Higher Education Mentoring Interventions toward More Responsive and Inclusive Educational Support Practices in Research Writing for a Student with Autism

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experience of an undergraduate student with autism during the research writing process, with the goal of informing more inclusive and responsive research advising practices. Through narrative thematic analysis of the student's journal entries, the research adviser's reflective accounts, and transcripts of academic conversations, the study examined how the student interpreted interpersonal interactions, responded to challenges, and developed self-awareness over time. Three major findings emerged. First, the student's understanding of social relationships was shaped by persistent anxiety, fear of judgment, and a strong desire for authentic connection. Despite communication difficulties, the student demonstrated emotional insight, resilience, and a need for affirmation from peers and mentors. Second, the challenges encountered—such as difficulty with emotional regulation, executive functioning, and expressing vulnerability—underscored the importance of consistent, structured, and empathetic support from family, therapists, and educators. Third, the research writing process highlighted the value of strength-based, flexible advising approaches that emphasized communication alternatives, co-designed timelines, psychological safety, and reflective journaling. These interventions helped reduce the cognitive and emotional load of academic demands and fostered a more supportive learning environment. The study concluded that inclusive research advising required a shift from standardized methods to student-centered mentorship rooted in empathy, collaboration, and recognition of neurodiverse strengths. The student's successful completion of the thesis, supported by adaptive and relational advising, illustrated that meaningful academic outcomes were achievable when advising practices honored the unique experiences of autistic learners.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Research Advising, Inclusive Education, Narrative Thematic Analysis, Neurodiversity in Higher Education

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social communication, behavior, and sensory processing (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While each individual with autism presents unique strengths and challenges, one consistent area of interest in both research and practice is the way autistic individuals experience and interpret interpersonal interactions. This study sought to explore the lived experience of a student with autism, with particular attention to how they understand social cues, form relationships, and participate in educational activities—especially during the research writing process. By including the perspectives of the individual, the research adviser, and the surrounding social context, the study aimed to generate insights that could inform more responsive and inclusive educational support practices for a student with autism.

Literature Review

Social communication challenges are widely recognized as core features of autism, often involving difficulties in interpreting nonverbal cues, adjusting to social norms, and developing reciprocal relationships (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Frith & Happe, 1994). These difficulties are not necessarily due to a lack of desire for social connection, but rather arise from differences in cognitive processing and social understanding (Milton, 2012). The "double empathy problem," proposed by Milton (2012), suggests that communication breakdowns between autistic and non-autistic individuals are mutual and rooted in a lack of shared experiences and understanding.

Several studies emphasize the importance of considering first-person narratives in autism research, particularly in exploring how autistic individuals make sense of their social world (Kapp et al., 2013). Lived experience accounts provide depth to our understanding of social challenges and reveal the adaptive strategies used by autistic individuals to navigate interpersonal environments (Davidson & Henderson, 2010). These narratives are especially important in educational settings, where support systems and relationships with teachers and advisers play a significant role in shaping academic outcomes and self-perception (Jones et al., 2021).

Furthermore, research in inclusive education highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that recognize neurodiversity and support personalized learning trajectories (Hehir et al., 2016). Advising relationships in particular can be critical spaces where autistic students either thrive or struggle, depending on the level of empathy, structure, and responsiveness provided by the adviser (Anderson et al., 2019). Understanding the research process from both the student's and the teacher's perspectives can inform the development of more effective mentoring practices.

Case Introduction

The Subject of this study was born in 2001, at a public hospital in Manila City, and was delivered via cesarean section. Raised in a caring and attentive home by his father, a seaman, and his mother, a nurse, he received consistent emotional and physical support throughout his early years. Despite her professional obligations, his mother played an active role in his daily care, often bringing him to work to ensure he was constantly nurtured.

By age two, early signs of developmental delay—particularly in speech and social interaction—prompted medical consultation. In 2004, he was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Level 1. This diagnosis indicated that while support was needed, he possessed a considerable degree of independence. He underwent various therapies including speech, occupational, and physical interventions. Following medical advice to prioritize inclusion, he was enrolled in a mainstream Christian school in 2007.

His early academic years were marked by a combination of behavioral challenges and expressive strengths. While he exhibited hyperactivity and occasional peer conflicts, he also shone in performing arts, gaining praise from teachers and classmates alike. In high school, he faced emotional reactivity and academic anxiety but developed close relationships with teachers, seeking connection through regular conversations.

The pandemic-induced shift to online learning in 2020 brought unexpected academic success. Freed from physical social stressors, he thrived in the virtual format. In college, he sustained strong academic performance, excelled in co-curricular dance activities, and cultivated meaningful relationships with peers and faculty. His hobbies—ranging from drawing and toy collecting to attending pop culture events—combined with stimming behaviors like clapping and hand-flapping, served as both personal expression and emotional regulation.

Possessing a keen memory and strong interest in history and social issues, the Subject demonstrates many of the intellectual strengths often associated with ASD. His life journey highlights the importance of early diagnosis, inclusive education, and sustained support, affirming the value of embracing neurodiversity within academic communities and beyond.

Philosophical Underpinning

This study is grounded in the **interpretivist paradigm**, which emphasizes the importance of understanding human experiences from the perspective of the individual. Rooted in the traditions of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and subjective, particularly when exploring how individuals make meaning of their experiences within specific social contexts (Schwandt, 2014). As this study seeks to understand how an individual

with autism interprets and navigates interpersonal interactions, the interpretivist paradigm is highly appropriate. It allows for a nuanced exploration of internal perceptions, lived experiences, and personal sense-making.

Furthermore, the study draws from **phenomenology** as a guiding philosophical framework. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of individuals and aims to uncover the essence of those experiences as they are consciously perceived (Van Manen, 2016). In the context of autism, this approach provides a respectful and rigorous method of accessing the subjective world of a person whose ways of communication and perception may differ significantly from neurotypical norms. By examining the individual's interactions with others, their interpretation of nonverbal cues, and the social challenges they encounter, the research acknowledges and values the richness of their personal narrative.

The choice of a **case study methodology** further aligns with the interpretivist-phenomenological orientation. A case study enables an in-depth, contextualized exploration of a single participant's lived reality within a specific environment, recognizing the complexity of their interpersonal, educational, and social interactions (Yin, 2018). It allows the researcher to examine the relational dynamics not only between the participant and others but also between the participant and the broader social constructs that influence communication, support, and understanding.

Finally, this study is informed by the **ethics of care**, a philosophical stance emphasizing relational responsibility, empathy, and attentiveness to the needs of others (Noddings, 2013). Given that this research involves close collaboration between a student with autism and a research adviser, care ethics reinforces the need for a sensitive, individualized approach to research advising—one that values emotional intelligence and adaptability in educational relationships.

Methodology
Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in the **interpretivist paradigm**, which emphasizes understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their lived experiences within specific socio-cultural contexts. Interpretivism rejects the notion of objective reality in favor of contextualized, subjective understanding (Pervin & Moktar, 2022). This philosophical orientation is well-suited to exploring how a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) interprets and navigates interpersonal relationships and academic mentorship. The paradigm supports in-depth, qualitative methods aimed at capturing the richness and complexity of human experience.

Research Approach and Design

The study adopts a **qualitative case study approach** embedded within **narrative inquiry** and informed by **phenomenology**. As a case study, it offers an in-depth exploration of a single student's experiences in their natural educational environment (Yin, 2018). The narrative inquiry approach allows for the examination of the participant's story over time, revealing how meaning is constructed through interactions and self-reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This aligns with **phenomenology**, which emphasizes the essence of lived experience and how individuals perceive and make sense of their social worlds (Van Manen, 2016).

By combining these approaches, the study provides a layered understanding of the participant's identity, social navigation, and academic growth—contextualized within the advising relationship and broader institutional culture. The case study method allows for triangulation of data sources and captures the particularity of the individual case while generating insights that can inform broader educational practices.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at a private higher education institution in the Philippines, specifically within the College of Education and Liberal Arts. The student-participant, diagnosed with ASD, was enrolled in the Communication Program and engaged in a capstone research project under faculty supervision. The locale was intentionally selected for its inclusive academic environment, which supports diverse learners through differentiated instructional and mentoring practices.

Data Sources

Data were collected from multiple naturalistic sources to support the case study's credibility and depth. These include:

- Reflective journal entries written by the student and the research adviser
- Written correspondences between the student and adviser during the research process
- Observational notes and transcript excerpts from panel evaluation interactions

These materials offer insights into the lived experience of the student, the evolving advisory strategies, and the relational dynamics within the academic context. They also reflect the emotional and cognitive processes that shape the student's social communication and identity development.

Sampling Technique

This study used **purposive sampling**, a non-probability sampling technique that selects participants based on their relevance to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participant, a student with a formal diagnosis of ASD, was selected for their capacity to provide rich, experiential data. Inclusion criteria included willingness to share personal experiences, engagement in an academic research process, and demonstrated interpersonal communication challenges relevant to the study's focus.

Research Instruments

The primary research instruments were the **reflective journals**, **written correspondences**, and **transcripts**. These textual artifacts served as narrative accounts of the participant's academic and interpersonal journey. They aligned with the phenomenological goal of accessing lived experience and the narrative aim of understanding identity through story. These instruments allowed for a deeply contextual and authentic exploration of the individual case.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed the **narrative inquiry** process embedded within the case study. Over the course of a semester, the student and adviser produced journal entries that captured their thoughts, emotions, and observations. Written exchanges documented key turning points, moments of misunderstanding or progress, and the emotional tenor of the research journey. All data were chronologically organized and ethically handled. In line with interpretivist principles, the researcher prioritized understanding meaning from the participant's point of view and avoided imposing external interpretations.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic narrative analysis**. This involved coding and identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings across the journals, correspondence, and transcripts. Analysis focused on the participant's experiences of social interaction, interpretation of nonverbal cues, and relational dynamics within the advising context. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, consistent with the interpretivist and phenomenological orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Van Manen, 2016). The goal was to understand how the participant made sense of their experiences rather than to generalize findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from the student and their legal guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing identifying details from all documents and reports. The

research complied with the provisions of Republic Act No. 10173 or the **Data Privacy Act of 2012**. Special care was taken to present the participant's voice with dignity and respect, recognizing their autonomy and agency as central to the narrative inquiry process.

Results

How does the individual with autism experience and interpret interpersonal interactions in daily life?

The Individual with Autism from the Lens of the Self: The subject experiences interpersonal interactions with a profound sense of emotional engagement, social motivation, and reflective awareness. His journal entries reveal a consistent desire to form meaningful social bonds and a nuanced understanding of communication that challenges common deficit-based stereotypes about autism.

Under the theme of **"Navigating Social Connection,"** the subject demonstrates a genuine enthusiasm for connecting with others. Contrary to assumptions of social withdrawal, he describes himself as "a friendly person to other people in my school" and expresses joy when greeting peers and professors: "I feel that I was happy." His accounts of being noticed, prayed for, or complimented—whether by church members, professors, or bands—are interpreted as affirmations of belonging, such as being treated "as a second son," "a sibling," or "a normal person."

However, he also shows awareness of the social challenges his autism may present, noting fears that people might get "mad or offended." Despite this, his overall tone remains positive and resilient, interpreting social life as a space filled with kindness, understanding, and relational possibility.

Through the theme **"Therapy as a Medium for Growth,"** the subject recounts early and advanced therapeutic experiences as foundational to his social development. Therapy is seen not merely as treatment but as a nurturing space of learning and bonding: "The therapist is happy when I did my task," he notes, linking social success with emotional approval. He views therapists not only as professionals but as people who treat him "like a patient needed to be healed and a friend and as a member of the family who needs love and care," underscoring the relational depth he finds in these interactions.

The final theme, **"Emotional Resonance in Communication,"** highlights the emotional intensity with which he experiences everyday interactions. Whether describing joy, nervousness, or confusion, the subject articulates emotions with clarity and authenticity. Being praised by a professor leaves him "shocked and starstruck," illustrating how even brief encounters carry deep personal significance. He also reflects on his self-regulatory behaviors such as "stimming," acknowledging them as emotional responses rather than dysfunctions.

Across all themes, the subject constructs a social identity that is relational, expressive, and growth-oriented. Communication, for him, is not just an exchange of information but a source of fulfillment: "happy" becomes a recurring word that encapsulates the emotional rewards of social connection. Far from being socially detached, the subject interprets daily interactions as opportunities to contribute, receive care, and affirm his place in various communities.

His narrative repositions autism as a *different* way of engaging with the world rather than a *deficient* one. By centering his own words and reflections, the study reveals a deeply human experience of autism—rooted not in isolation but in connection, learning, and emotional richness.

The Research Adviser and Subject Lens: From the lens of the research adviser–subject relationship, interpersonal interactions are experienced as emotionally layered, dynamic, and highly dependent on mutual attunement. The student with autism, referred to as the Subject, navigates academic and interpersonal tasks with pronounced emotional sensitivity, a need for structured guidance, and a deep reliance on interpersonal reassurance. Through their journal entries, the adviser uncovers five interconnected themes: anxiety, communication barriers, emotional need for affirmation, the capability–self-doubt tension, and the transformative role of empathetic support.

One of the most dominant themes, **anxiety**, emerges as a persistent barrier that colors the Subject's interactions and performance. The adviser notes the Subject's references to experiencing "panic attacks" and feeling "a lot on their plate," especially when academic tasks involve reflection or emotional self-disclosure. The student often sends late-night messages, not simply to ask questions but to seek "emotional containment," which reframes communication as both informational and affective.

In terms of **communication and expression**, the Subject is able to verbalize ideas in conversation but struggles with transferring these thoughts into structured, academic writing. Although he expresses intentions to write, he insists on waiting for formal records from his mother before proceeding, suggesting a difficulty in trusting his own voice. As the adviser observes, "he knows what he wants to say, but struggles to begin." This difficulty appears less about knowledge and more about perfectionism and emotional vulnerability, especially when tasks are open-ended or introspective.

The Subject also exhibits **emotional sensitivity and a need for reassurance**. He frequently apologizes for delays, expresses fears of failure, and is distressed by comparisons to peers. These emotions strongly influence his self-worth. The adviser's response is consistently affirming, telling the student that he may be "the first autistic undergraduate in the institution to complete a research paper." This statement

becomes a motivational turning point, reinforcing that encouragement is not peripheral—it is central to how the Subject experiences interpersonal interaction.

Throughout the narrative, a **tension between capability and self-doubt** emerges. The Subject is capable—he participates in poetry, prepares presentations, and contributes meaningfully during consultations—yet often claims to feel "lost" or unsure. This internal conflict reflects how emotional state and cognitive load can disrupt performance despite demonstrated ability. The adviser notes that "capable students with autism may still require consistent scaffolding," not because they lack competence, but because neurotypical systems often fail to accommodate the fluctuating nature of executive functioning in autism.

Finally, the most critical insight comes from the theme of **structured and empathetic support**. The adviser adapts reminders, introduces a thematic writing approach, and offers emotional validation. These actions help the Subject gradually internalize structure and gain confidence. Over time, the student shows initiative, updates the adviser regularly, and takes increasing ownership of his work. This relational scaffolding becomes the core of his success. As the adviser reflects, "support is not about fixing students—it is about walking with them."

The research adviser-subject dynamic illustrates that interpersonal relationships for individuals with autism are not incidental—they are formative. They shape how tasks are interpreted, how emotions are regulated, and how identity is developed. Through intentional, compassionate mentoring, the Subject does not simply meet academic requirements—he thrives in ways that reflect his unique strengths. His journey reminds us that effective interpersonal interactions are rooted in **understanding, patience, and personalized care**, and that these, in turn, empower authentic achievement.

The Subject and the Social Context: Viewed through the lens of the social context, the Subject's interpersonal interactions are shaped by an interplay of **emotional depth, strategic adaptation, and identity assertion**. Rather than merely participating in structured academic and public settings, the Subject actively negotiates his position, affirming his presence and worth in spaces that often feel exclusionary. This experience is captured in four interwoven themes: navigating formal expectations, seeking authenticity, balancing vulnerability and agency, and striving for belonging in academic environments.

In **formal academic settings**, such as thesis defenses and panel discussions, the Subject shows acute awareness of **social expectations** and the potential consequences of perceived failure. When he asks, "Did I get past the thesis?" and later confesses, "I'm scared that I will not graduate in May 2025," it reveals how academic performance becomes emotionally charged. These settings trigger

uncertainty, prompting reassurance-seeking behaviors. His use of polite, formal language—"I'm so sorry," and "Thank you, Professor"—demonstrates his efforts to conform to social scripts and manage power dynamics, even while internal tension builds between expression and expectation.

The Subject's strong **desire for authenticity** comes into sharp focus when the panel recommends anonymity. He firmly resists: "No, no. I want to speak," and adds, "This is me, this is my actual [self]," signaling his refusal to be erased. This moment affirms that for him, interpersonal interaction is a medium not only for communication but for self-representation. His identity is inseparable from his voice—being named is a form of social recognition.

The Subject also demonstrates a complex **ambivalence between vulnerability and agency**. He oscillates between fear ("I'm scared that I will not be graduated") and aspiration ("Because my paper will be the best of my life"). His words reflect an emotional duality—he is self-aware and self-critical, yet equally hopeful and proud. He navigates parental expectations—"My mom said to me… you must behave"—but pushes against them, asserting, "I want to speak out." This tension illustrates how social conformity and self-expression are continuously negotiated in his experience.

In **academic spaces**, the Subject interprets milestones like thesis completion as more than personal goals—they are **symbols of social legitimacy**. He declares, "I want to graduate this May," with urgency, not just to fulfill requirements but to affirm his place within a normative community. However, he is also conscious of his outsider status, noticing subtle power dynamics when the panel reassures him, "Don't worry… we're going to try to help you." Though well-intended, these words remind him that his full participation is conditional.

Yet, the Subject persists. He seeks validation not only from authority figures but from peers, stating, "I hope that my friends… might miss me," and "I have friends from my former school and here." These remarks show that for him, belonging is not achieved through formal achievement alone—it is about emotional connection, memory, and mutual recognition.

Taken together, these reflections highlight that the Subject does not experience social life passively. Rather, he interprets interpersonal interactions as **emotionally complex, socially charged, and personally defining**. He adjusts his behavior strategically, resists being silenced, and articulates his hopes and fears with clarity and purpose.

His story offers compelling evidence that autistic individuals, far from lacking social insight, may experience social life more intensely and thoughtfully. His statement, "This is me," serves as both a declaration and an invitation—to see autism not as a deficit but as **a different articulation of human engagement** with identity, community, and meaning.

How do challenges encountered by an individual with autism shape their understanding of social relationships?

The Subject's lived experience demonstrates that communication challenges deeply influence how individuals with autism understand and engage in social relationships, often framing them as emotionally charged, structurally navigated, and identity-affirming. Four key themes emerged: **anxiety and fear of judgment**, **striving for authentic connection**, **reliance on support and structure**, and **growing social awareness and adaptation**.

First, **anxiety and fear of judgment** consistently shape the Subject's social interactions. He openly states, *"I'm scared that I will not graduate in May 2025,"* revealing how academic expectations trigger emotional distress. Similarly, social exchanges are navigated with hesitation: *"I doubt that they will get mad and offended at me,"* reflecting a constant self-monitoring rooted in fear of rejection or misinterpretation. Repeated apologies, such as *"I'm so sorry,"* further suggest a heightened sensitivity to interpersonal evaluation.

Despite this anxiety, the Subject expresses a clear **desire for authentic connection**: *"When I talk to my friends on different topics, I feel that I am happy and comfortable."* He values relationships where he feels understood, describing professors who *"treated me like a second son"* and therapists as *"a member of the family."* These affirming interactions reinforce his sense of belonging and identity. He also proudly shares his passions—*"I am very good at drawing and singing"*—as meaningful avenues for connection beyond autism.

The Subject's understanding of social relationships is also shaped by a **strong reliance on structured support**. Early therapeutic experiences, such as using prompts to *"listen to instructions and take turns,"* provided predictable frameworks for engaging with others. In school, professors who greeted him regularly made him feel *"famous in school,"* highlighting how consistent social scaffolding boosts confidence. Even family members, while sometimes misunderstood, are appreciated as emotionally grounding: the mother is *"sacrificial and disciplinarian,"* and the brother is *"caring but annoying."*

Finally, the Subject shows **growing social awareness and adaptive strategies** across different contexts. He understands the need to adjust his behavior depending on the setting—being respectful with professors, open with friends, and attentive with therapists. He acknowledges tendencies like interrupting conversations because he *"want[s] to share my thoughts,"* revealing increasing self-awareness. Significantly, he defines friendships as *"a second family,"* indicating that his social world is not transactional but deeply relational and identity-building.

In summary, the Subject's narrative illustrates that social challenges do not diminish the desire or capacity for connection—instead, they shape a nuanced, emotionally rich, and structurally supported understanding of relationships. Through anxiety, adaptation, support, and resilience, he constructs a social identity that values authenticity, affirmation, and belonging.

How can the lived experience of a student with autism during the research writing process inform the development of research advising practices that are effectively tailored to their unique learning needs?

The lived experience of a student with autism during the research writing process highlights the need to reimagine research advising as **relational, flexible, and inclusive**, rather than rigid and one-size-fits-all. Effective advising for neurodivergent learners centers on empathy, collaboration, and strength-based approaches.

A key insight is the **shift from authority to partnership**. Instead of acting solely as an academic enforcer, the adviser co-created the process, recognizing that the student brings valuable insights and strengths. As the narrative notes, *"Advisers who choose to listen deeply… become facilitators of transformation."*

Flexible communication was crucial. Because real-time verbal exchanges were often overwhelming, the adviser encouraged journaling and email correspondence, creating space for the student to reflect and express ideas at their own pace: *"Once this was recognized, a shift in the advising structure occurred."*

Establishing **psychological safety** was equally essential. Validating the student's uncertainty and emotional vulnerability enabled growth. Small gestures—supportive feedback, normalization of non-linear progress—built trust: *"Creating such a space supports the student's autonomy while mitigating emotional exhaustion."*

To reduce pressure, the adviser and student **co-designed timelines**, replacing rigid deadlines with micro-goals. For example, instead of demanding a full literature review, the student first completed an annotated bibliography, allowing for gradual progress with less stress.

Advising also became **strength-based**, highlighting the student's talent in reflective writing: *"The student's strength in reflective writing became a cornerstone of their research development."* Instead of forcing conformity, the adviser leveraged this strength to build confidence and engagement.

Institutional **contextual awareness and advocacy** were also necessary. The adviser consulted with disability services to support the student's rights, showing that *"inclusivity is not a private effort but a shared institutional responsibility."*

Finally, **narrative reflection** through journaling helped the student manage anxiety, monitor progress, and deepen self-awareness. Journaling became a powerful tool for

both emotional regulation and academic communication: *"It also served as a communication bridge with the adviser."*

In sum, the student's journey shows that inclusive research advising must move beyond accommodation toward co-creation, empathy, and recognition of neurodiverse strengths. As the narrative concludes, *"It is about redefining excellence to encompass diverse minds and methods... where all students—regardless of neurotype—are seen, heard, and valued."*

Discussion

What interventions can be proposed to customize the role of the research adviser for an undergraduate student high functional autism in research writing?

Based on the synthesized data across the three research questions, the following **evidence-informed interventions** are proposed for **research advisers** working with undergraduate students with autism. These interventions are designed to align with their **emotional, cognitive, communicative, and social needs** to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes in thesis writing.

1. Build a Safe, Affirming Advising Relationship: *"The therapist treated me like a friend... like a member of the family who needs love and care."*

Intervention: Establish *psychological safety* and *relational trust* as a foundation.

- Begin the advising process by explicitly affirming that mistakes are normal, questions are welcome, and emotional challenges are valid.
- Use empathetic, non-judgmental language. Avoid pressuring students with comparisons to peers or rigid expectations.
- Regularly offer verbal or written affirmations (e.g., "You're doing great," "This part is meaningful," or "Your voice matters").

2. Diversify Communication Channels: *"I feel happy when I write in my journal... I can say my feelings there."*

Intervention: Offer multiple, student-preferred communication modes.

- Supplement or replace face-to-face meetings with asynchronous formats like emails, shared digital documents, or voice notes.
- Allow time for reflection before requiring responses in meetings or defense rehearsals.
- Normalize journaling and mind mapping as valid forms of planning and self-expression.

3. Use Scaffolded and Co-Constructed Timelines: *"When I was told to just write reflections by topic, it helped me think clearly."*

Intervention: Break down research tasks into smaller, manageable parts through collaborative planning.

- Design "micro-goals" (e.g., one paragraph reflection, key concept list, outline sketch) instead of full sections or chapters.
- Co-create a flexible calendar that allows for rest, recalibration, and life responsibilities.

4. Incorporate Narrative and Reflective Writing: *"This is me, this is my actual self… I want to speak."*

Intervention: Integrate self-reflection as a formal part of the research process.

- Encourage students to maintain a guided research journal using prompts (e.g., What did I struggle with today? What helped me focus?).
- Include narrative sections in the thesis (if appropriate) to validate personal perspective and motivation.

5. Identify and Build on Strengths: *"My uniqueness of my Autism is the knowledge on social sciences… I am very good at drawing and singing."*

Intervention: Center advising on what the student does well and enjoys.

- Identify and affirm their talents (e.g., drawing, deep focus, reflective writing, conceptual thinking).
- When appropriate, integrate these into their research design (e.g., visual frameworks, infographics, or oral narratives).

6. Model and Teach Social-Academic Scripts: *"I'm scared that I will not graduate… Did I get past the thesis?"*

Intervention: Provide explicit guidance on formal academic interactions.

- Role-play or script common defense questions or adviser responses.
- Teach appropriate academic phrases and email etiquette using examples.

7. Be Flexible but Consistently Present: *"My adviser didn't push me, but she reminded me kindly and it helped."*

Intervention: Balance flexibility with dependable presence.

- Be consistent in follow-ups, but modulate reminders based on the student's anxiety levels.
- Offer opt-in reminders or visual progress trackers to support executive functioning.

8. Advocate Within the Institution: *"The adviser regularly consulted with the university's disability services office to ensure the student's rights and needs were respected."*

Intervention: Act as a liaison between the student and the academic system.

- Help secure official accommodations and negotiate flexible requirements when needed.

- Educate other faculty members or panelists about how to communicate with clarity and kindness.

9. Include Peer Support or Social Mentoring: *"When I talk to my friends on different topics... I feel that I am happy and comfortable."*

Intervention: Facilitate low-pressure, interest-based peer engagement.

- Invite trusted peers for informal writing circles or thesis check-ins.
- Encourage sharing passions as a way to build rapport and reduce isolation.

10. Redefine Success and Encourage Self-Authorship: *"No, no. I want to speak. This is me."*

Intervention: Help the student see their work as valid and valuable—even if it differs from the norm.

- Honor their voice in authorship choices, including the use of first-person narrative if suitable.
- Emphasize progress over perfection, and process over product.

Table 1

Summary Table of Interventions

Domain	Intervention	Outcome Targeted
Relational Safety	Affirmation & trust-building	Emotional security
Communication	Multiple, student-preferred modes	Reduced anxiety, better engagement
Task Management	Scaffolded, co-created goals	Executive functioning, productivity
Self-Reflection	Narrative journaling	Metacognition, emotional regulation
Strength-Based Approach	Skill-aligned research tasks	Engagement, self-efficacy
Social-Academic Preparation	Scripted academic interactions	Confidence in formal settings
Flexibility & Consistency	Gentle reminders, opt-in tools	Motivation, task follow-through
Institutional Advocacy	Disability coordination, panel preparation	Fair access, inclusive feedback
Peer Engagement	Low-stakes social connection opportunities	Belonging, reduced isolation
Identity Empowerment	Authorship, validation, and meaning-making	Motivation, identity development

These interventions reframe the adviser's role from supervisor to **co-learner and co-navigator**, affirming that neurodivergent students are not broken scholars—but whole people whose potential flourishes through **relational care, adaptive structure, and empowered voice**.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the lived experience of an undergraduate student with autism navigating the thesis writing process, with the intention of informing more inclusive and responsive research advising practices. Through a narrative and thematic analysis of the Subject's reflections, adviser's journal entries, and recorded academic interactions, the study uncovered how communication challenges, emotional sensitivities, and social anxieties deeply shape the student's understanding of interpersonal relationships and academic tasks.

The data reveal that the Subject's journey was not defined by incapacity, but by a continuous negotiation between capability and self-doubt, vulnerability and resilience, conformity and authenticity. Far from being socially withdrawn, the Subject demonstrated a profound desire for connection, meaning-making, and academic achievement. His story highlights the emotional labor required to function in a neurotypical academic environment and underscores the importance of intentional, structured, and empathetic support.

From this, the study affirms that effective research advising for students with autism requires a shift away from rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches toward relational, flexible, and strength-based mentorship. It involves co-constructing goals, diversifying communication methods, affirming student identity, and creating psychologically safe environments where neurodivergent learners can thrive.

Ultimately, the Subject's progress in completing his research is not only a personal milestone—it is a testament to what becomes possible when educational systems and relationships are shaped by understanding, patience, and trust. His experience provides a compelling case for reimagining inclusive research advising as a deeply human endeavor—one that honors not just intellectual outcomes, but the diverse ways students learn, connect, and express who they are.

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