



Case study 1: Kevin, a student with ADHD

I went to a school for kids with physical disabilities because no place else wanted me. But I have a designation of ADHD, which is obviously not a physical problem, but an emotional one. In the *Sonderschule* [special school], there were a lot of kids who came from immigrant families and with low economic status. It was clearly a dead-end. English as a subject was ignored in the *Sonderschule*, and even in the *Hauptschule* [vocational school] as well. But especially in the *Sonderschule*. I made it through school and I did a training as a nursing assistant. Then I went back to school and got my *Abitur* [college-preparation degree].

ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a neurodevelopmental issue that affects 2% (ICD-10) to 7 % (DSM-V) of people aged under 18 years. Main symptoms perceived by outsiders are hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention, often resulting in poor performance in educational settings. People with ADHD describe problems with organization, identifying relevant information, and emotional self-regulation. Short-term memory, awareness of time, and sensitivity to criticism are significant challenges. ADHD persists into adulthood and can be associated with mental health problems or learning disabilities.

When I first started studying, I wanted to study theology, but the professor was completely inflexible while at the same time requiring us to be completely flexible. He changed course times and days and you weren't allowed to miss a single day, even though it was five days a week. So I liked the subject, but I couldn't deal with that. Now I study English, German, and special education for emotional-social needs and cognitive development.

The biggest problems right now are the social isolation due to COVID, but also the last-minute changes that can't be planned for. What I hate most is the lack of what feels like understanding on the part of the professors. Every change is a huge psychological problem for me, but they change things at a moment's notice and don't see why it's a problem. I asked for my exam to be in the morning because I know that my anxiety is a problem as the day goes on. And it's in my accommodations, but the professor said I had to take it like everybody else. And then someone at DOBUS [Dortmunder Support Center for Students with Disabilities] stood up for me. So the professor made a separate exam for me, and in Moodle, he wrote "Exam for Kevin M. due to disability." So I felt really outed. And there's no common basis, no relationship. Of course, you can't have everything: In other departments [than English], they are much nicer, but much less organized.

What is really helpful are the videos that everybody made during COVID. Because then I can watch them as often as I need to, and I don't need to out myself that I lost focus or can only concentrate for a few minutes at a time. It's even better if they have quiz questions in them or that I can complete afterwards, because then I can check myself and force myself to listen and watch.

It would be great if there was more organization in general. Information is really all over the place, and the different digital systems don't connect with each other. So I have to read this book of courses here, and sign up here, and then I have to make sure it fulfils this requirement over here. It is a digital mess, it creates a lot of management work, and it is not transparent. Some departments have it online, but others don't. And they don't talk to each other. So each time you need anything, like an accommodation, you have to negotiate with each individual professor. That takes time, and you feel like you are begging for something that you are actually entitled to, to help compensate for your disability. It makes me angry, and that carries over to everything else. I spend more time managing my studies than actually studying the content. And I am angry and frustrated a lot, which takes a lot of work not to show.

English itself is not a problem for me as a sort-of native speaker. Linguistics is really dry, but literature is the complete opposite. It is very interesting and you can explore a lot of different issues and themes. Of course, it helps if the topic is interesting or if you can choose your own topics or books. And even if you don't remember every word of a text, you can engage in thinking and discussing it. So it feels good to be able to contribute to a conversation in a seminar. It is more of a problem when the professor only recognizes one interpretation of a text as the "right" interpretation, but that happens less in university. I also like the variety of texts, everything from classics like Shakespeare to newer text forms, like graphic novels and comics. I can get really into these. I find Linguistics a lot harder. There is a lot to memorize and because I grew up speaking English, I make these decisions according to my instincts, not according to rules. And it is very detail-oriented, if you leave out one accent mark or double point, it is a mistake. I understand why, but for me, it is impossible not to overlook small things like that. And it takes me a lot longer to memorize things like the phonetic letters. I have a harder time remembering things, I forget things faster, so I have to work harder to learn them, and I have to keep re-learning them.



Case study 2: Laura, a student with visual impairment

I have been blind since childhood, and I think I cope very well. I also think I would be a good teacher. I did a voluntary internship for a year at an elementary school, and I worked very well with the pupils. In secondary school, English class was one of my favorite classes. In fact, I was at a bilingual school. My teacher was excellent. I received support from IRIS [a support center for learners with disabilities]. I really enjoyed literature a great deal. But at the university, it was a disaster and I ultimately had to switch from studying English to studying a different subject. Now I study special education, German, and religion as pre-service teacher.

One of my problems is my orthography, and I know it is bad. The problem is, I can't see the language; I can only hear it, and because English is not written as it is spoken, it is hard for me to use the right spelling and punctuation. I know my writing is really bad, and I had been working very hard on it. I tried to memorize everything. I also tried to get into the language skills classes where this is a focus, but they were always overbooked, and I wound up on the waiting list. So my spelling and my punctuation are very weak. At first, I was told that this was not a problem because it was clear that my deficit was a result of my disability. The professor told me it would not negatively affect my grade. But then, about two-thirds of the way through the seminar, she told me I did not have the necessary competences and that I was unsuited to be an English teacher. This came as quite a shock to me, and I felt like there was a real lack of transparency about what the expectations are. It also seemed like I was in a university seminar to learn, so the fact that I could not pass because I might someday not be a good English teacher, that felt like two things were getting mixed up.

In other English classes, it was more or less problematic. In linguistics classes, I was able to get alternative assignments and that worked out. I did okay in those classes. In the literature classes, it was more of a problem because, for example, there would be last-minute changes to the texts, and I did not have time to get them done over for me. In one class, we had a reader with excerpts from books, and the quality of the

Visual impairment

Visual impairments may take many forms, be of varying degrees and have different causes. The term "blindness" is used for (almost) complete vision loss that affects 43 million people worldwide. Assistive technologies play an important role in coping with visual impairments, for example, screen readers or Braille displays. Another kind of vision impairment is visual processing disorder. In this case, the brain has difficulty interpreting signals the eye sends it. There are many different types of visual processing disorder. Because it is often goes undiagnosed, it is not clear how many people are affected. It is also frequently misdiagnosed as Dyslexia or ADHD.

reader was bad. So DoBUS [*Dortmunder Support Center for Students with Disabilities*] can help me with these things, but not at the last minute. If the automatic text recognition doesn't work, which it doesn't for poorly-copied things, then they need a lot of time to prepare it for me, but we only got the things a week in advance. That is not enough time. Then one time, we were assigned a graphic novel, and I was like, hello? I can't read that. I was determined to participate anyway; I read up about it and just tried to insert my comments whenever it seemed like it might be relevant. But the professor was like, whatever. I mean, the problem was the graphic novel. But really, the problem was the professor. And I was made to feel like I was creating extra work. And of course, I always felt different. I was treated like a child. And I was the only one allowed to use a computer, so I felt special, in a bad way.

In class, spontaneous activities were a problem, because I can't read the directions without having them fed into the screen reader first. So someone would have to read it to me, and that only worked some of the time. With presentations, it's not a problem if I can get them in advance. It would be really helpful if people labeled things that are just decorative and things that are necessary to understand the slide.

There are problems in other subject areas, too. In the *Reha* department [Rehabilitation Sciences, where special education teachers are educated], they gave me a 3-D model of the brain when they were showing it on the Powerpoint. But the labels were just written on it, and so I didn't know what I was touching. But a big problem on the horizon with English was the stay abroad. I think it just would have required too many resources. I know there is support for disabled students, but I had a hard time getting information, nobody seemed to know how I could get money, for example, for my mother coming with me to help me find my way around at first. And I heard from other blind students that other departments were better able to cope with them. It's kind of a vicious circle: Because other departments have more experience, they do a better job with it. And because they do a better job, more students switch to those departments. Word gets around.



Case study 3: Sarah, a student with dyslexia

Being dyslexic or having “normal” difficulties in learning to read and write – this has been a crucial question for me since my early childhood. As my parents told me, I had difficulties with identifying similar words and rhyming already in kindergarten. A few weeks after I started elementary school, my teacher suggested to my parents that I should get tested for *Lese- und Rechtschreibstörung* [= dyslexia]. I still remember the name of the test: *Münsteraner Rechtschreibanalyse* – a word that I simply didn’t understand. Anyway, the test turned out to show I had it, and so I got extra classes in learning to read and write every two days. I remember that it was hard work, but also very helpful!

Dyslexia

Students diagnosed as “dyslexics” show problems in reading and writing/spelling that are substantially different from typical students. While the problems are often noticed in the early years at school, some students can compensate for them in the first language. Sometimes, the problems are only found when the student starts learning a foreign language. The number of people with dyslexia depends enormously on the diagnostic criteria and is estimated between 3-20 % of the population. Dyslexia is also known as RSD (Reading-Spelling-Difficulties).

I also remember that my parents always seemed to be very concerned with my reading and writing problems. Me as a child or adolescent, I just noticed that in some situations, my classmates were able to read so much faster than me and that I needed much more time to complete my tasks. When it comes to writing, I simply couldn’t remember the proper spelling of words, even if I wrote them down at home like twenty times... But what bothered me most was that I was so slow compared to my classmates. I was always the last one who finished a text, and I spent all my afternoons with catching up on what I didn’t complete during the lessons.

At school, I learned English and Spanish as foreign languages. It was impossible to find specialised support for these subjects, but I could benefit from learning strategies that I acquired during my learning therapy. For example, I learned how to repeat and memorise new vocabulary, how to revise my written texts during the *Nachteilsausgleich* [= extra time during exams for students with dyslexia], how to deal with the emotional struggles dyslexia can cause and how to profit from my strengths in oral communication. Thanks to the great support of my parents, the extra classes, and several learning therapies, I could reach my goal and achieve my *Abitur* [college-preparation degree] in 2019. So far, so good. But what came next wasn’t less difficult: Would I be able to study at university, considering the high demands in dealing with the amounts of texts, written language and really packed schedules? What is the right subject for me to study? Or should I choose a more practical profession that doesn’t require so many language skills?

In order to find a proper answer to these questions I went to several student counselling centres in Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony. The consultations took very different directions: Some said that I shouldn't opt for the study of linguistics or (foreign) languages at all, other experts said that I should follow my personal interests or that I should rather think about the profession that I would like to practise than the way that leads to it. Just following my interests and what I do in my free time, it was pretty clear for me: I adore the Spanish language, the culture, the music, the food. That's why I spent three months in Oviedo, Spain after I finished school and worked as an au pair in a Spanish family. After this great experience, I decided to risk it and chose Spanish as one subject. And I didn't regret it!

For two years and a half I am now studying to become a Spanish and sports teacher at *Realschulen* [= German secondary schools]. I think that it was the right choice – despite all challenges and problems. In Spanish classes, the biggest challenges for me are spelling and punctuation, even if the Spanish orthography is easy to learn – I mean, compared to an opaque one like the French orthography. But I know how to deal with my problems and I am able to pass my exams and even get good grades in many courses. When I am confronted with long and complex written texts, for example, in Spanish literary studies or educational theory, I use my reading stencil and take many breaks. As for seminar papers, my sister always proofreads my work before I submit it.

As I am “officially” diagnosed with dyslexia, I still get my extra time during written exams, I am allowed to use a dictionary in Spanish language courses and sometimes my deadlines for seminar papers are extended. For that, I had to put in an official application to the faculty, but I found great support at the student council and the equal rights representative. I think that it is the best way to organise your studies as a dyslexic student because you don't have to negotiate every single compensation with the professors. You just show your confirmation and that's it.

I am sure that I can become a good teacher despite – or because of (!) – my dyslexia! I can be a role model for students with similar problems and also for those ones who struggle with learning at school in general, those who are diagnosed with ADHD etc.



Case study 4: Katy, a student with Autism

One of the worst things about being autistic is that people have a lot of misconceptions about what it is. They get pictures from TV and the media about autistic people, who are mostly male. A lot of Autists are enby [non-binary] or trans[gender], so the male/female binary is a problem right from the start. And then because there are these stereotypes about what Autism looks like, girls and women don't get diagnosed, even when they are autistic. Everybody says, oh you can't be an Autist, you are a girl, and Autists are all boys. But because then girls don't get diagnosed, people all think girls can't be autistic.

And then Autism is not just liking math or being bad at language. The first time I was going to get diagnosed for Autism, the person said I could not be autistic because I was too empathetic and because I was too good at language. That is ridiculous. Of course autistic people are empathetic. They are probably more empathetic than most people, because they know what it is like to have trauma, from being misunderstood all the time, even being bullied. They just show it differently or are afraid of saying the wrong thing.

And not all autistic people are bad at language – that's why it's called a spectrum. I love writing, and I love language, and I am actually very funny and sarcastic. My friends say this, too. It's not really language that I struggle with, it's communication. I am constantly anxious that I am going to say the wrong thing or that I misunderstood what someone meant between the lines. I think Autism is a form of anxiety. I ask my sister to "translate" a lot of my WhatsApps, because especially without people's tone and body language, I don't know if they are mad at me or just stating a fact. This makes is really hard in my classes with the professors, too. I can't tell if they think what I said was good, or if they think I am an idiot who is going off topic. If I have to ask for something in an email, I will have a panic attack about what to write to be clear and get what I need but not be rude.

I also love video games and social media. This may, actually, be a stereotype about autistic people that is true about me. Because of being online so much, it was really easy for me to learn English, because everybody online uses English to

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurological difference that affects about 1 out of every 40-70 people.

The core features of ASD are differences in communication and social interaction, repetitive behaviors, and a strong interest in particular topics or subjects. ASD is not an intellectual impairment. Although many people classify ASD into categories such as Aspergers or high- or low-functioning Autism, the most recent DSM-5 and ICD-11 reject these distinctions. ASD is likely a result of an interplay between genetic and environmental factors. There is a high co-morbidity with ADHD and learning disabilities.

communicate as a language that everybody speaks, more or less. I actually learn a lot of phrases from other languages, from my online friends, so I know a few words in Pinoy. And I find that really interesting, like how some words are similar in different languages, or how, because of imperialism, English has become a universal language but still has lots of differences everywhere. Anyway, through all of these online contacts, I picked up English really quickly and easily, and I really enjoy speaking it.

What gets hard sometimes is when professors require us to use “only British” or “only American” English. Like, I don’t know the difference? No one talks like that online. Also, it totally ignores all the other kinds of English out there, like Singlish or whatever. It’s very much this mentality that British is best, American is OK, and everything else is worthless.

I actually think my Autism gives me an advantage in learning languages because I am always thinking about how people interact. I get what it’s like to feel strange or not understand someone doing something for cultural reasons, even if I understand the words. Having Autism and constantly worrying about whether I am seeming like an outsider... sometimes, it’s easier to just *be* an outsider in a strange country. I think I pick up on cultural nuances that other people would miss, because I am always looking at stuff like that anyway.

The worst thing about the university? Group projects. I spend so much time worrying about talking with the other people in my group and working out who is going to do what, and when we’re going to meet, and if they are mad because they think I am slow or I misunderstood what I was supposed to do or I did not do enough or my ideas are stupid... It is exhausting constantly thinking about how to interact. I am always tired. That’s why I don’t want to do lots of stuff with them socially. But I do like social contacts, there’s just not enough spoons* left for me when classes are over to actually do something I *want* to do.

*Many disabled people use the metaphor of spoons to refer to emotional, cognitive, or physical resources. If somebody is “low on spoons,” they do not have enough energy (psychological, cognitive, or physical) for a task.