A Brief Guide to Mentoring Neurodivergent Teachers

An easy guide to increasing inclusivity and accessibility for neurodivergent student and early career teachers

Florence Neville and Simon Neville

Introduction

It is estimated that 1 in 5 people are neurodivergent and this ratio appears to be reflected in the teaching workforce. Neurodivergence includes (but is not limited to) autism, ADHD, dyscalculia, dyslexia, dyspraxia, OCD and Tourette's. Most neurodivergent people are multiply neurodivergent, and distinctions between neurodivergent 'types' often overlap.

> Neurodivergent teachers tend to have a much more difficult time developing and maintaining a career path because of structural and day-to-day disabling factors within the school structure and environment.

This is not because neurodivergent teachers are less competent, it's just that the school structure and environment is highly likely to cause more difficulties for them than for the estimated 4 in 5 teachers who are neurotypical.

We designed this quick and easy guide to help you understand what some of these disabling factors are and to help you reduce some of these disabling factors for your neurodivergent colleagues and/or mentees.

Although we only skim the surface in this guide, understanding and reducing disabling factors for your colleagues will go a long way towards:

- reducing disability
- creating a more welcoming and supportive environment
- reducing absence and burnout
- minimising the need for added support and individual accommodations.

We refer to this process as making the workplace more neuroinclusive. However, you will notice that many of the recommendations we offer will also make your workplace more inclusive for other members of staff.

We hope that you find this guide easy and quick to understand and implement. We understand that, as a teacher and mentor, you are likely to be strapped for time and energy. However, as and when you get the opportunity, we do hope that you will find out more about neurodiversity. You can find a link to helpful resources at the end of this guide.

Reframing neurodivergence

> The Neurodiversity Paradigm frames differences in how people's minds work as both natural and beneficial to society. The Social Theory of Disability frames disability as a result of structural barriers rather than inherent faults within an individual person.

Practitioners working within the Neurodiversity Paradigm and the Social Theory of Disability do not consider neurodivergent people to be disordered or burdensome. Rather, they consider how societal structures – such as the workplace – create unnecessary barriers for neurodivergent people.

When neurodivergent differences are desired and supported, neurodivergent people are likely to thrive at home, socially, and in the workplace.

When neurodivergent differences are not desired or supported, neurodivergent people will experience increased disability and will be less likely to thrive at home, socially and in the workplace.

In this guide we focus on autistic, ADHD and dyspraxic teachers but you will notice that the information and recommendations we offer are transferrable to other neurodivergent teachers.

Autistic Teachers

> Autistic teachers tend to experience, process and respond to sensory and social information differently from teachers who are not autistic. Not better, not worse, just differently.

However, in school environments, autistic teachers tend to experience more overwhelm from social and sensory factors than people who are not autistic.

> **Sensory overload** can result from bright or flickering lights, loud and unexpected noises, background noise, strong smells, and extreme temperatures.
>
> **Social overload** can result from translating, processing and following neurotypical or cross-neurotype communication and social preferences.

Social and sensory overwhelm is also common for ADHD, dyspraxic and OCD teachers.

Overwhelm can cause co-ordination challenges, communication challenges, dizziness, dysregulation, emotional distress, headaches, fatigue, frustration, illness, insomnia, nausea, pain, reduced executive functioning, and more.

When factors that contribute to overwhelm are reduced, your autistic colleagues will have more energy to focus, regulate and teach effectively.

ADHD Teachers

> ADHD teachers tend have different patterns of focus and activity and are motivated differently than teachers who are not ADHD. Not better, not worse, just differently.

However, in school environments, ADHD teachers tend to have more difficulties with physical and mental regulation than teachers who are not ADHD.

> **Mental regulation challenges** can include switching focus from one activity or train of thought to another, engaging when unfocused, and disengaging when focused.
>
> **Physical regulation challenges** can include a need for physical movement to be able to think, focus and stay calm, and challenges with physical inertia (being unable to move from one place to another, or to start an activity).

Mental and physical regulation challenges are also common for autistic and dyspraxic teachers.

Dysregulation can cause co-ordination challenges, communication challenges, emotional distress, embarrassment, fatigue, frustration, insomnia, overwhelm, reduced executive functioning, and more.

When factors that contribute to dysregulation are reduced, your ADHD colleagues will have more energy to focus, regulate and teach effectively.

Dyspraxic Teachers

> Dyspraxic teachers tend to experience, process and respond to sensory and temporal information differently from people who are not dyspraxic. Not better, not worse, just differently.

However, in school environments, dyspraxic teachers are more likely to have difficulties with physical and temporal co-ordination than people who are not dyspraxic.

> **Physical co-ordination challenges** can include navigating messy or crowded rooms, multi-tasking, visual tracking, speech, and handwriting.

> **Temporal co-ordination challenges** can include remembering and following sequences, diary management and time management.

Physical and temporal co-ordination challenges are also common for autistic, ADHD dyscalculic and dyslexic teachers.

Reduced co-ordination can cause accidents, communication challenges, dizziness, dysregulation, emotional distress, headaches, fatigue, frustration, insomnia, nausea, overwhelm, reduced executive functioning, and more.

When co-ordination challenges are reduced, your dyspraxic colleagues will have more energy to focus, regulate and teach effectively.

Reducing disability

Rather than waiting for your neurodivergent colleague to tell you about their neurodivergent identity or to tell you what they need to reduce disability in the workplace, you can work on making your own practice inclusive (regardless of neurotype) and accessible (regardless of disability).

The following pro-active recommendations will reduce potential anxiety and overwhelm, support your colleague's ability to self-regulate, and improve their chances of moving safely and confidently around the building and classroom. In turn, this will support your colleague to thrive in your school, and to be a more effective educator.

We suggest that you build these recommendations into your regular practice, for all new staff.

Before the post or placement starts

At least a week in advance of your colleagues' placement or post, you can reduce disability by emailing:

• Detailed but clear information about public transport and parking for your school

• A map of the school building(s) and clear photographs of key areas such as teaching space(s)

• Details of where and when to turn up on their first day (with directions and a number to call or text in case of difficulties)

• Dress code (specific to the school and/or department)

• Behaviour policies and expectations (a brief guide, not the whole document)

• Information about who to contact if more information is needed, and what to do in case of absence

Having this information will mean that your colleague can plan how to reduce overwhelm, find ways to regulate, and to co-ordinate their movements.

Day one

On the first day of placement or post, you can reduce disability with a guided walk around school. Point out and describe the:

• Toilets (where they are, when they can be used, who can use them)

• Staff room(s), subject area(s), social culture, hierarchical structure

• Safe spaces (dim, quiet, private rooms where they can go if they are overwhelmed, regulatory spaces (places where they can go to move around if they are overwhelmed), where to make a drink/have lunch etc.

• Storage for personal items

• Fire and lockdown alarms and procedures

Having this information will help your colleague reduce their risk of overwhelm and dysregulation and increase their ability to manage co-ordination challenges.

Ongoing

You can reduce day-today disability during placement or post by often discussing and revisiting

• Disabling and supporting sensory factors in the school (lighting, sound, touch, ventilation, visual displays, etc.)

• Staff social culture and event expectations

• Setting priorities around marking, lesson planning and taking time out

• Managing unexpected changes (and how and when these changes are communicated to your colleague)

• Mitigating/managing/recovery from crisis situations (meltdowns / shutdowns / neurodivergent burnout)

• Communication (clarity, frequency, format etc.)

Providing a safe and stigma-free environment to discuss these issues will increase your colleague's autonomy and agency and help them to feel accepted and included.

Watch out for

Warning signs that suggest a person is overwhelmed, dysregulated and unable to co-ordinate themselves in time and space include:

- Absence
- Accidents
- Anxiety
- Burnout
- Confusion
- Depression
- Disorganisation
- Fatigue
- Meltdowns
- Poor personal hygiene
- Poor timekeeping
- Inability to speak clearly
- Inability to focus
- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Shutdowns

If your colleague shows these warning signs, it is worth arranging a time to chat. Avoid the vague and triggering “We need a meeting”, instead discreetly mention that you notice they have had trouble with *X* and suggest a 20-minute meeting to see what you or the school can do to help. After your meeting, email a clear and concise action plan and ensure that it is actioned and followed up promptly to avoid difficulties spiralling out of control.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Why should I have to make accommodations? It's their problem not mine.

Structural and environmental disabling barriers occur when environments and systems are not designed with inclusivity and accessibility in mind. Therefore, they are everyone's problem. If everybody works to reduce these barriers there will be less need for individual added accommodations.

How do I tell my colleague that I think they are neurodivergent?

In short – you don't! If there are specific challenges they appear to have in school – such as sensory overwhelm, or difficulty with time management – help to reduce these challenges instead. Review the "Reducing Disability" recommendations we have given above and talk to your colleague about which ones they might find useful.

Should my neurodivergent colleague tell other people that they are neurodivergent?

There's no easy answer to this. In a supportive and understanding social environment disclosing a neurodivergent identity may be helpful. In a social environment that does not understand neurodiversity, support neurodivergent teachers, or appreciate the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce, it may be personally and professionally dangerous in terms of stigma, bullying and career prospects.

Should I tell other people that my colleague is neurodivergent?

That depends – ask your neurodivergent colleague if they want to you share this information or not (and see the FAQ above).

Isn't neurodivergence a superpower?

Although your neurodivergent colleague may have some unique skills which appear to relate to their neurodivergence, this does not mean that the structural, social and sensory environment isn't disabling for them. Referring to perceived superpowers can deflect from very real and difficult challenges for neurodivergent people.

Some neurodivergent people refer to having a superpower, and some find the term at best misleading, and at worse dismissive of their challenges.

Isn't it enough to just tell my colleague to ask if they need something?

No. Having to identify and ask for disability accommodations is an added burden for someone who is already disabled.

Aren't your recommendations simply good general practice?

Yes! Overwhelm, dysregulation and co-ordination challenges are also common for teachers with anxiety, depression and trauma, for teachers who are physically disabled or have chronic illnesses, for teachers with English as an additional language, for teachers going through menopause, for teachers with added caring responsibilities... the list goes on!

> Our recommendations don't just benefit the 1 in 5 of your colleagues who are neurodivergent, they will likely benefit most of your colleagues.

OK, I think I understand all this, it seems pretty basic. Can I now train my colleagues about neurodiversity?

We believe that training other people about neurodiversity, without having a solid background in neurodiversity research and informed practice, commonly causes a great deal of damage and misunderstanding. We recommend that you find someone personally and professionally qualified to run training workshops.

Useful terms to know

A quick online search will help you learn more about each of these terms.

Executive function A range of abilities that rely on emotional and physical regulation and co-ordination. Executive functioning is adversely affected by external factors such as sensory and social overwhelm and a lack of resources to self-regulate.

Identity-first language A value-neutral way of describing part of someone's identity (e.g. autistic person), as opposed to person-first language (e.g. person with autism) which assumes that the identity is negative and somehow separate from the person.

Meltdown A crisis response to acute overwhelm (which should not be confused with anger or a tantrum).

Neurodivergent A value-neutral way to describe a person whose mind works substantially differently from around 4 in 5 of the general population.

Neurodiverse A group of people with different neurotypes (an individual cannot be neurodiverse, only a group of people can be neurodiverse).

Neurodivergent burnout A state which may look like anxiety, depression or workplace burnout, but is actually a long-term and highly disabling response to chronic overwhelm.

Neurotype A way of labelling someone's mind type (such as Autistic, ADHD, neurodivergent, neurotypical etc.).

Neurotypical A value-neutral way to describe someone who's mind works similarly to around 4 in 5 of the general population.

Shutdown A crisis response to acute overwhelm (which should not be confused with sulking or rudeness).

Stimming Using preferred physical or vocal movements, or using 'fidget toys' to self-regulate, improve focus, distract from pain or overwhelm, and/or increase joyful feelings.

About us

Simon and Florence are lecturers with many years of combined knowledge and experience in the field of neurodiversity and education. Simon, who is autistic, has twenty years of secondary classroom teaching experience and an overlapping seventeen years of tutoring and mentoring student teachers. Florence, who is autistic and dyspraxic, has been researching and training organisations about neurodivergent wellbeing for over seven years, and has a PhD in autistic wellbeing. Together we run workshops on neuro-inclusivity in the classroom, and on supporting neurodivergent student and early career teachers.

Find out more about neurodiversity: https://florenceneville.com/resources/ Links to resources on neurodivergence and inclusivity