attitudes toward disabilities is important (Hosking, 2008). Historically, students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities have been ignored and/or underserved by IHEs (Squires et al., 2018). Working against the history of stigmatization of students with intellectual disabilities requires reframing intellectual disability as difference rather than as deficient. This reconceptualization positions students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities as individuals with unique strengths capable of contributing to society and, therefore, will benefit from a college education (Thomas et al., 2011). One aim of this study was to empower participants to share their voices and their stories to limit the exploitation and oppression of people with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities in the future (Sahdra, 2012). +These thoughts and opinions can affect the perceptions of individuals with disabilities collectively (Cox et al., 2015).

In recent years, strides have been made within the medical community to establish the use of language that reflects and promotes positive representations of individuals with disabilities. The preferred term of clinicians and researchers for the neuro-atypical population considered in this study, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), is mild-to-moderate intellectual disability Mazzotti et al., 2020). This change in language, and my own choice to adhere to it, was informed by the notion of people-first

language, which privileges the person over the disability (Balogun, 2019). Over the years, many professional associations, academic journals, federal and state governments around the world have promoted the use of People First Language to address access issues and barriers to healthcare, some state governments in America have enacted legislation to bolster the use of PFL and "promote dignity and inclusion for people with disabilities (Balogun, 2019). This shift in the language used to describe individuals with disabilities has influenced shifts in policy, such as the passage of HOEA, which impacts students with intellectual disabilities' access to educational opportunities.

Another aim of this shift in language and representation of students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities is the normalization of these disabilities. To this aim, accommodations recommended by the medical establishment have been widely adopted by IHEs (Zager & Alpern, 2010). For normalization of disabilities to occur, an expansion of the definition of "normalcy" is required. The movement toward this expansion is reflected in the emphasis on a standardized education that allows all students to meet minimal requirements in order to be prepared for life after high school (Individuals with Disabilities Act [IDEA], 2004). While "normal" is often arrived at through statistical averages, the questions asked to arrive at those statistical averages often contain opaque value judgments. Despite this, notions of "normal" arrived at this way are often used to represent what is right and desirable (Taylor & Mykitiuk, 2011). Further, when normalcy is invoked, there is a blurring of the distinction between fact and value, confusing what is with what should be.

In this article, the concept of normalization is also asserted in the standardized transition goals of employment, education, and independent living (Martinez, 2008). The incongruent perspectives of persons with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities and their actual abilities

are often conflicted in the minds of many members of the workforce (Papay & Bambara, 2011). Further, this conflict can cause doubt among high school graduates with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities as to whether college is a viable option for them (Mazotti et al., 2013). For young adults with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities, a college education can make the difference in terms of inclusion or exclusion in their local communities. (Glatter, 2017). College is the next step in a progression for students who have had access to inclusive education from   primary-through-secondary school. As it is a path to success for their non-disabled peers, it also allows for more vocational and social opportunities for those with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Neuman, et al, 2011).

        College attendance improves outcomes that lead to employment and independent living for individuals with mild-to moderate disabilities (Neuman, et al., 2011)., 2011). Within the last ten years, programs at two- and four-year collegiate institutions that include individuals with mild-to moderate intellectual disabilities have become more prevalent in the United States (Griffin & Papay, 2017). These programs offer access—and ultimately inclusion—in the college experience, including social activities, college classes, vocational training, independence, and experiencing life like other college students who do not have disabilities (Grigal et al., 2019). Currently there are over 200 IHE opportunities for individuals with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities in existence today in the United States (Gibbons et al., 2015; Grigal et al., 2016). Vocational schools and many large corporations are also providing rich training environments for individuals with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities as post-secondary educational options (Boucke, 2012). This trend is also growing as employers find employees with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities to be loyal and hardworking employees (Gilson & Carter, 2016).

Research in the emergent field of study of college students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities has primarily been comprised of quantitative studies (Grigal, et al., 2019). Recognizing the experiences of college students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities are rich and complex, the current study uses qualitative methods to capture the experience of college students with mild to-moderate intellectual disabilities in postsecondary programs (Squires et al., 2018). To this end, I interviewed four graduates or program completers from a program in the Southern United States and asked the participants a set of questions to determine definitions of success and feelings of inclusion in their communities upon completion of their postsecondary education. The current case study explores the complex social acceptance of individuals with disabilities and synthesized elements of CDT.

The current investigation was conducted at a private, two-year inclusive, residential program for individuals with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities established in 2014. This program serves 20 students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities per year and has an 86% employment or completion rate. Employment rates for graduates of this support program are as high as 65% some years, and administrators report graduates of the program leave with skills that aid in living more independent lives than they would otherwise (Moore, 2014).

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the personal experiences of college students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities on their perceived success in the program and involvement in their community after college. The case in this study is naturalistic or situational in that it explores participants' experiences in their natural settings: the college campus, specifically classes, and interactions with peers, professors, and advisers (Squires et al.,

2018). In this section, I describe the case study methodology used,, i.e., the interview format, participants, setting, and method of analysis.

The objective of this case study was to obtain a clear, descriptive narrative, or a story, of the experiences of individuals with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities, while they attended college, to determine how they define their success in the program. Yin (1989) suggested that the term, *case study*, refers to an event, an entity, and individual or even a unity of analysis. It is an empirical inquiry, which investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1989). It brings descriptions of participants' experiences to the fore, exploring the intensity and depth of the experience (Flyover, 2011). To this end, participants described experiences that defined personal successes. Anderson (1993) saw case studies as being concerned with how and why things happen, allowing the investigation of contextual realities and differences between what was planned and what occurred.

An underlying intention of this research is on moving forward from the social model by seeking feminist critiques that may erase the experiences of impairment (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). The inclusion of those with disabilities in society has been slow to occur because people the consideration of consideration of disabled bodies must was left largely unexplored in critical discourse until recently (Mladenov et al., 2015). Including participant stories in qualitative analysis include mild-to-moderately intellectually disabled individuals in the process of shaping the discourse. By allowing study participants to define success on their own terms, I was able to capture emergent and immanent properties of life in organization, as well as ebb and flow of the program and all the activities (Pothier & Devlin, 2006).

Site, Participants, and Method

Participants in the program completed a two-year inclusive, residential certificate program for individuals with mild-to-moderate disabilities at a private four-year Christian university in the Southeast United States. The program seeks to meet the needs of mild-to-moderately intellectually disabled students and prepare them to live as confident and contributing members of society. . This program encourages and supports students enrolled in the program to experience all that the university has to offer alongside their peers in the general population. This includes taking classes, going to sporting and cultural events, completing internships, eating in the cafeteria, attending chapel, etc. According to the program's website, its goals include developing friendships, expanding, and deepening student knowledge, strengthening their skills through workplace training, and providing increased independent opportunities that prepare students for life after college.

The participant selection process was very specific, since I used a case study approach. I contacted the program directors and asked them for assistance in selecting participants based on the following criteria. First, they must be willing and available to participate. Second, the participants will have completed the collegiate program. Third, the participants came from different graduating classes. Case studies are most useful when interviewing a small number of individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2017). Qualitative researchers accept that the theoretical analysis process is not driven by the saturation point being the objective in choosing the number of participants (Wendell, 2008). Two male and two female participants were selected. The participants came from middle (one participant) to upper class (three participants) U.S. American households, and all four of them are White.

All four of the participants fondly recall their time in college and are vocal about the importance of programs for individuals with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities to attend college and serve as examples of success among their peers. The first participant, "Wally," (all names are pseudonyms) is 24 years old, a white male from an upper-middle class family who went to a public high school. He currently lives in an apartment with a roommate. The second participant, "Jace," is a 23-year-old white male from a middle-class background. He currently lives in an apartment with a roommate. "Tabitha," is a white, 29-year old female from an upper-middle class household who graduated from a public high school and immediately entered the collegiate program. The fourth participant is "Robin", a 24-year-old white woman from a wealthy family, who entered the program in 2017."

I completed one one-hour semi-structured interview with each participant for this case study. The hope of this research was to empower participants to share their voices and their stories to limit the exploitation and oppression of people with disabilities in the future (Sahdra, 2012). These thoughts and opinions can affect the perceptions of individuals with disabilities collectively (Cox et al., 2015). Interviews are intimate encounters of experiences of individuals; for an interview to be fruitful, the researcher must develop skills in asking follow-up questions and prompting elaboration (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The richness of an interview is heavily dependent on probing questions, and the use of a list of guiding questions allows the interviewer to come prepared to each conversation with the tools needed for a rich conversation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted and tend to be more carefully scripted asking specific questions in a specific sequence and allow for more open dialogue (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Each of the interviews with the four participants lasted about an hour and was conducted using internet communications tools (e.g., Zoom), due to

COVID-19, and were digitally recorded. All data were stored on the hard drive of a password-protected computer. The digital recordings were stored securely on a private password protected laptop, and transcription documents and coding materials were stored in a locked file cabinet. Interview questions are included in the Appendi*x*.

Analysis

The inductive method of thematic analysis was used in this study. Inductive methods including initial and in-vivo coding were utilized to find similarities and emergent themes that helped define success by the participant in the program (Stake, 2010). In-vivo coding is championed for its usefulness in highlighting the voices of participants and for its reliance on the participants themselves for giving meaning to the data (Wendell, 2008). Cross-coding then occurred examining each of the participants' account of their college experience. As these themes emerged from the data immersion, the themes were then developed into categories utilizing various types of coding. I also looked for contrasts and let that data drive speculation as to where participants' stories of success emerged. I examined the transcripts individually looking for commonalities. Next, charts were created to find patterns that allowed for the opportunity to construct a rich narrative describing the experiences of participants (Ingram, 2018). As is common with qualitative research, a recursive process, data must be analyzed multiple times using a myriad of frameworks (Squires et al., 2018). Robinson and Hawpe (1986) argued that storytelling involves narrative thinking in which we reflect upon our experiences to construct stories, the result being a descriptive representation of each participant's experience (Padgett, 2004). This helps create a textual form to maintain the essence of the stories of each of the participants (Ingram, 2018). Ultimately, I compiled definitions of success using the data collected.

Findings

This section presents how participants defined success in relation to their collegiate experiences. Hart and Grigal (2010) affirmed that the college experience is comprised of a wide array of possible experiences for students, including academic, social, and employment opportunities. Participants in this study discussed having access to typical college experiences, including participating in college course work, navigating the college campus, participating in college social life, and meeting the demands of college rigor (Gallinger, 2015). The college experience was unique for each participant, reflecting their individual preferences, interests, and goals (Mazotti et al., 2020). As generalization is not a goal of CDT, so too is generalization not a goal of this paper. I leave it to the reader to determine where the stories are pertinent to other situations and contexts (Erevelles, 2012). It is my hope that the voices of each participant are heard clearly (Erevelles, 2012). First, I share the stories that show the completion of traditional college classes and acceptance by professors is a definition of success. Then I will discuss the program specific classes that also determine success. Next, I will recount the stories that discuss independence as a definition of success. Last, I will discuss the two definitions of success, social interaction success and sustained employment, both of which were dominant themes throughout the interviews. These findings, in conjunction with the method of data collection, are in line with the aims of CRT in that this methodology puts the experiences of people with disabilities at the center of interpretation of their place in the world (Griffin & Papay, 2017., Glatter, 2017).

Completion of Traditional College Classes and Acceptance by Professors

All participants enjoyed their traditional college classes and considered each class that they took a personal banner of success. One reason traditional classes were so important to participants was because they felt included in the environment of the general population of the

university.. Each participant identified their favorite classes, noted favorite instructors, and provided interesting stories about these academic experiences. While all reported having excellent relationships with other students, in this section I focus on the students' relationships with their professors. and the professors who taught each class. By being listened to and included, each student was made to feel felt a part of the whole experience (Glatter, 2017).

Tabitha recalled that her favorite professor was not actually the professor of her favorite class. Her favorite classes were classes called" Make-up for the Stage" and "Dances from all over the World." Her favorite professor taught Principles of Nutrition, which was hard for her, but she still talks to her professor from that class. Tabitha felt that the professor believed she could do the work in the class. Tabitha noted, "She made me feel like I was important in her class and that made me feel like I really could be accepted in college, and I was!" Wally shared that his professor in the Video production class helped him overcome challenges. He described his professor as someone who respected him. "I struggled in his class at first, but he took time to work with me and was really cool, I could always tell that he was pleased with my work, and that made me feel important in the class." These experiences illustrate how the participants felt listened to and included, and part of the whole college experience (Glatter, 2017). This is important because this inclusion is a new experience to this historically marginalized group (Prodinger et al., 2020). Recalling the concept of normalization, as defined by Taylor and Mykitiuk, it is reasonable to suggest that the inclusion and support of students with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities in classrooms with neurotypical peers normalizes disability. Further, through this diversification of the classroom population, both neurotypical and atypical students are socialized in a way that promotes greater acceptance of difference in their lives beyond the college classroom.

Completion of Program-specific Classes are Successes

Certificate program-specific curriculum aimed to lead toward direct or indirect employment training (Moore, 2014). Jace, Wally, Tabitha, and Robin talked about skills they learned in these classes that were designed to meet their unique needs. They talked about learning to clean, shop, get around town, pay bills, and take care of themselves, as well as appropriate social skills. They all talked about how much they learned in the "cooking class" (or "cooking lab" as it was referred to by Jace) and shared their favorite meals to cook. For example, Wally is proud of the shrimp pasta he learned to cook. Robin says she is cooking for her family using many of the recipes she learned in the class. Jace got very excited when he talked about the cooking class and said, "I never really learned to cook until the cooking class, and now I can cook meals, independently, to impress my friends." Tabitha recounted learning to make Mexican food and said "it is as good as Taco Tuesday at a restaurant." Developing essential skills, like cooking for oneself and one's family, are a way that individuals with mild-to moderate intellectual disabilities gain independence. Gaining the independence to take care of oneself, in ways that many neurotypical individuals take for granted, also serves to combat popular stereotypes of individuals with disabilities as "less than" or "not normal" (Bethune-Dix et al., 2020).

The program-specific classes provided goals, as well as hands-on experiences with which students could develop the skills to achieve these goals (Moore, 2014). Examples of program class goals are social skills, articulation and development of religious faith, and independence, both in terms of employment and the wherewithal to live on one's own (Moore, 2013, p. 50). For example he social skills class prioritized solving conflicts and dealing with

feelings, which Tabitha said she benefited from It also helped Jace learn to manage his aggression toward friends and, now, co-workers. He said:

> I can have conversations with people at work and disagree and now I do not get angry. In the past, I would get very angry if someone did not understand me or agree with my views on a subject. The social skills class has made me a better employee. The employment class in the program also helped me with these communication skills, that I really needed. Now, when I talk to others that have a different opinion about what I am saying, and we can disagree about certain things, but they all listen to what I have to say, and that is success for me.

For both Jace and Tabitha, this program-specific class gave them relational and emotional-coping skills that they could apply to every area of their lives.

Robin had a difficult time deciding which classes were most beneficial. She recounted, smiling proudly:

> All the classes helped me in one way or another. I think I remember the most from the Adult Living and Employment because it taught me to be professional and like all the other people I work with. I do not believe I would be as successful in my job today if I had not felt so included in the program.

Tabitha and Robin had been roommates throughout the program, which encouraged them to find roommates and live independently from their families after graduation. . Once they learned to be independent, they wanted to maintain that independence.

Wally agreed that classes emphasizing employment skills, adult living, and social skills were "almost as important as the cooking class." He explained that one of the staffers who taught in the employment skills became a mentor to him.

She taught me how to be a good employee and that it was important to show respect and to be on time to work, also.

Stories like these convince employers to accept individuals with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities as employees in their companies. This trend is also growing as employers find employees with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities are loyal and hardworking employees (Gilson & Carter, 2016).

Independence is a Definition of Success

Classes within the program teach self-advocacy skills and independence and support the hopes and dreams of everyone (Griffin & Papay, 2017). All participants are currently or have lived independently with a roommate at one time or another since being in the program. This was a hallmark of success for each of the participants. Jace and Wally are currently roommates and became roommates during their last year of college. Wally shared that he had at one time had two roommates, but that it just did not work out for any of them. Independent living is a key component to post-secondary programs for individuals with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Suazo, 2014).

A Good Job is a Definition of Success

Knowing the skills of those with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities is a selling point for many programs, after businesses give students an opportunity (Prohn, Kelley, & Westling, 2017). For Jace and Wally, the ultimate collegiate success for them was their current jobs. They both described how blessed they were to work at a marketing firm that was very inviting and sees the importance of hiring individuals with disabilities. Wally explained that he has worked for the agency for two years.

I have a great boss. He values what I do and what I think. All the experiences in college

helped me to be a good employee for him, and that makes me happy. I have done lots of

different jobs for him, but now I am working on my own web show mini-series, and it is

so much fun. It is about what my life is like living in this town and being independent

after going to college. I cannot wait for people to get to see it. I hope it helps others with

special needs see what good things they can do, if they will try to go to college like other

people my age. There are few people like me who get to do what they love, and the

college program helped me be ready to work so I could do that! I think of all the things

I learned in college, how to hold on to a good job, is the most important, for me.

Wally and Jace both focused on pre-employment classes as the most important aspects of

the program that made them successful. They spoke fondly of the social aspects, but both being

very career driven, focused on what they needed to learn to be employable when they graduated

from college. Wally took traditional college classes that prepared him for his current job working

at an advertising agency making videos and working on podcasts. His favorite classes were:

Communications and On-Camera Delivery. Both classes helped him, in his words, "become a

better public speaker." He was also very complimentary of the Employment Skills classed that

focused on the basic employability skills needed to obtain a good job and keep it. Wally

explained that this class was tailored to meet his needs and helped him to become a successful

employee. Wally happily shared that he is currently writing and producing a podcast about his

life and is thrilled to begin recording very soon. Jace also works at the same marketing firm. This

firm is very successful and has a long tradition of employing adults with disabilities. It is a

thriving business that is a glowing example of a workplace that is successful because of the

employees and their differences, not despite their differences. Jace is a filmmaker but is also

quite a philosopher. He shares opinions about products frequently with co-workers and believes

the courses he took in college help him with communication skills. The program, has helped him

to "develop as a person with a disability, as a person with Autism, and as a person as a whole."

He explained, that "he has more in common with those who are not disabled than he ever has in

the past." He credits this ability to interact effectively to the time spent in the collegiate program,

especially the employment class, where he learned to manage his anger and aggressiveness. He

recounted the staff members and a counselor who worked with him to manage his anger.

Jace works as a film-editor as well. He was very candid in saying,

> I do not think that I would be working today if I had not gone to college. People with
>
> disabilities are underutilized in our society, and I would be too, if it were not for what I
>
> learned in the program. I have worked at the same marketing agency for almost four
>
> years. It has been an amazing journey.

Lack of choice by participants of these programs as to where they work is also another barrier to

the success of the individual (Squires et al., 2018). The ability to participate in gainful

employment was an obvious answer to research questions. If fully inclusive campus work

internships are part of the college experience and have illustrated preliminary success, then

community policies and funding streams should promote competitive employment opportunities

and not segregated work settings with limited wages and experiences (Prohn, Kelley, &

Westling, 2018).

Social Inclusion is a Definition of Success

Saldana (2016) explains in her research that participants in her study discussed the

importance of the social aspect of leisure time and social activities for enjoyment, sustaining

friendships, meeting new people, and opportunities to connect with others who have common

recreation interests. Current disability theory is not just about gaining equality rights for people with disabilities but also about the fostering of a positive identity, namely, that there is nothing wrong with a person with a disability (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Hence, the onus is on the non-disabled to adjust to those individuals with disabilities, not the other way around (Sahdra, 2012). According to Law (2002), participation in common aspects of life is a vital part of human development through which people acquire skills and competencies, connect with others, and find purpose and meaning in life. Dwyre et al. (2010) claimed that being a part of the college community, and all that it involves, can provide students with intellectual disabilities the chance to practice a variety of skills in real life circumstances, while also providing safety nets in this relatively structured environment. Story duplication among participants about the love of the social aspects of the program was uplifting. All four participants said that their participation in the Best Buddies program allowed them to make life-long friends. Best Buddies International is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These relationships are crucial to the whole college experience (Glatter, 2017). Social inclusion is a definition of success to the individuals who complete these programs, as evidenced by the answers to my interview questions.

Both Tabitha and Robin mentioned the social portions of the program as the most beneficial experiences. They both mentioned participation in their sororities, formals, friendships with college students in the program and those who were considered traditional college students. The young women highlighted their memories of parades, tail gating, and sporting events. Both beamed when recounting their stories. Tabitha recounted her favorite memories. They were

participating with the Best Buddies program, and all the activities that happened at night: watching movies, visiting with boys on campus, going to different activities on campus, and doing homework together. She is glad that she went to the private Christian college, especially since she was able to visit family and go to college with her brother.

Robin recounted that she loved what is referred to as the 'Circle of Support'. She explained that these were college students who volunteered to work with the collegiate program. She said at first she did not know what to think of all these people who were with her to eat meals, to exercise, to go get a soda or ice cream, or just to do homework with, but they quickly became her friends and she still stays in contact with many of them. She beamed when talking about her sorority sisters and being able to be a part of that organization. She loved attending functions, sporting events, dances, and especially the formals. She still talks to many of her sisters gets to 'hangout' with her college friends. This was the most memorable part of the program to her.

While research projects are relatively new and small, the data seems to indicate that there is an emerging pattern of increased ultimate educational and social involvement in collegiate programs (Smith et al., 2012). This pattern was indicated in the definitions of personal success explained by each participant. When analyzing the data from the interviews, success was evidently defined from the amounts of the interviews that were devoted to social inclusion, Tabitha spoke lovingly of something called, the Circle of Support. Circle of Support as Robin explained it was a program for student volunteers to spend time doing homework and setting goals for the week. Robin told me that she is still in contact with her two best friends, and she loves that she still gets to talk to them and go out. She reflected,

I loved my time with the Best Buddies, program. But, when I was in the sorority my

friends were there because they were my sisters, not part of a program. That made college

so much fun for me, and it still makes me very happy, and I am so thankful for my time

in college.

The answers to the interview questions point out that social acceptance and inclusion are

hallmarks of collegiate success. The social organizations that are available to the typical college

student are available to everyone (Griffin & Papay, 2017).

Tabitha enjoyed the "little things" about her social activities. One of the things she spoke

fondly of is walking to class just like all the other students, independence is truly a definition of

success. I was in a sorority and I really loved that whole process, everyone was so sweet to me,

and they gave independence, basic independence and that was so important to my success. I

would not be where I am today if I had not gone to college. The data assembled in this study

reflect the personal definitions of success of individuals with mild to moderate intellectual

disabilities who have completed collegiate programs.

Interpretations, Conclusions, and Limitations

The development of collegiate programs requires research into the practical areas of

program standards, funding, staffing, and the day to day procedures. (Mazzotti, et al., 2012). A

key principle in conducting this study through a disability studies perspective was to presume the

competence and capabilities of each participant (Kleinert et al., 2012). Each participant in this

study was the expert of their own experience (Grigal et al., 2010). A strengths-based approach

guided this study, which focused on the participants' aptitudes, abilities, interests, desires, and

potential Gallinger 2015). Findings from this study provide alternative, empowering

constructions that have historically supported and legitimated exclusion from post-secondary

education policy, practice and participation (Mazzotti, et al., 2020). Program administrators also need to hear from other people who have completed these programs to hear what worked for them and what did not, which this research sought to do. For the graduates of the program, it is the ultimate form of acceptance for them, having people listen to them, and hear their opinions about their individual definitions of success of the program they attended. Keeping in mind that a collegiate education program has many options for attaining skills and training, it also requires finding the right fit for everyone to be successful (Cimera et al., 2018).

It is my hope that this research helps to strengthen existing programs by illuminating the definitions of success by those who completed the programs. I believe that the answers to the research questions found embedded within this study will inspire the creation of new programs in places where opportunities for inclusion in college do not exist. Lastly, after reviewing the literature, listening to the interviews, interpreting the data, and writing the results the importance of allowing the voices of those once marginalized is crucial to further the acceptance of individuals with intellectual disabilities in our society. This deficit-based misperception likely emerges from the way that students with disabilities, and those without, are socialized. Our educational systems support a culture where categorization is rampant and being "normal" is perceived as the goal of development. This creates groups that are considered "the other," and students expend a great deal of effort to not be perceived as a member of those "other" groups (Squires, et al., 2017). The goal of changing perceptions of people with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities is for them to be a "normal" part of the fabric of Universities across different cultures (Balogun, 2019).

Future Research Possibilities

One of the limitations of this study was the lack of racial and socioeconomic class diversity. A future research opportunity could be to conduct the same research at a public

21

university where there is more cultural and socio-economic diversity among program completers and compare the results at the differing schools. Another limitation is how gender and participants' beliefs were linked. Future research could investigate the gendered experiences of MMID students in these programs, which might then lead to ways programs could be more gender inclusive. Both research opportunities provide more opportunities to hear the opinions of those who are served in these critical programs and provide voices to those who are often ignored and marginalized.

This research in this study begs the question for program administrators, "should extensive exit-interviews be given to program completers at the time of graduation to get data from the program participants themselves?" A research project looking at the opinions of many completers would be interesting and potentially beneficial to program improvements.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Association.

Anderson, G. (1993). *Fundamentals of Educational Research* (pp. 152-160). Falmer Press.

Balogun, J. A. (2019). Communicating Research Outcomes Sensitively Through Consistent Use of People-First Language. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, *23*(2)

Bethune-Dix L. et al. (2020) Inclusive Higher Education for College Students with Intellectual Disability. In: Crimmins G. (eds) Strategies for Supporting Inclusion and Diversity in the Academy. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43593-6_16

Boucke, E. C. (2012). Secondary students with moderate/severe intellectual disability: Considerations of curriculum and post-school outcomes from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 56*(12), 1175–1186. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.2011.01517

Cambridge Dictionary: English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus. (n.d.). Disability. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved June 2020, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disability

Cimera, R. E., Thoma, C. A., Whittenburg, H. N., and Ruhl, A. N. (2018, June). Is getting a postsecondary education a good investment for supported employees with intellectual disability and taxpayers? *Inclusion*, (*6*)2, 97-109. https://doi.org/10.1352/2326-6988-6.2.97

Cox, B. E., Mintz, A., Locks, T., Thompson, K., Anderson, A., Morgan, L., Edelstein, J., & Wolz, A. (2015, April). *College students with autism: Bridges and barriers to postsecondary success* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.

Dowling, M. (2007). From Husserl to van Manen: A review of different phenomenological approaches. *International Journal of Nursing Studies 44,* 131-142.

Drum, C. E. (2009). Models and approaches to disabilities. In C. E. Drum, G. L. Krahn, & H. Bersani, Jr. (Eds.), *Disability and public health* (pp.135-146). American Public Health Association.

Dwyre, Grigal and Fialka (2010). Student and family experience. In M. Grigal & D. Hart, (Eds.), Think college: Postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities (189-228). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Erevelles, N. (2012). *Disability and difference in global contexts: Enabling a transformative body politic* (pp. 1-57). Macmillan.

Flyover, B. (2011). Case Study. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 301-316). Sage.

Gallinger, K. (2015). *Inclusive post-secondary education: Stories of seven students with intellectual disabilities attending college in Ontario, Canada*. Dissertation: Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences. Vol 75(7-A) (E). ProQuest: Information and Learning

Gilson, S.F. (1996). Students with disabilities: An increasing voice and presence on college campuses. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 6(3),* 263-272.

Glatter, H. (2017, May 1). The path to higher education with an intellectual disability. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/05/the-path-to-higher-education-with-an-intellectual-disability/524748/10

Griffin, M. G., & Papay, C. K. (2017). Supporting students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to attend college. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *49*(6), 411–419.

Grigal, M., Hart, D., Smith, F., Papay, C., & Domin, D. (2019). *Executive summary of the year three annual report of the TPSID model demonstration projects (2017-2018)*. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion. https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/TCreports_YEAR3_TPSID_FINAL.pdf

Higher Education Opportunity Act, Public Law 110–31 (2008).

Hofer, B. K. (2006). Domain specificity of personal epistemology: Resolved questions, persistent issues, new models. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 45, 85-95.

Hosking, D. L. (2008). *Critical disability theory* [Paper Presentation]. 4th Biennial Disability Studies Conference. https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference_archive/2008/papers/hosking2008.pdf

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

Ingram, J. (2018). *Transitioning from secondary education into adult life: A phenomenological study of the experiences of Navajo students with intellectual disabilities and their families* [Doctoral Dissertation, Northern Arizona University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Kleinert, H., Jones, M., Sheppard-Jones, K., Harp, B, & Harrison, E. (2012). Students with
intellectual disabilities going to college. Absolutely! *Teaching Exceptional Children*.
44(5), pp. 26-35.

Law, M. (2002). Participation in the occupations of everyday life. American Journal of
Occupational Therapy, 56(6), 640-649. doi: 10.5014/ajot.56.6.640

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2016). *Designing qualitative research.* SAGE.

Martinez, D. C. (2008). *Parents involvement in transition planning for their young adult children
with intellectual disabilities* [Doctoral Dissertation, The George Washington University].
ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
https://search.proquest.com/openview/6e1d94bf92ed412d3077ab376e5e9899/1?pq-
origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Mazzotti, V. L., Rowe, D. A., Cameto, R., Test, D. W, & Morningstar, M.E. (2013). Identifying
and promoting transition evidence-biased practices and predictors of success: A position
paper of the Davison on Career Development and Transition. *Career Development and
Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, *36*(3), 140-151. doi:10.1177/2165143413503365.

Mazzotti, V.L., Rowe D. A., Kwiatek, S., Voggt, A., Chang, W.H., Fowler, C., Sinclair, J., &
Test, D. (2020). Secondary transition predictors of post-school success: An update to the
research base. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*. (00)(0)
1-18. doi: 10.1177/216514342095973.

Mladenov, T., Owens, J., & Cribb, A. (2015). Personalization in disability services and
healthcare: A critical comparative analysis. *Critical Social Policy*, *35*(3), 307–326.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018315587071

Moore, E. (2014). Postsecondary inclusion for individuals with an intellectual disability: A comparative case study [Master's Thesis, Grand Valley State University]. *Graduate Research and Creative Practice.*

Neuman, L., Wagner, M., Knokey, A. M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., & Wei, X. (2011). The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school: A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). NCSER 2011-3005. *National Center for Special Education Research.*

Noor, K. (2008). Case Study: A strategic research methodology. *American Journal of Applied Sciences. 5*(11), 1602-1604.

Padgett, D. K. (Ed.). (2004). *The qualitative research experience.* Wadsworth/Thomas Learning.

Papay, C., & Bambara, L. (2011). Postsecondary education for transition-age students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities: A national survey. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 46*(1), 78-93. www.jstor.org/stable/23880032

Pothier, D., & Devlin, R. F. (Eds.), (2006). *Critical disability theory: essays in philosophy, politics, policy, and law*. CNIB.

Prohn, S. M., Kelley, K. R., & Westling, D. L. (2018). Students with intellectual disability going to college: What are the outcomes? A pilot study. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, *48*(1), 127–132. https://doi-org.nexus.harding.edu/10.3233/JVR-170920

Devi, N., Prodinger, B., Pennycott, A., Sooben, R., & Bickenbach, J. (2020). Investigating Supported Decision-Making for Persons With Mild to Moderate Intellectual Disability Using Institutional Ethnography. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, *2*, 143. https://doi-org.ezproxy.memphis.edu/10.1111/jppi.12314

Reaume G. (2014). Understanding critical disability studies. *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association journal = journal de l'Association medicale canadienne*, *186*(16), 1248–1249. doi:10.1503/cmaj.141236

Robinson, J. A., & Hawpe, L. (1986). Narrative thinking as a heuristic process. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 111–125). Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Sahdra, S. (2012). *Critical disability discourse*. Osgoode Hall Law School, York University.

Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Scheef, A. R., Barrio, B. L., Poppen, M. I., McMahon, D., & Miller, D. (2018). Exploring barriers for facilitating work experience opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education programs. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *31*(3), 209–224. https://search-ebscohost-com.nexus.harding.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=eric&AN=EJ1200607&scope=site

Smith, F.A., Grigal, M., Sulewski, J. (2012). The impact of postsecondary education on employment outcomes for transition-age youth with and without disabilities. A secondary analysis of American community survey data. *Think College Insight Brief* (15). University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion

Squires, M. E., Burnell, B. A., McCarty, C., & Schnackenberg, H. (2018). Emerging adults: Perspectives of college students with disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *31*(2), 121–134. https://search-ebscohost-com.nexus.harding.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=eric&AN=EJ1192068&scope=site

Stake, R. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work* (pp. 11-35). The Guilford

Press.

Suazo, V. (2014). Seeing potential. *Think College Stories*.

https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/TC11_seeing_potential_F_0.pdf

Taylor, Kerry & Mykitiuk, Roxanne. (2011). Genetics, Normalcy and Disability. Can J Policy

Res. 291.

Thomas, C. M., Curtis, R. S., Shippen, M. E. (2011). Counselors', rehabilitation providers', and

teachers' perceptions of mental and physical disabilities. *Journal of Counseling and

Development, 89*(2), 182-189. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2011.tb00076.x

Wendell, S. (2008). Toward a feminist theory of disability. In A. Bailey & C. Cuomo (Eds.), the

feminist philosophy reader. McGraw Hill.

Yin, R., (1989). *Case Study Research* (pp. 22-26). Sage Publications.

Zager, D., & Alpern, C. S. (2010). College-based inclusion programming for transition-age

students with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 25(3),

151–157. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357610371331

Appendix

- Explain the services or resources you used to help with your classes.

  o Tell me how those helped you get a job.

  o Tell me about your current job.

  o Describe how you obtained this job.

- Describe the services or resources you used to help you learn to live

  independently.

- o Where are currently living?

- o Do you have a roommate?

- o Do you live with your family?

- Tell me about the social activities you participated in.

  - o Talk to me about the services or resources did you use to help you meet other students.

  - o Which of the services or resources you described helped you feel the most successful in the program?

  - o What friends have you stayed in contact with since you left school?

  - o How do you stay in contact with them?

  - o Who made the biggest impact on you while you were in college?

- Describe how attending college change the way you saw your future before college.

- What traditional college classes did you take?

  - o What was your favorite traditional college class?

- What is your favorite memory about your time in college?