

Becoming & Belonging: Experiences of Middle School Autistic Students Participating in an Inclusive, Interest-Based Maker Club

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A growing amount of research shows that autistic individuals desire access to mental health services (Cage et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2019). Occupational therapists are well-positioned to develop effective mental health interventions, yet these interventions are underutilized in services to autistic people. This study intends to understand middle school autistic students' experiences participating in an inclusive interest-based Maker program; an extracurricular program that incorporates students' interests in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics learning, and their perceived impact on belonging, social connectedness, and self-determination as protective factors of mental health. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of Maker program data collected from three public middle schools in an urban area over two academic years. We examined transcripts of 8 focus groups (two midpoint focus groups and six focus groups at the end of the school year) with teachers; 4 focus groups with students; 4 parent interviews; and field observation notes (n = 149). Preliminary analysis revealed the following themes. 1) Social skill development: students helped each other with projects and club activities, shared workspaces, and co-regulated themselves and their peers 2) Becoming and belonging: students expressed satisfaction and received social admiration for their projects; they developed a sense of competency. Teachers and parents described increased engagement among students 3) Safe space: some students exhibited more positive behaviors like collaboration and social interaction when in the club space compared to other environments. To address the risk of mental health conditions among autistic individuals, protective factors like belonging and social connectedness need to be promoted. When working with autistic individuals, occupational therapists need to incorporate interest-based activities in inclusive environments that improve mental health and well-being.

References

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