An investigation into the Understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome among first year Social Care Students at A.I.T

Bachelor of Arts (Hons) In Social Care Practice

Name: Gráinne Mc Phillips    Student Number: A00148148

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Declaration

I declare that this project is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Social Care Practice. It is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted to any other university or higher education institution, or for any other academic award in this institute. Where use has been made of the work of other people it has been fully acknowledged and fully referenced.

Signature_________________  Date___________________________

Gráinne Mc Phillips  24th November 2011
In Memory of the bravest man I know

My Father

Michael Mc Phillips

(14/09/1951 - 17/09/2011)
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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to evaluate the extent of which first year social care students at Athlone Institute of Technology understand Asperger Syndrome. The objectives are to explore the first year social care student’s knowledge and understanding of Asperger’s and their knowledge of what supports are available for students with Asperger’s Syndrome at third level education. To carry out this research, a qualitative method was adopted, with twenty questionnaires distributed among first year social care students. It was shown that there was a restricted understanding of what Asperger’s Syndrome meant. Few students had no experience of Asperger’s. Results show that majority of students don’t know what supports are available to people with Asperger Syndrome at third level education.
Introduction

Asperger Syndrome is known as an Intellectual brain disorder. It is seen as a form of Autism. In the past the condition has been misdiagnosed as having conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and forms of schizophrenia. The condition is known to affect more males than females. Aspire (2008) state that 3,730 children up to the age of 18 have Asperger’s in Ireland. The aim of this research project is to evaluate the extent of which first year social care students at Athlone Institute of Technology understand Asperger Syndrome. The objectives of this research project include:

- To explore the 1st year Social Care student’s knowledge and understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome
- To explore 1st year Social care students knowledge of Asperger’s syndrome at 3rd level and what supports are available for students it Asperger’s Syndrome at 3rd level education

This research project will look at the following:

- Chapter One: This chapter will discuss the main literature review of research project.
- Chapter Two: Will look at the methodology used
- Chapter Three: Shows the results and findings
- Chapter Four: This chapter shows the discussion of the finding and results
- Chapter Five: Will looks at the conclusion and recommendations for the research project.
Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

This literature review will explore the awareness of Asperger Syndrome among third level undergraduate students in Athlone Institute of Technology. The literature review explores the following areas: definitions, history, symptoms and implications of the syndrome in an academic setting.

1.2 What is Asperger’s Syndrome?

Asperger’s Syndrome is an intellectual brain disorder and is seen as part of the Autistic spectrum (Autismsupport, 2009). According to Jackson (2002), Asperger’s Syndrome is usually known as a mild type of autism, where there are both good and bad outcomes. Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland has estimated that, 3,730 children up to the age of 18 have Asperger’s in Ireland. The condition generally affects more males than females, with an estimated ratio of 7 males to every female with Asperger’s Syndrome (ASPIRE, 2008). In the past people with Asperger’s Syndrome were thought of having conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Asperger’s Syndrome being misdiagnosed is very common as the syndrome is quite rare. The condition occurs in 1 in 10,000 people worldwide (Bryna, 2006). Surprisingly many famous figures have been thought to have had Asperger’s Syndrome people such as Albert Einstein, Isacc Newton, W.B Yeats and Eamon De Valera (Walker and Fitzgerald, 2006).

‘People with Asperger Syndrome are remarkable in their ability to learn to adapt and compensate for their difficulties. They can achieve the highest levels of education and successful professional career’ (Frith, 2003; cited in Jamieson and Jamieson, 2004:1).

1.3 Symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome

Asperger’s Syndrome is a lifelong developmental disability. According to Wing (1998) the condition has a number of clinical characteristics which include: Lack of empathy, little or no ability to form friendships, repetitive speech, poor non-verbal communication, and intense
absorption in certain subjects. Wing (1998) also stated that Asperger’s is considered as a subgroup with the Autistic spectrum and also there is evidence to suggest that Asperger Syndrome is more common than normal Autism and it may be diagnosed in children who may have never previously been diagnosed with Autism. The symptoms of Asperger Syndrome vary but are generally divided into three main groups. These include; Difficulty with social communication, difficulty with social interaction and difficulty with social imagination. They are often referred to as 'the triad of impairments'.

**Difficulty with social communication:** Aspergerssupport (2009) states that for people with Asperger’s Syndrome understanding conversation can sometimes be like trying to understand a foreign language. Aspergerssupport (2009) also highlights that people with the condition can find it difficult to portray themselves emotionally and socially for example, they can find it hard understanding conversations, gestures and can find difficulty in understand metaphors or sarcasm in conversations.

**Difficulty with social interaction:** People with Asperger’s Syndrome also have problems and difficulty with social interaction. Some of these impairments may include; an inability to interact with peers, have poor eye contact and lack of social skill towards others and also an inability to portray sympathy and empathy (Asperger-Advice, 2007).

**Difficulty with social imagination:** Many people with Asperger’s can illustrate a lot of repetitive thinking combined with an impairment of their social imagination, for example, children with Asperger’s may arrange their toys according to size, colour or shape (colour7en, 2006). Due to the lack of social imagination, people with the condition can only see things in their own way. The impairment in imagination can also make it difficult for them to understand other people’s feelings (Asperger-Advice, 2007).

### 1.4 The History of Asperger’s Syndrome

Hans Asperger 1944, an Austrian psychiatrist, carried out his thesis on children who were intelligent with above average vocabulary but showed similar behaviour with regards to social and communication deficiencies as to those who had autism (Attwood, 2007). Hans Asperger also conducted research through case studies; he described four boys who were different in their behaviour, social and cognitive. He found that the four boys illustrated “autistic psychopathy” (Attwood, 1998). The study by Hans Asperger did not achieve any recognition until the 1990’s when Asperger’s Syndrome was established as a diagnosis.
(Attwood, 1998). Robison (2007) highlights that before the study achieved any recognition, Asperger’s syndrome had often been misdiagnosed as conditions such as depression, schizophrenia and other psychological type disorders.

1.5 Academic, Social and Emotional effects of Asperger’s Syndrome

Adolescents with Asperger’s syndrome can experience social, emotional and also academic effects. Holliday-Willey (2003), states that adolescents with Asperger Syndrome can experience a heightened sense of ‘differentness’ during their years in high school. She highlights that social environments such as schools are challenging for adolescents as they continually confront the Asperger’s Syndrome students vulnerabilities with respect to social processing and also needs for consistency and predictability. An estimated 10% to 20% of typical school aged children suffer bullying, or social rejection by their class mates (Bureleson, 1985; cited in Holliday-Willey, 2003). The effect of peer rejection or isolation can show a big impact on the person with Asperger’s Syndrome socially and emotionally. It has been found that children who do not have good friendships skills will experience negative effects that are long-term and affect their cognitive, social and emotional development (Painter, 2006)

1.6 Asperger’s Syndrome at third level (University/College)

Third level educations such as university and institutions have seen a large rise in the number of students with disabilities. According to AHEAD (2008) there has been a significant increase of students in higher education with a registered disability over the past number of years. One of the greatest increases in students numbers attending third level education are individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome (Gleeson, Quinn & Nolan, 2010). There can be both positive and negative aspects for an individual with Asperger’s Syndrome entering into third level education. The university/College life can nurture the students’ strengths and can help their development and special interests. Third level education can provide a vast range of opportunities for students with Asperger’s. It can foster personal, social and academic skills. Students with Asperger’s can also gain great independence. Going to university/college can influence the individual to make new and diverse friendships, join different societies and develop a stronger sense of values and interests (Gleeson, et al., 2010). Palmer (2006) comments on the negative aspects of 3rd level education. She states that there can be anxiety when preparing for the transition to college life and this can overwhelm the benefits that can
come from the college experience. For students with Asperger’s it can be a daunting time in their life. According to Baker & Welkowitz, (2005) the college student with Asperger’s Syndrome is like a boat without sails that has been set off to sea.

1.7 Supports for Student’s with Asperger’s at third level education

Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome who enter into third level education require different supports. The significance of supports for individuals with Asperger Syndrome in primary and secondary level education are well acknowledged but there appears to be less research and services at third level. To satisfy the requirements of students with the condition when entering into a different and complex environment of college or university, people need to be willing to respond effectively to the needs of students with Asperger Syndrome (Gleeson, et al., 2010). Asperger syndrome seems to be rare in college and university environments with a lot of students being unaware of the condition, thus requiring more awareness to be made in 3rd level education.

1.8 Conclusion

This study investigates the condition of Asperger’s Syndrome from a first year Athlone Institute of Technology social care students understanding. The literature review has shown an overview of Asperger’s Syndrome in general. The author believes that there is a need to carry out this study as there have not been many studies undertaken in relation to Asperger’s Syndrome and specifically from a social care student’s perspective. Therefore a significant gap exists in the current level of research.
Methodology

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the author will explain the research method that is being carried out within this research project. This chapter will be divided under five headings, these include; research method, the sample group, the process/pilot study, ethical considerations and limitations that the author may have come across.

2.2 Research Method

The research methods can be separated into two categories, quantitative and qualitative methods. ‘Qualitative method attempts to understand individual’s perception of the word. It uses non-numerical and unstructured data and has more general research questions, at the beginning which become more focused as the interview progresses’ (Punch, 2005; p.28). Qualitative research can be carried out by two ways, as interviews or a focus group. ‘Quantitative research collects numerical data and...(Uses) typically structured and predetermined research questions conceptual framework and designs’ (Punch, 2005; p.5). This research can be carried out by using questionnaires / surveys. Mc Donald, (2006) states that qualitative research relates to the quality of the research. The author has chosen quantitative research. This type of methodology is conducted through a questionnaire format. The questionnaire asks specific questions, which can make it easier for the participants. The use of the questionnaire set-up is practical as it is a fast method of collecting information as they are very quick to distribute, to be completed and to collect. The author believes that carrying out a questionnaire will get a good insight into a first year students understanding of what Asperger’s syndrome is and Asperger’s Syndrome in 3rd level education.

2.3 The Sample Group

The author’s aim has to evaluate the understanding of Asperger Syndrome from the perspective of the 1st year social care students in Athlone Institute of Technology. The sample group was constructed of twenty 1st year Social care students in Athlone Institute of Technology. This way it would give a good insight into their views and understanding of the Asperger’s condition.


2.4 The Process – Pilot study

Before the interviews took place, the author conducted a pilot interview on random students in Athlone Institute of Technology. ‘The pilot study is a small version of the main study and is useful to test all the procedures and the feasibility for the study’ (Murphy-Black, cited in Cormack 2000:p.311). Some alterations were made to the question list once the pilot Questionnaire was carried out, so it would match the author’s objectives for the research project. In order to conduct the questionnaire the author spoke to the students about the study and explained the purpose and all other relevant information about the study.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations are a very important part of gathering or planning any form of research. The participants were informed about their rights prior to taking part in the questionnaire, from a cover letter that was attached to the questionnaire. Their rights included, confidentially, all participants were also informed of the purpose of the study, and if any of the students felt uncomfortable answering any questions they had the right to skip them.

2.6 Limitations

The author faced some limitations whist carrying out the study. The sample group is only limited to twenty students which therefore it makes it difficult to get a great insight into the first year students understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome. Also trying to obtain the students to answer all questions and as acutely as possible can be difficult.
Results

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the results supplied by the twenty questionnaires. The purpose of this method is to find out a 1st year student's understanding and knowledge of Asperger’s Syndrome.

3.2 Results

Objective 1: 4.2 Objective 1: To explore the 1st year Social Care student’s knowledge and understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome

Q.1 what age range are you in?

50% (n=10) students were in the age range of 16-20. 5% (n=1) was aged 21-25. 10% (n=2) of students were 26-30 and 35% (n=7) were aged 30+.

Q.2 what gender are you?

85% (n=17) of the students were female and 15% (n=3) were male.

Q.3 what is your understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome?

The Majority of students stated that they did not have a good understanding of what Asperger’s Syndrome meant. 45% (n=9) did not know what the condition was. 30% (n=6) of the students had a good concept of what Asperger’s Syndrome and the other 25% stated that it was ‘A form of Autism’.
Q.4 what is your experience of Asperger’s Syndrome?

The vast majority of the students did not have any sort experience of Asperger’s Syndrome, 75% (n=15) of the students stated this. A mere 25% (n=5) had some sort of experience such as reading books, watching television shows about it, having family members, friends and acquaintances with the condition.

Q.5 Do you know anyone with Asperger’s Syndrome?

75% (n=15) of the students stated that they did not know anyone with Asperger’s Syndrome, whereas 25% (n=5%) showed that they knew someone with the condition.
Q.6 If ‘Yes’ What relationship do you have with them?

When asked if the students knew anyone with Asperger’s Syndrome 25% stated they knew someone. 10% (n=2) have a friends with the condition. Another 10% stated they had a sibling who had Asperger’s Syndrome and 5% (n=1) of the students showed that they had a (other) relative with the condition.

Figure 3.b
Q.7 In your opinion, who do you think Asperger’s Syndrome affects more?

Figure 3.c

When asked who do you think Asperger’s Syndrome affects more, 65% (n=13) didn’t know, 35% (n=7) said males and no students thought that females are affected by Asperger’s Syndrome.
Q.8 what do you think would be the main implications for a person with Asperger’s Syndrome?

![Figure 3.4](image.png)

The students were asked what they thought were the main implications for a person with Asperger’s Syndrome. 50% (n=10) reported that a person with Asperger’s are effected socially. 20% (n=4) commented that people with the condition were emotionally effected. 15% (n=3) of the students stated academically and 15% didn’t know what implications effected a person with Asperger’s syndrome.

**Objective 2: To explore 1st year Social care students knowledge of Asperger’s syndrome at 3rd level and what supports are available for students it Asperger’s Syndrome at 3rd level education**

Q.9 what supports do you believe should be available for students with Asperger’s Syndrome in 3rd level education?

40% (n=8) of the students felt that students with Asperger’s could do with more help from tutors. 35% (n=7) didn’t know what supports should be available and 25% (n=5) of the
students when asked stated that greater support should be made available including a
counselling service or someone to talk to.

Q.10 Are you aware of any supports available at A.I.T for people with
disabilities in general?

70% (n=14) a significant number of students said they were unaware of any supports
available at Athlone Institute of Technology. 30% of the students stated they knew some
supports available from Athlone Institute of Technology these included ‘Disability supports’
and ‘the students union’.

Q.11 Do you think there should be more Awareness about Asperger’s
Syndrome?

When the students were asked do they think there should be more awareness about
Asperger’s Syndrome, 100% (n=20) all the students said there should be. The students were
also asked if ‘yes’ to state how should Asperger’s Syndrome should be made aware. 55% (n=12)
said that it should be made more aware by information sessions and talks, 35% (n=7) said
awareness should be made by leaflets/posters and 10% stated that it should be introduced in
lecturers.
3.3 Summary of findings

The findings in this research showed:

- The vast majority of students did not have an understanding of what Asperger Syndrome was.
- The majority of students did not have any experience of Asperger Syndrome and didn’t know anyone with the condition.
- The majority of students didn’t know who was affected more (Males or Females) by Asperger Syndrome.
- 70% of the students were not aware of any supports available for people with disabilities at Athlone Institute of Technology.
- All 20 students stated that Asperger Syndrome should be made more aware.
Discussion

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the research results are discussed and compared with others indicated in the literature review will discuss the research results. They are discussed under the two main objectives.

4.2 Objective 1: To explore the 1st year Social Care student’s knowledge and understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome

Initially the author needed to get a 1st year social care students’ understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome. Autism support, (2009) stated that Asperger’s Syndrome is an intellectual brain disorder on the Autistic spectrum. It was shown that 6 students 30% had a good understanding of what Asperger Syndrome was. 25% of the students stated that Asperger’s Syndrome was ‘A form of Autism’ which endorses Jackson’s findings that Asperger’s Syndrome is a form of Autism with good and bad outcomes. The majority of students did not know what Asperger’s Syndrome was - 9 (45%). The students were asked did they have any experience of Asperger’s Syndrome, again the vast majority stated they did not have any experience with 75% stating this. The high percentage shows that most of the students that stated they don’t know what Asperger’s meant, did not have an experience of the condition. From the material researched in the literature it shows a clear estimate of 3,730 children up to the age of 18 with Asperger’s Syndrome, (Aspergersyndromeireland, 2009). When the students were asked, do they know anyone with Asperger’s Syndrome the vast majority 75% didn’t know anyone with the condition. From the 25% who did know someone, 10% stated they knew a friend, another 10% said a sibling and the other 5% was a relative. These results show that a minority of the students knew someone with Asperger’s. The number of 3,730 children up to the age of 18 in Ireland illustrate that there is a very small number of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. When asked, who do you think Asperger’s Syndrome affects the most, the students commented that 65% didn’t know with 35% stating men were affected more, and no students reporting female’s were. The students revealed that more males are generally affected than females and according to Aspire (2008) an estimated ratio of 7 males
to every female suffer from Asperger’s Syndrome. With 7 out of 20 students admitting they
don’t know who is affected by Asperger’s this show a repetition of the students having no
knowledge of Asperger’s Syndrome. The main implications for a person with Asperger’s
Syndrome can affect them socially, emotionally and academically. From reading the research
gathered in the literature review, Holliday (2003) reported that adolescents with the condition
can experience a heightened sense of differentness. Half of the students 50% answered in the
questionnaire that the main implication for a person with Asperger Syndrome were effected
socially. This relates to a lot of people with the condition having difficulty socialising and
communicating with others. 20% said that they believed people with Asperger’s are affected
emotionally, 15% say academically and 15% stated they don’t know what implications
affected people with Asperger’s Syndrome.

4.3 Objective 2: To explore 1st year Social care students knowledge of
Asperger’s syndrome at 3rd level and what supports are available for
students it Asperger’s Syndrome at 3rd level education

Question 9 asked the students what supports they believed should be available for students
with Asperger’s Syndrome in 3rd level education. 35% didn’t know what supports should be
available. 40% felt that students with Asperger’s could do with ‘extra help’ and ‘help from
tutors’. The other 25% reported that a counselling service or ‘someone to talk to’ should be a
support available. As stated by The National Autistic Society (2011) students with Asperger’s
syndrome can experience high levels of stress and anxiety than other students. So as the
students reported in the questionnaire ‘extra help’ from tutors and counselling services would
be beneficial to students with Asperger’s. Awareness of supports available at A.I.T for people
with disabilities in general was also a question asked. Of the 20 students asked, 14 (70%)
Students stated they were not aware of supports available at A.I.T with 30% stating they
were aware. One student commented ‘explaining more to 1st year students of what facilities
there are and more about what the students’ union can do’. Comments such as this emphasise
the ideas that disabilities in general could be made more aware for students at A.I.T.
Awareness about Asperger Syndrome was also highlighted on the questionnaire. The students
were asked if they thought there should be more awareness made about Asperger Syndrome.
The 20 students who participated in the questionnaire stated that there should be more
awareness made about the condition. A high number of students commented on this fact,
saying there should be a lot more awareness. As mentioned above 45% of the students did not know what Asperger Syndrome is. 55% of the students said that information session would be a great way of spreading awareness of the condition. 35% believed that posters and leaflets would portray more awareness and 10% said that introducing it into lectures would be a good idea. These comments show that there could be a lot more research done about the topic of Asperger’s and there could be more research conducted from a 3rd level perspective.

4.4 Evaluation of Method

The author used a quantitative method for the research. This method worked well in ways of gathering information but the author believes that a qualitative method may have been more appropriate to gather in depth knowledge of the students understanding of Asperger Syndrome. Although the quantitative approach was a straightforward, cheap and familiar method of gathering information form a group of participants.

4.5 Limitations of Method

The limitations the author faced while carrying out this method were, the sample group was only limited to twenty students which showed that some of the information given was not as in-depth for what the questions asked. For example, when the students were asked what was there understanding of Asperger Syndrome students gave a one sentence answer such as ‘A form of Autism’ this is a correct concept of Asperger’s although a more detailed answer could of been given. Also the students honesty when answering questions is not always 100% true which can lead to a lot if inadequate information.
5.1 Conclusion

The main aim of this research project was to evaluate the extent of which first year social care students at Athlone Institute of Technology understand Asperger’s Syndrome. The author had to research other literature on the topic of Asperger’s Syndrome, although there is an inadequate amount of research especially Asperger’s Syndrome at 3rd level education. The literature review focuses on Asperger’s in general and support for people with Asperger’s at college. The research was carried out by a qualitative method by a means of a questionnaire. The findings gave the author a good insight that the students who took part in the questionnaire did not have great understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome. It was also found that the students did not have any experience of the condition and majority did not know anyone with Asperger’s Syndrome. Students stated that they were unaware of what supports were available for people with disabilities. It was shown that all students felt that they thought the condition should be made more aware. In conclusion this research highlights the students’ lack of knowledge about Asperger’s Syndrome with 45% not knowing what the condition is. This also shows a lack of knowledge of the supports available to people with the condition who attend 3rd level education.
5.2 Recommendations

- Students need to be more aware of what Asperger’s Syndrome is.
- Athlone Institute of Technology could promote the topic more by having information talks guess speakers and people who may have the condition on the topic of Asperger’s Syndrome.
- More studies could be conducted to explore the awareness of Asperger’s Syndrome and Asperger’s Syndrome at 3rd level education.
- Services such as counselling should be more prompted within the college for students who may have the condition.
Referencing List


Cover Letter

To whom this may concern

I am a fourth year student of B.A in Social Care Practice. For my course I have to complete a research project. I have decided to carry out a project to evaluate the extent of which first year social care students at Athlone Institute of Technology understand Asperger’s Syndrome.

As part of my research I would appreciate it if you complete the attached questionnaire. The information gathered will be for the sole purpose of the project and will remain confidential and anonymous.

Please complete as many questions as accurately as possible and if you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask me.

Thank you,

Gráinne Mc Phillips
Questionnaire on Asperger’s Syndrome

Q.1 What age are you?
16-20  □   21-25  □   26-30  □   30+  □

Q.2 What gender are you?
Female  □   Male  □

Q.3 What is your understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q.4 What is your experience of Asperger’s Syndrome?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q.5 Do you know anyone with Asperger’s Syndrome?
Yes  □   No  □

Q.6 If ‘Yes’ what relationship do you have with them, are they you’re…….
Parent  □   Child  □   Classmate  □
Sibling  □   Friend  □   Other relative  □
Other  □

If ‘Other’ Please specify_______________________________________________________
Q.7 In your opinion, who do you think Asperger’s Syndrome affects more,
Females □ Males □

Q.8 What do you think would be the main implications for a person with Asperger’s Syndrome? (i.e. Socially, Emotionally and Academically)
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q.9 What supports do you believe should be available for students with Asperger’s syndrome in 3rd level education?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q.10 Are you aware of any supports available at A.I.T?
Yes □ No □
If ‘Yes’ Please Specify_______________________________________________________

Q.11 What do you think A.I.T can do better to support people with learning disabilities in general?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Q12. Do you think there should be more awareness about Asperger’s Syndrome?
□   □
Yes               No

If ‘Yes’ please specify how it should be made more aware

Q13. Any additional comments please state them here

Thank you for your co-operation