Examining the Motivations and Career Goals of Autistic High School Students within an Informal Technology Program

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

- Previous writing has detailed the struggles that autistic students face when accessing or deciding future goals. For instance, choosing paths such as job and college.
- Previous research has also mentioned that autistic students may be more inclined to pursue a career in STEM.
- By understanding the goals and motivations of autistic students, we can begin to guide students with autism toward their future goals.

Objective: This study is about understanding the motivations and future goals of high school students who have autism.

METHODS

- This study uses data from Tech Kids Unlimited. TKU is a summer program teaching technology skills to neurodivergent students ages 7-21.
- There were 16 high school student participants, all between the ages of 14 to 19.
- The data is in the form of a semi-structured interview.
- We coded participant interviews before they started a given week of programming at TKU.

RESULTS

1. What are your job and/or school-related goals for right after high school?
   • “Hopefully maybe I’d like to go to college for maybe either art or maybe a nursing college so that hopefully I could learn art or nursing. I’m honestly thinking between one of those two, somewhere between art and science.”
   • “In the Fall I’m going to Vassar College and I’m planning to take intro courses in math, CS and music in my first semester.”
   • What job or type of job would you like to have in the future? Why do you want this job?
   • “I guess I would start as an indie game developer... and I feel there is a lot of content missing from the game that people haven’t tried to make.”
   • “I was thinking of something like a speech and language pathologist maybe? Why aren’t there more people on the spectrum in this line of work?"

Demographics:

- Gender: Male 95.0%, Female 5.0%
- Age: 15 36.7%, 14 18.5%, 13 18.5%, 12 20.8%
- Race: Hispanic 42.9%, Black 18.5%, Native American/Indigenous 5.2%

Coding Scheme:

Interview Questions Students Answered:
- What are your job and/or school-related goals for right after high school?
- What job or type of job would you like to have in the future? Why do you want this job?
- How are you preparing now to get this job?

Coding:

- Job Occupation: (SC) STEM Creative Arts, (SC) Creative arts painting/drawing, animation, programming, photography, theater: movie/film, sculpting, music.
- College: (SC) STEM (SC) Creative Arts
- Intrinsic Interest: Knowledge of the skillset, (SC) Internet/Internet Influence, any online internet platform, (SC) Internship
- Extrinsic Interest: Learning how to do programming and watching tutorials on platforms like Coursera, (SC) Internship
- Family Members: Undecided Other
- Other: Knowledge of the skillset

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- Autistic teenagers in a technology focused program had a strong interest in creative arts, equally as much as the STEM related careers.
- Intrinsic interests was a primary motivator for many of the autistic students interviewed. This is relevant because other possible motivators such as extrinsic interest or even family members weren’t nearly as frequently mentioned in the responses.
- The greatest influence on the motivations came from personal interest or helping others.
- The responses to the last question show how many students knew how to prepare for their jobs. Although some were undecided, many autistic students described how they were going to improve their skills and knowledge needed for the career to prepare.
- Results suggest that some autistic teenagers are actively developing skills they will need to get a job. Future research should address societal stigmas to help them get the jobs they deserve.
- This study is important for understanding the motivation and future goals of autistic high school students. We found that autistic students expressed less interest in STEM than creative arts for their future goals. This suggests that autism career initiatives need to expand beyond their current over-focus on STEM careers.

REFERENCES