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Disabled students in higher education - restrictions to participation

Eva Magnus

Sør-Trøndelag University Colloge/NTNU Social Research Ltd., Trondheim, Norway

Background

Higher education is generally regarded as important for young people. For disabled persons it is seen as one of the most important strategy to increase participation. Membership in the labour market increases between two and three times with higher education (Bliksvær and Hanssen 2006). There are political agreements of an equal right to higher education, and on the necessity of increasing accessibility. The intention of the PhD-project "Disability and higher education" was to explore how students with impairment experience their everyday life. The main focus was to examine what restrictions they met, and what consequences this caused for studies and for active participation.

Objectives

The purpose of this presentation is to present what restrictions students with impairment can be confronted with, and to discuss how these restrictions can be understood.

Methods

To grasp the everyday life of the participating students, the time geographic diary (Ellegård and Nordell 1997) was used, asking the students to record time in activities, places and social relations during one week. The diary illustrates routines and preferred activities in a social and geographical context, and indicates what can be restrictions for the individual. Diary writing was followed by an in-depth interview, focusing on everyday life situations. Common themes were discussed in focus groups. Data production and analysing were inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz 2006).

Results

Everyday life is shaped by what the individual give preference to, and by the restrictions met. Even if the students reported different restrictions, mutual features in there experiences were found. Restrictions met can be grouped at different levels; capacity, coupling and authority (Whilborg 2005). The students spent more time than other students in rest and sleep, in several ordinary daily activities, as well as in the struggle of making the sudy situation accessible. Unconscious expectations of normality and of disability appear as underlying causes of the constraints these students are confronted with.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy

This presentation gives evidence of how a broad spectre of restrictions has to be considered in occupational therapy work when focusing on participation in society.