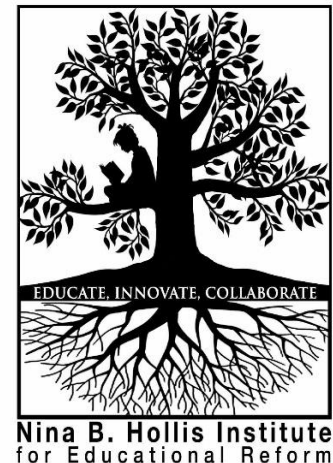


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Márta Vajda
Florida Atlantic University

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“I Can Stop Doubting Myself:” ADHD College Students’ Experiences from ADHD Coaching: An Action Research Study

Márta Vajda¹

¹Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Florida Atlantic University, United States
mvajda@fau.edu

Abstract

This participatory action research project was conducted to better understand the impact of ADHD coaching on the experiences of two college students with ADHD. Both students were coached individually for eight weeks on Zoom. Pre and post coaching surveys were conducted to assess motivation for coaching and takeaways from coaching thereafter. Questionnaires were administered to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses with executive functioning and, as a form of ongoing support, accountability check-ins were provided in between weekly sessions. After two months of coaching, results revealed that both students changed their negative mindset about themselves, became more confident and self-regulated learners, and learned new tools to implement on their own for their future.

Keywords

higher education, coaching, ADHD

Introduction

ADHD is a common behavioral disorder that impacts students in all facets of their lives. Studies involving college students have shown that having ADHD adversely affects long-term academic outcomes, resulting in more suffering than their non-ADHD peers (Alsalamah, 2017). Core ADHD symptoms include inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (Ahmann, Tuttle, Saviet, & Wright, 2018) -- all of which have debilitating effects on academic goal attainment. Without the parental supervision or support received in high school, college students find adjusting to new academic environments particularly challenging (Ahmann et al., 2018). To gain a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and to discover how ADHD coaching can mitigate them, this action research study was conducted and guided by the following research question: What impact do motivational and organizational strategies have on the academic success of college students with ADHD?

Literature Review

As college students with ADHD enter college, they encounter a variety of academic challenges. Some of these include the difficulties of managing multiple courses, time management, developing and organizing planner systems, initiating tasks, and minimizing distractions (Ahmann et al., 2018). Relative to their peers without ADHD, these students adjust poorly to the greater demands of college life due to their executive function deficits, often resulting in withdrawal from classes or academic probation (Alsalamah, 2017). To ensure students receive proper support, they must pursue accommodations on their own and disclose their diagnosis to the appropriate service department at college. Since support services vary greatly among colleges, pursuing accommodations is often met with frustration and feeling overwhelmed. In a National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 by Newman et al. 2011, researchers found that roughly 28% of college students with disabilities seek accommodations in college and, of those who do, over half found the services useful (Newman et al., 2011 in Ahmann et al., 2018). Among those who sought support services, 34% resorted to services outside of their college, (Ahmann et al., 2018) either due to the stigma associated with or to the lack of individualized support that ADHDers greatly benefit from.

In contrast to traditional campus services, ADHD coaches focus on supporting students' emerging autonomy by helping develop and manage their executive function skills to promote self-efficacy and confidence (Zimmerman, 2002). This type of life coaching conforms to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which articulates that individuals should be causal agents in the development of their own goals (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). To this end, ADHD coaches help students gain clarity about their neurodiversity and the "skills, strategies, and beliefs needed to manage executive function challenges" (Parker & Boutelle, 2009, p. 205). Working closely, ADHD coaches facilitate a co-creative partnership with their students that explore new ways of facing obstacles and improving overall well-being. Though SDT-based research on ADHD is still scarce, the internal motivations are operationalized in most ADHD-related motivational frameworks (Morsink, Van der Oord, Antrop, Danckaerts, & Scheres, 2021). Future research on motivation for students with ADHD could benefit from broader frameworks that explicitly include internal motives in the conceptualization and operationalization of student success (Morsink et al., 2021).

A theory that supports ADHD college students' engagement in achievement-related behavior is Achievement Goal Theory (AGT). Coupled with ADHD coaching that ultimately helps students maximize academic performance, this theory provides an understanding of the reasons why students engage in achievement-related behavior and the standards used to evaluate their success (Chazan, Pelletier, & Daniels, 2021). Although frequently used to study neurotypicals' relationship with achievement goals, studies involving the achievement goals of students with ADHD have been rather scarce (Barron, Baranik, Serpell, & Evans, 2006). With poor academic outcomes, failing grades, and higher drop-out rates than their neurotypical peers (Barron et al., 2006), ADHD college students can benefit from the theoretical framework afforded by AGT in coaching to focus on mastery and performance toward short- and long-term goals.

Lastly, the application of Resiliency Theory (RT) lends itself to the belief that students and ADHD coaches form a co-creative partnership that focuses on enhancing strengths instead of deficits. The utility of this framework promotes a growth mindset thinking that helps students think and behave

in new ways (Zimmerman, 2013). This, in turn, enhances students' assets as ADHDers, puts barriers around weakness, and presents new resources they can cultivate and manipulate once coaching has ended.

Methodology

Study Participants

This participatory action research study was conducted over the course of eight weeks, from September 2022 through November 2022. Two college students were chosen for this study who reached out to the researcher for ADHD coaching. The students were Sarah and Gabby (pseudonyms), both freshman in college in the Southeastern United States.

Data Collection

Both students were coached individually for an eight-week duration, meeting weekly with the researcher for 30-40 minutes each. Between their weekly sessions, both students had unlimited accountability in the form of text message check-ins that allowed the researcher and students to stay in touch and ensure goals were being met. The researcher worked independently on this action research study.

Before the commencement of coaching, both students were administered The Peg Dawson & Richard Guare Executive Function Questionnaire (Dawson & Guare, 2023) which helped assess their executive function areas of weakness and strength and helped the researcher tailor coaching sessions to their specific needs. The Dawson & Guare Questionnaire is a self-report assessment instrument created by renowned clinical psychologist, Peg Dawson, and neuropsychologist and board-certified behavior analyst, Richard Guare to help students become aware of their executive function strengths and challenges (Dawson & Guare, 2023). Qualitative data was collected from pre and post coaching surveys that asked about students' motivations for coaching and their takeaways after coaching. A researcher journal that recorded students' weekly progress was kept as well.

Data Analysis

To conduct sound research, the researcher employed a case study design with an inductive approach to collect data from the surveys, journaling, and the questionnaire. This was in attempt to explore answers from real-life contexts and see how it mapped to the general understanding of students' experiences from ADHD coaching. After gathering notes from the data, the researcher searched for common themes among them. By locating and grouping similarities and recurring themes across the data, the researcher was able to cluster and aggregate findings into thematic levels. Approximately 1 hour of survey data, 5 hours of journaling data, and 1 hour of questionnaire data were documented through a coding phase, charting phase, and interpretation phase. Survey data from the students were first analyzed individually, then collectively analyzed, and triangulated. As a result, 3 themes emerged.

Findings

Theme 1: Students Changed their Negative Mindset About Themselves

After eight weeks of ADHD coaching, both students reported feeling better about themselves. Sarah let go of the limiting beliefs she had about herself at the onset of coaching. Her post coaching survey revealed how she "let go of the limiting belief that [she has] to struggle all the time to succeed." This was particularly revelatory, because initially she was operating on the mindset that struggling equaled success. For her, this negative framing had subsequently hindered her academic growth because it focused on her deficits instead of her strengths. The results from her Executive Function Questionnaire highlighted that Flexibility and Stress Tolerance were her strengths, which she was able to capitalize on through the eight weeks of coaching and weekly check-ins.

Similarly, Gabby felt that she could accomplish more now that she believed in herself. After connecting with a coach who believed in her, she shared that she could tackle the most difficult scenarios with ease. Originally, Gabby thought that medication was the answer to her academic and motivational problems, but through ADHD coaching realized she was wrong to think this way. Gabby thought "medication would give [her] all the help [she] needed...." But now, she shared, "I feel like a whole new person, I finally have control over my studies and can even do all the planning and stuff myself because I know how." Gabby also revealed that her motivation to do better in school got better throughout the weeks. When she felt a "lack of motivation coming" from subjects in school that were boring or stale, she would "implement some of the cool strategies." The researcher recommended and visualized herself feeling better about making progress; visualization was one of the tools that truly helped Gabby "see" herself in a better light.

From the researcher's journal entry during week four, she wrote that, "both students are readily sharing news of their successes with their parents and with me. Sarah got an 89% on her math exam, which is a huge win! Prior to coaching, her grades on math tests were hovering in the low 70s because she didn't know how to create a study guide and plan a study schedule ahead of time. Proud coaching moment here!" During week eight, I wrote that, "Gabby told me that she told her mom how much she's loving her coaching sessions and how much she's learning."

Theme 2: Students Became More Confident and Self-Regulated Learners

Both students reported feeling more confident and better able to self-regulate their learning. At the onset of coaching, when students filled out The Peg Dawson & Richard Guare Executive Function Questionnaire, this was not the case. Sarah's weakest skills were Response Inhibition, Task Initiation, and Emotional Control, which had long debilitated her progress academically. Sarah shared that prior to coaching, she was not able to start anything without feeling worried or anxious about the multiple steps needed to accomplish an assignment; her mind started spiraling and negative thoughts would ensue, triggering procrastination and avoidance. After eight weeks of coaching, however, she shared that she was "able to complete assignments early now instead of last minute..." and that she was, "calm when it [came] to school instead of always anxious." She learned that having an organizational system could actually work for her and the way her brain is. Before ADHD coaching, she thought all organizational planners were the same and could not help

her unique brain wiring; through our coaching sessions, however, she learned that she just needed to find the right one and learn how to make it her own.

For Gabby, at the onset of coaching, her weakest executive function skills were with Working Memory, Stress Tolerance, and Sustained Attention. After eight weeks of coaching, my journal notes reported that Gabby was able to both sustain her attention and maintain her stress levels much better. Gabby also shared in her post-coaching survey, “It’s like you knew exactly what I needed to learn to be a better student. ...before, I barely planned anything, but now I can understand what it takes to learn properly, and I can do it on my own for the way my brain understands it.” Coaching that focused on the unique needs of a student with ADHD provided Gabby with tools to excel academically and the confidence to overcome hardships using those tools. Sarah summed up her experience nicely when she shared, “I love being confident in my abilities to plan and prioritize.”

My journal entries also supported this theme. During week three, I noted that, “Sarah is getting the hang of our accountability check ins and is excited about organizing her week using the Notion planner introduced during our session.” Accountability measures also proved to be extremely helpful. My journal entry on Gabby during week 5 read, “Gabby is checking things off on her own in Coach Accountable and using the reminder feature more consistently now. This is awesome.” Gabby also shared, “I am no longer making endless to do lists with no direction, but instead organizing my schedule with accountability. I have my coach to help and I’m holding myself accountable too.” By the seventh week, my journal notes revealed that, “both girls are much, much more motivated with their studies and I think quite happy with their progress.”

Theme 3: Students Learned New Tools to Implement on their own in the Future

Both students were able to learn new strategies and implement them for their present and future goals. By strengthening her executive functioning weaknesses, Gabby highlighted how she could “stop getting in [her] own way.” She learned how to forgive herself when slip ups occurred (journal entry). Similarly, when Sarah slipped up, she knew it wasn’t the end of the world. She focused instead on her “wins” from that week and tried a different approach the next time (journal entry). Her mantra as a result was to: “Keep on trying your best and push yourself!”

Both students were able to take the tools of organization, time management, and strength-based motivational strategies to help themselves academically. Sarah said it best, “I tell myself that I can do it and use the tools I have learned in ADHD coaching, and I stop doubting myself. I remember that I did it with you holding me accountable, so I can do it without you, and hold myself accountable.” Gabby also shared that she “has learned that [she] can inspire others.” How amazing is that!

Discussion

The aim of this participatory action research project was to explore the impact of ADHD coaching on the academic challenges of college students with ADHD and to understand it from the perspective of students’ experiences. After just two months of weekly coaching sessions and accountability measures, this study highlights the value of ADHD coaching to struggling students.

By changing their negative mindset, students were able to build their confidence and become self-regulated learners who could take the tools and strategies learned in coaching and apply it to their lives after coaching had ended.

While this was a small-scale study, the findings imply that ADHD coaching on a larger scale has the potential to reform educational circles by providing strength-based tools and strategies for students to understand their neurodiversity and arm themselves for success, however they may define it. As a unique service that promotes students' autonomy, self-determination, and resiliency, ADHD coaching can be incorporated into colleges' support services departments to provide more students with targeted, individualized support that provides solutions to the unique symptoms of ADHD. Services can include but are not limited to strategies involving decision-making, goal attainment, self-awareness and self-compassion, planning and organization, self-advocacy, stress and anxiety management, and overall well-being for living a purposeful, flourishing life. The benefits of ADHD coaching are limitless and, when coupled with support services such as tutoring or therapy, can be the very resource students need to feel heard and believed in.

The co-creative partnership afforded by ADHD coaching underscores the importance of collaborative learning environments. Thus, future research on ADHD coaching will benefit from mixed methods approaches, longitudinal designs, and exploring specifically the factors supporting the impact of coaching on student success. While ADHD coaching is not the only multimodal treatment for struggling ADHD students, it is a valuable and effective service for meeting the individualized needs of students and advocating for their success in college and beyond.

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