

Fostering Belonging and Inclusion for Individuals with ASD

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Session Description:

School belonging, inclusion, and connectedness are critical predictors of students' academic, social, and emotional well-being, and research consistently shows that interventions designed to enhance these constructs significantly improve engagement and mental health outcomes (Davies et al., 2025). Autistic students, however, experience heightened stigma, social isolation, and reduced peer belonging, underscoring the need for educational environments grounded in autism acceptance and neurodiversity-affirming, rather than deficit-oriented, approaches (Oduro et al., 2025). Broader scholarship highlights persistent challenges in defining and operationalizing school belonging, emphasizing that students' sense of connection is shaped by cultural, contextual, and structural factors within school environments (Allen, 2025). This presentation integrates research on belonging, inclusive education, and Autism Spectrum Disorder to outline practical, strengths-based strategies that foster authentic participation, supportive peer relationships, and meaningful belonging for autistic students in school settings.

Learning Objectives:

1. Define and differentiate belonging, inclusion, and school connectedness, and explain why fostering belonging is especially critical for students with disabilities, including those with ASD.
2. Apply an understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder, using DSM-5-TR criteria, the spectrum nature of ASD, and current prevalence data, to recognize how autistic traits influence participation, relationships, and school belonging.
3. Identify and implement inclusive, strength-based strategies at both the classroom and systems level that promote meaningful participation, peer connection, and a genuine sense of belonging for students with ASD.

Maria O. Mendez, Ph.D. (she/her), is a nationally certified counselor and school psychologist. She currently serves as the Senior Program Coordinator for the University of New Mexico's START Program and as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the UNM Center for Development and Disability. Dr. Mendez is a dedicated scholar and practitioner with clinical, community, and school-based experience supporting diverse children, adolescents, adults, and families. She provides services to individuals with emotional and behavioral challenges, including those diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other intellectual or developmental disabilities, and co-occurring mental health.