

INDEPENDENCE AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

WHAT'S THE POINT OF DISABILITY SUPPORT?

by **Suzie Murray**



It's sometimes a cynical question, with equally disillusioned answers. Support can be wielded as a PR tool or a marketing prop. Sometimes it can seem like a stop-gap for otherwise inaccessible environments: ensuring students don't fail outright without really improving their experience.

By contrast common consensus for best practice is to clearly prioritise the needs of disabled students and center their independence, shifting away from the needs of the environment and bringing the focus on them. And independence can be a great word for reflecting both their individuality, and specific separation of their needs from their institution, company, or school: to not only 'survive' where they are, but to 'thrive' as who they are.

Independence is also a major cultural touchstone for **"emerging adulthood"**. Leaving school, often moving away from home, or to university, "young adults begin to take on many of the executive self-management tasks and responsibilities formerly implemented, supervised, or cued by parents or teachers". As such, a key marker of independence is tied to executive functions like time management, self-regulation, planning and organisation.

But for students with ADHD, those executive functions are impaired — and by some accounts, this dysfunction is at the core of what makes ADHD a disability. In other words, how do we support independence, when it seems that independence is what's impaired?

Mary Solanto and Anouk Scheres's study into the "feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of a new cognitive-behavioral intervention" set out to teach these executive functions through 12 sessions of group CBT. As well as assigning homework for each CBT 'skill', the study describes a collaborative, social environment. This includes serving pizza, identifying the holistic support of the specialist group leader alongside other participants, but also a process of detailed feedback and support. For example, in the homework reviews, "the group leader queried each participant about the process and outcome, addressing any difficulties that arose, and highlighting what the student might do similarly or differently next time".

I found myself distracted by the similarity of these teaching methods with forms of support that aren't related to the cognitive behavioural approach. Some aspects sound markedly similar to the kinds of involved and enthusiastic support structures I sought out as a student. But those structures were continuous, and not didactic. They built off of findings that **"for adults with ADHD to engage with activities, these need to be perceived as inspiring, include an apparent goal to stimulate performance and need facilitating support"**. The observed successes of external support such as coaching, mentoring, and often medication affirm my own experience with the "situational variability" of executive dysfunction, which "can be spontaneously activated and integrated by situational stimuli that ... provide sufficient intrinsic satisfaction or threat to stimulate and sustain response".



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In other words, it's not necessarily true that learning executive skills makes it much easier to implement them. The methods of this study might be successfully applied to any kind of goal. Crucially, we don't know whether those outcomes were sustained after the study had ended. As **Russell Barkely** has detailed, it is not a lack of understanding which causes ADHD. It is the disconnect between knowledge of these skills and their execution. It's so rarely the case that ADHD students don't know what a timetable is or how to use one (not least because it's an explicit feature of secondary education). By definition, it is executive dysfunction which makes it so difficult to execute skills like time management. You don't need to teach someone how to use a light switch during a powercut, you need to lend them a torch.

ADHD is so heavily stigmatised as a 'lazy' or 'needy' disorder that a lack of acceptance can become its own barrier. By celebrating that 7 of their 18 participants "no longer met adult criteria for ADHD" at the end of the study, Solanto and Scheres equate ADHD with failure, and suggest that their method of supporting students with ADHD is to try and eliminate their neurodiversity.

This ideology pervades Sydney S. Zentall's 2011 study into "**Social Behaviour in Cooperative Groups**" with students with ADHD. The study grouped students into triads and measured their ability to solve group tasks, using teacher evaluations to identify students "at-risk" of ADHD. Some groups included these students, teamed with two "control" students, while other groups were entirely from the "control" pool. The findings were that "at-risk students exhibited more negative verbal, off-task, and less cooperative behavior. Unexpected findings were that their groups were also more successful". In fact, the groups with ADHD had an 88% success rate, compared to 17% success in the control.

The study was frankly eager to prove that ADHD students were a distraction who would damage the successes of their peers. When they found the opposite, they weren't able to say why. In hindsight, **with subsequent research**, some of these outcomes seem obvious. We know that ADHD does well with external cues; that it's great for creativity and problem solving, and that **teamwork improves outcomes** for diverse groups of learners.

In these cases, the framework for independence seems limiting, not empowering. Both studies measure positive outcomes in terms of reducing visible ADHD symptoms. It's a vision of disability interventions where success reduces the disability itself, and therefore the need for further support. It could be that it's a sincere interpretation of independence, but it also sounds like an approach developed with convenience in mind. As Zentall's study could indicate, when we adjust our priorities away from how ADHD students should work, we can realise the potential of what they're working on.

It's time to stop using 'independent' as a euphemism for 'going solo'. We know it's not consistent with the challenges of executive function, and we have examples of positive outcomes in group work and **more external support**. Independence can bring autonomy, empowerment, and self-assurance. For students with ADHD, that external support can be the difference between doing things alone, and getting in control.



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