

Disability Case Study

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Case Study

For the purpose of this case study, K.A. Smith, a 53 year old woman, who is legally blind was interviewed. Her disability is a result of an excessive amount of oxygen at birth, which led to the damage of the optic nerve. Because the nerve is now damaged, there is no cure. Being legally blind, Smith has had to constantly make adjustments and adapt her life around the disability. While there is no specific term for her condition, Smith falls under the broad category of those who are visually impaired. This case study will compare the experiences of Smith with that of research for those who are visually impaired, more specifically legally blind.

When conducting the interview, Smith brought up the struggles she faced in school. She explained that she was often frustrated because the classroom as well as the lessons “were not designed” for those who are visually impaired (personal communication, 2015). Early on, she realized that she had to be proactive in her request for adaptations. Specific ones that she remembers were that no papers could be handwritten or faded, as these were incredibly hard to see. All her papers, notes, and worksheets needed to be typed. Thinking back to the time in which she went to school, the late 60’s and into the 70’s, it can be concluded that this was not as convenient as it is today. Although in present day education, assistive technologies for students are more available, research explains a lag in the actual way lessons are taught. One study suggests that “education should pay attention to the social consequences of this impairment in all relevant aspects,” (Yildiz & Duy, 2013). This suggests building the interpersonal communication skills of the person with the disability and giving other students a sense of empathy or education on the disability itself. For Smith in particular, social experiences in and out of school caused great anxiety.

This anxiety that Smith faced was focused around her inability to read quickly or easily. She confessed that she was always afraid in school, and even still today, that people would “think she was stupid” because she had a hard time reading (personal communication, 2015). This fear could stem from the fact that visual impairment is a non visible disability. Others do not perceive her to have this impairment, making the task of reading or reading out loud, nerve wracking or embarrassing. Research enforces however, that “visual impairment does not limit mental processes” (Yildiz & Duy, 2013). By using the social approach stated previously, visually impaired students would learn communication skills to lessen their anxiety, while other students would gain empathy toward the situation. The focus of Smith’s education was not on social aspects, allowing her to hold on to her anxiety and fear over “looking stupid” to others that did not understand. Given the research, it begs the question, if Smith had had a socially centered education would she be less anxious about reading/reading aloud in front of others?

While Smith has learned to make many adjustments to her life, she explains that the most difficult and “annoying” aspect of being legally blind is her inability to drive (personal communication, 2015). As a mother of two, now grown children, it was incredibly inconvenient. Living in a small, rural community there was/is virtually no public transportation. This is a serious challenge for those visually impaired. If no public transportation is available, they must solely rely on family and friends for rides. Research shows that “the inability to travel independently has been considered one of the most significant handicaps experienced by visually impaired people, requiring the development of ‘alternative strategies’ (Montarzino & Robertson, 2007). Smith explains that her “alternative strategy” is relying on family and friends for

transportation. This clearly requires ample planning and coordination on her part, to find rides to important appointments or tasks as simple but essential as grocery shopping.

As one can assume, with this lack of guaranteed transportation, Smith finds it very difficult to plan activities and other tasks for herself. Because of her dependence on others for transportation, she tends to only go out for the essentials or if she is invited by others. Smith confesses that this hinders her from taking up activities that she would like to be involved in such as the gym (personal communication, 2015). In some ways Smith feels as though her lack of transportation leads to lack of independence in doing what she wishes. Research suggests that “adapting the environment so that it is congruent with an individual’s visual capabilities and is supportive of continuing engagement in valued leisure activities may play an important role in one’s well being” (Stevens & Krause, 2004). While difficult to fully involve oneself in activities and groups with no dependable transportation, it is not impossible. In the interview, Smith was adamant that she felt fulfilled, as she was “lucky to have understanding family” that brought her to community dinners where she volunteers and church (personal communication, 2015). It is important to realize that one’s social life is not impaired along with their vision. Just like all other aspects, one must adjust and adapt to make things functional.

As stated earlier, being visually impaired as forced Smith to be proactive about finding adaptations and assistive devices. One significant program that she was introduced to is called The Iris Network, which provides free or reduced priced powerful assistive technology (personal communication, 2015). Devices such as an enlarged keyboard for the computer or a powerful palm sized magnifier, allows Smith to adjust to her environment. Assistive devices are essential to those who are visually impaired as they go beyond just the typical eyeglass and provide

greater quality of life. Assistive devices “incorporate technology, equipment, devices, appliances, services, and services used by people with disabilities to actively participate in society” (Brassai & Bakó, 2011) With the help of this program, Smith is able to listen to her favorite books, instead of trying to read the fine print. Her experience, follows right along with research. People with visual impairments rely on technologies to carry out every day tasks. Although Smith’s particular visual disability does not have a cure and her vision cannot be corrected through eye glasses, she is able to use a variety of devices to adapt to the environment around her. As research shows an “important aspect concerning visually impaired people is the need for common information and its fulfillment by using modern assistive technologies such as audio transcription of printed information” (Brassai & Bakó, 2011). Although programs such as the Iris Network may not be available to all, it is imperative to know that devices are out there.

It is evident that despite the degree of Smith’s visual impairment and the incurable damage of her optic nerve, she has faced many obstacles and challenges, yet learned to navigate through them. As she ages, it is clear that new obstacles arise. While younger her biggest challenge was fitting in and succeeding in school, but now in her 50’s, she is most affected by her inability to drive and lack of dependable transportation. While comparing her experience to that of research, there are vast similarities. Research suggests ways to adapt or change one’s environment to better suit their lives and places a great emphasis on assistive technology. In conclusion, a life with a visual impairment is a fulfilled one, with adaptations.

References

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