

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Developing College Skills in Students with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome**

Sarita Freedman, 2010

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The support and success of students with disabilities is a key aspect of the social inclusion agenda. This cohort has been identified by the Bradley Report as one of the under-represented student groups requiring attention. In recent years, Australian universities have reflected a marked increase in students with registered disabilities. Many of these are “invisible” disabilities such as learning disorders, mental health disorders, or students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Students with Asperger's syndrome or High Functioning Autism are likely to require additional assistance in order to comprehend and meet academic expectations. Although in one sense universities may become safe havens for these students because there is a legitimate space to examine a special interest in detail, they also represent a new learning environment and a new set of social expectations. Academic language and learning staff can play a key role in “decoding” classroom and assessment requirements and expectations, as well as some of the intricacies of language which may not be immediately apparent using the very literal thinking processes that are typically employed by this group of students. The book takes an explanatory approach to the needs and challenges of students on the spectrum and lists a range of strategies which have proven useful, although arguably some of these may be better suited to upper primary or secondary school students. Freedman is a psychologist who specialises in autism spectrum disorders and founded the College on the Spectrum foundation. The recommendations she makes are based on her own private practice, and in the context of the Australian higher education system would more likely be shared between disability services, counselling, and academic language and learning. Still, Freedman's underlying premise – that the “overriding goal of intervention should be [the] independent functioning [of ASD students] in all areas” (38) – is sound. Certainly, academic language and learning teachers can assist this cohort with strategies for reducing rigidity of thinking, improving organisational strategies and project planning, self-monitoring, multi-tasking, classroom codes of conduct, interpreting the “unwritten” or assumed aspects of learning and assessment, and central coherence. All of this is, of course, predicated on students self-identifying that they may require assistance in some of these areas, and the practitioner identifying useful communication techniques for this cohort.

Freedman's book is aimed at a broader audience than just academic developers; however, it seeks to assist all tertiary teachers, the parents of ASD students and the students themselves in developing the skills required for student success. Consequently, some of the information is not really pertinent to our field. Many of the strategies are recommended to be implemented while students are still in secondary school, while others, such as commentary on offering advice about dating and sex, sit well outside the scope of our practice. Nevertheless, *Developing College Skills in Students with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome* provides background information and links to important websites and books. As such, it is a useful starting point.

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