Impact of Labor-Strike on Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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INTRODUCTION

With the increasing unionization in the university setting and fight for better work environments, faculty strikes have become a consistent occurrence at universities and colleges across Canada.

A study conducted at York University following the strike in 2008 found negative psychosocial impact on students; specifically, students reported stress surrounding financial concern, and the disruption of their plans.1

Currently, there is a dearth of research investigating the impact of strikes on students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). These students may be uniquely impacted due to core features of ASD, including rigidity and limited social support.

METHODS

Seven participants were recruited from the ASD Mentorship Program (AMP) at York University and Seneca@York.2

AMP mentors students with ASD with the objective of:

• Building a social network & social skills
• Encouraging organizational & academic skill development
• Assisting in the navigation of the post-secondary transition

AMP is comprised of 3 components:

1) Individual Meetings
2) Group Events/ Joint Meetings
3) Workshops

• Interview questions queried various areas such as: routine during the strike, available support, resources and services accessed, mental health impact, and general understanding of strike logistics.

RESULTS

Audio recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Three themes emerged:

1. Social Isolation & Related Difficulties
   - “There was not enough social outlets and support. I tried to join clubs, none of them were apparently running because I never heard back from any of them.” -2
   - “Since I’m not having to go to class… I’ve basically been home most of the time and not really been doing much.” -4
   - [Stigma with York] “I wouldn’t talk about York University with my friends… right now my social life is a little bit barren” -3
   - “I couldn’t really talk to [professors] if I needed help with something, I could only rely on the classmates so in a way it was kind of difficult” -5
   - “I was just playing games… I just didn’t have anything to do.” -6
   - [Routine] “Probably a lot of video games, that’s about it… because when there are no classes you’re kind of more isolated than usual.” -1

2. Need for Support Services
   - “A workshop on handling stress would be nice, maybe having some support and someone to talk to would be good.” -5
   - “I was able to meet with [my mentor] and she was a really big help.” -2
   - “I was doing a lot of counseling stuff at the time so it was fine” -1
   - “I still had meetings with my learning strategist and counselor.” -6
   - “More [AMP] meetings or social [events] both work” -4
   - “One of the benefits I found meeting with [AMP mentor] was clarifying my goals and seeing it through” -3

3. Affective Difficulties
   - [Source of anxiety] “The unpredictability of when classes would start again.” -1
   - [Source of anxiety] “Just loss of routine.” -3
   - “It left me with like nothing to do really… I’ve probably been turned down for work 50 times now… it sort of left me feeling a bit down, I feel like a deadbeat sometimes, like I’m not going to school and I’m not working so I’m not doing much useful with my life.” -2
   - “Not having classes or things to do on campus is actually kind of affecting me like a good bit and I have plenty of not good days because of like how I am” -4
   - “My experience with [the strike] is kind of intimidating, I was worried about how the semester would go, I was thinking about whether I would be able to finish the semester.” -5

DISCUSSION

The impact of strike on neuro-atypical students is poorly understood. Due to core features of ASD, including rigidity, and poor social relationships, this population faces unique challenges when navigating labor strikes. Our research identifies key areas of difficulties:

• Social Isolation: Themes of isolation and loneliness were commonly reported amongst the students for whom class and university activities were a main source of social interaction.

• Affective Difficulties: Students reported being anxious and feelings of sadness, and a loss of purpose or routine.

• Need for Support: Students with ASD are at an increased risk for developing mental health comorbidities such as depression and anxiety.3

It is therefore instrumental that counselling and support services remain available during times of strike. Students identified AMP as a beneficial support program that can provide outlets for social engagement and techniques for managing stress.

With increasing unionization, it is important to understand the differential needs of this population during strikes. Thus, informing our design of interventions and tailoring of support services to mitigate mental health deterioration, and promote overall well-being.

REFERENCES