

**A Critique of Kenneth M. Coffey and S. John Obringer's:
"A Case Study on Autism: School Accommodations and Inclusive Settings"**

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Coffey, K.M., & Obringer, S.J. (2004). A Case Study on Autism: School Accommodations and Inclusive Settings. *Education*, 124(4), 632-639.

There is no doubt that school children with disabilities experience numerous challenges both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, their necessary accommodations can also put an enormous strain on their families, their schools, and their community to fulfill their special individualized needs. In the article entitled “A Case Study on Autism: School Accommodations and Inclusive Settings,” authors Kenneth M. Coffey and S. John Obringer provide an analysis of their findings through a case study that they developed consisting of interviews with the mother and father of two siblings diagnosed with autism socializing disorder (ASD). The purpose of their study is to examine the involvement of the schools and the community and their efforts in providing inclusion of these two autistic siblings.

The article begins by explaining that autism was once a disorder that had not been sufficiently studied, but has recently received heightened attention by the government. It also mentions that the definition of autism is widely disputed, as some authorities consider it a distinct disability, while others consider it a subgroup of other disabilities and disorders. The article later explains how rare autism is, as it affects only about 4.8 per 10,000 people. Furthermore, the authors point out that fewer than 3 percent of siblings of children, who are diagnosed with autism, also have the disorder. This demonstrates the study’s significance by explaining how siblings with autism are an extremely rare and neglected population.

In their comprehensive case study, Coffey and Obringer did a thorough examination of a family who lives in a small town in the southeastern United States. The father is a 46 year old engineer who spends most of his time outside of work with the family. The mother is a 47 year old homemaker who plays an active role in their children’s lives and has spent extensive time studying autism. The couple has two autistic children, a son who is fourteen years old and in the eighth grade, and a daughter who is eleven years old and in the fourth grade. The children both

have poor social skills, as they both have few friends and spend a great deal of their time in solitary activities. The major difference between these two individuals is in academics, where the daughter struggles greatly in school, while the son is a “straight A” student.

Coffey and Obringer’s study included two sets of semi-structured interviews with the mother and the father of the two autistic children. The first set was conducted separately and the second one was done as a couple. To ensure accuracy, the interviews were recorded and reviewed by both researchers, who then examined the records of both the separate and joint interviews of the couple to determine emerging themes. The issues covered during the interviews include psychological stressors, genetics predispositions, social interactions, and family planning, in addition to a wide variety of questions on education and service delivery.

Through these two sets of semi-structured interviews, the authors found that the couple’s responses were similar on most issues. Both parents reported being more worried about their daughter who missed many early development milestones since childhood, while they had more confidence that the son would be successful. The couple had a difficult time trying to get the children to socialize. The parents were also both pleased with the positive reactions from the schools, especially the teachers and administrators who they say have been very supportive by providing both children with individualized attention and special services based on their needs. These services include in-home tutoring in academic and advanced self-help skills performed by university practicum students from special education programs. In addition, they also praised the community, particularly the children’s classmates and their parents for being respectful of the children’s disabilities, rather than judging them. The couple’s main disagreement was about the goals they had for their younger daughter. The mother was more committed to the daughter receiving a standard high school diploma, while the father was more concerned about her

happiness and well-being rather than educational achievement.

Coffey and Obringer conclude by setting forth new implications for both schools and communities with regards to the inclusion of children with autism based on their findings from the study. These suggestions include promoting community programs for students with developmental disorders and establishing more classrooms with peer support groups for both academic and social issues for these children. The authors also admit that these two siblings have unique life experiences and do not represent all school children in the United States who also have autism. Therefore, they recommend that the study be replicated using another family with autistic siblings. However, they concede that it would be hard to repeat this exceptional case study due of the rare occurrence of finding two siblings with the disorder.

This article consists of an excellent case study, and is well-written and well-organized. Coffey and Obringer do an outstanding job at providing an informative history of the autism in the introduction. I learned a little about the autism in college, but after reading the article's brief literature review in the introduction, I developed a clear understanding on how the disorder affects many young children and their families. In addition, they also explained how rare it is for researchers to find two siblings who both have the disorder. This demonstrates how the study is unique and provides it with a greater sense of importance to the field of disability studies.

In the methodology section of the article, the authors' procedures used for data collection are explained in great detail. Their methodology is logical and well-designed, as the two sets of questions (provided at the end of the article) used during their semi-structured interviews with the parents of the children are written clearly and easy for the interviewees to understand. In addition, the authors made the brilliant decision to ensure the accuracy of their findings by making sure that the interviews were both recorded and reviewed, followed by a thorough

examination of the records to determine common themes. This is then followed by a sound analysis of their reported findings from the interviews with the parents of the autistic children. These findings are invaluable, for they give readers a general understanding of the concerns that many parents have about their children who have developmental disorders.

While this article is strong overall, it still has its shortcomings. A substantial weakness with this article is that Coffey and Obringer do not explain what they had done (if anything) to ensure that data collector bias was not an issue affecting the study's findings. This is a significant flaw, as these biases can establish a major threat to the validity of study's results if they are not controlled properly. All data collectors have biases which have strong potential to threaten the credibility of their research findings. As a result, it should always be determined how this threat would be controlled before beginning the data collection process to ensure validity to the study's findings. While it is possible that something was done to control this threat, the authors fail to mention it in the article.

Another problem with this article is that the information included about the autistic siblings is fairly limited and general. The children are the centerpiece of the study. Therefore, the study should present a stronger focus on them. What is their daily routine like? Do they have any special skills, abilities, or talents? How do they get along with others, such as their parents, their peers, and their teachers? What special accommodations do they need to succeed in school? These are important questions that need to be addressed further. Coffey and Obringer should have also interviewed the siblings along with their parents in regards to their personal life experiences, as the study mainly concentrates on promoting inclusive settings for children with autism in their schools and their communities. There might have been a good reason why the authors decided to interview only the parents and not the children, but no explanation is provided

in the article.

Despite this article's shortcoming, Coffey and Obringer are successful at focusing on the special needs of children with developmental disorders such as autism, as well as growing efforts by schools and communities in support inclusive settings for them. This is done effectively through their interviews with the parent's on the involvement of both the schools and the community, in the inclusion of their autistic children. Children with developmental disorders have always been an important, yet often neglected segment of the disenfranchised population. Researchers in the field of disability studies often rely on government statistics of children with developmental disorders in America's elementary and secondary schools to draw conclusions concerning autistic children. However, these statistics do not provide first-hand accounts of the personal life experiences of children with the disorder and their families like Coffey and Obringer's comprehensive case study. As a result, this article is truly noteworthy and a remarkable contribution to the field of disability studies.

In addition to the researchers in the field, this article will also be of great value to prospective and current special education teachers. The study's findings will further their understanding of the many difficult challenges facing families with autistic children.

Reference

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