Chapter 13
An Integral Analysis of Wellbeing in Adults With Characteristics of High Functioning Autism

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ABSTRACT

Quality of life is generally assessed through objective measures including conditions relating to material living, productive activity, health measures, education levels, and economic standing. In contrast, wellbeing is a complex process involving subjective evaluation of the qualities and experiences that make life good. Research is plentiful with studies exploring autism and quality of life. Less information is available relating to wellbeing and autism, especially from first person perspectives. This research explored how autism characteristics shape understanding and experiences of wellbeing in individuals with characteristics of high functioning autism. The study made use of a multi-method research framework, integral methodological pluralism (IMP), based on Ken Wilber’s integral theory, for gathering and understanding knowledge from diverse perspectives, styles, and methodologies. Findings contributed towards a more coherent and inclusive understanding of personal wellbeing in high functioning autism.

INTRODUCTION

As a whole, individuals with high functioning autism do not tend to have better life outcomes than those with more severe forms of autism (Hofvander, et al., 2009). Studies indicate that few individuals with autism live independently and that they experience higher levels of antisocial personality disorder, substance abuse problems, and mood and anxiety disorders. Despite having normal IQs, less than half are generally employed (Eaves & Ho, 2008), the majority have never been in a long-term relationship (Hofvander, et al., 2009), and a higher percentage of this population express suicidal thoughts (Eaves &
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Ho, 2008). In general, people with high functioning autism are often unable to meet their potential and suffer a decreased quality of life (VanHeijst & Geurts, 2014).

Alberta’s education system has seen a significant increase in the number of students diagnosed with, or exhibiting characteristics of, high functioning autism (Clarke, Dudley, Dutton, Emery, & Ghali, 2014). These students tend to be academically capable, but their prospects beyond school are often bleak. Increased understanding of their condition and strategies to support their needs are more likely to be implemented now than in previous years, but the current approach to accommodating these students’ needs lacks consistency and reflects a reactive rather than proactive approach. To shift to a proactive position requires an inclusive, integrated perspective that focuses on the long-term implications of high functioning autism as well as the symptoms that manifest in the classroom. C.D. Ryff’s model for psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) was used to explore improved understanding of the long-term implications of high functioning autism, with IMP providing methodological framework for collecting data that reflected inclusive and integrated perspectives. All Quadrant (AQ) mapping was used to enhance the value of understanding from the literature review, establish the design framework and data collection methods for the research, and to enrich analysis and understanding from the study’s findings.

Context

People with high functioning autistic characteristics tend to have strong skills in some areas, while being very low functioning in others. Common strengths often include skills and traits that are required for school success, including the ability to focus attention, memorize, master basic academic skills quickly and easily, and follow concrete instructions. It is not uncommon for the educational needs of these learners to be overlooked because they are capable of mastering basic curriculum. Important areas of deficit are generally not addressed in school, as they are not part of any current curriculum and possibly because most neurotypical learners naturally develop these essential skills without specific instruction. Weaknesses relating to perception, abstract thinking, understanding cause and effect, prioritizing, decision-making, and adapting to change are typical in the diagnosis. These are examples of skills that are pertinent to success, but are not identified as focus points in any particular curriculum.

Although existing research allows for speculation about what knowledge, skills and attitudes should be addressed in the successful education of learners with characteristics of high function autism, there seems to be little research examining the big picture of autism.

Purpose

This research sought to understand well-being in individuals with characteristics of high functioning autism, and to explore what this insight could reveal about educating Alberta learners on the autism spectrum. It was anticipated that a better understanding of participants’ perceptions and experiences of well-being could have curricular implications. By examining multiple perspectives of the topic, rich and contextualized understanding offered valuable information towards improving the educational experiences and outcomes for learners on the autism spectrum.