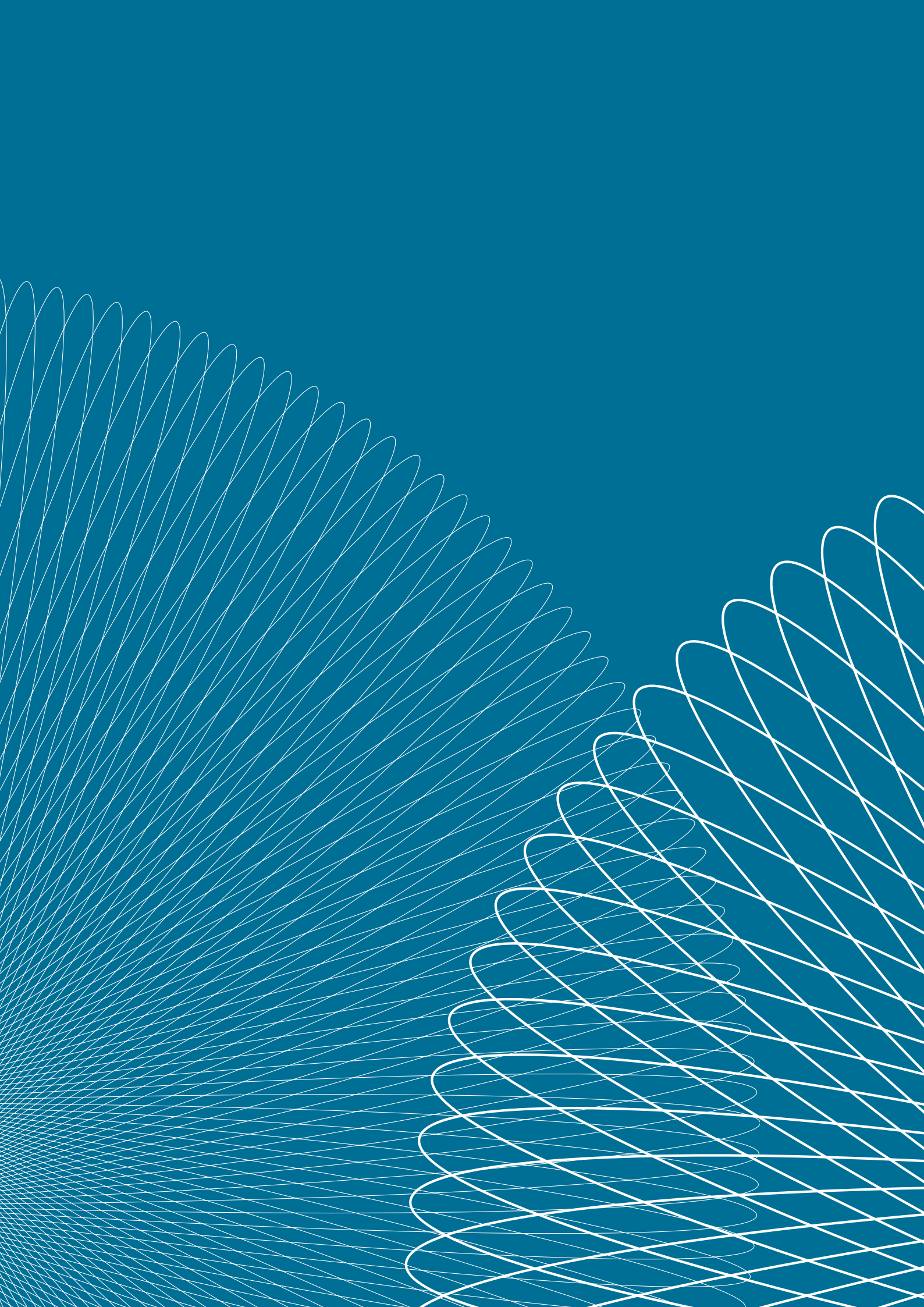
CENTRE FOR AUTISM
MIDDLETOWN

RIGHTFUL PRESENCE & INCLUSION



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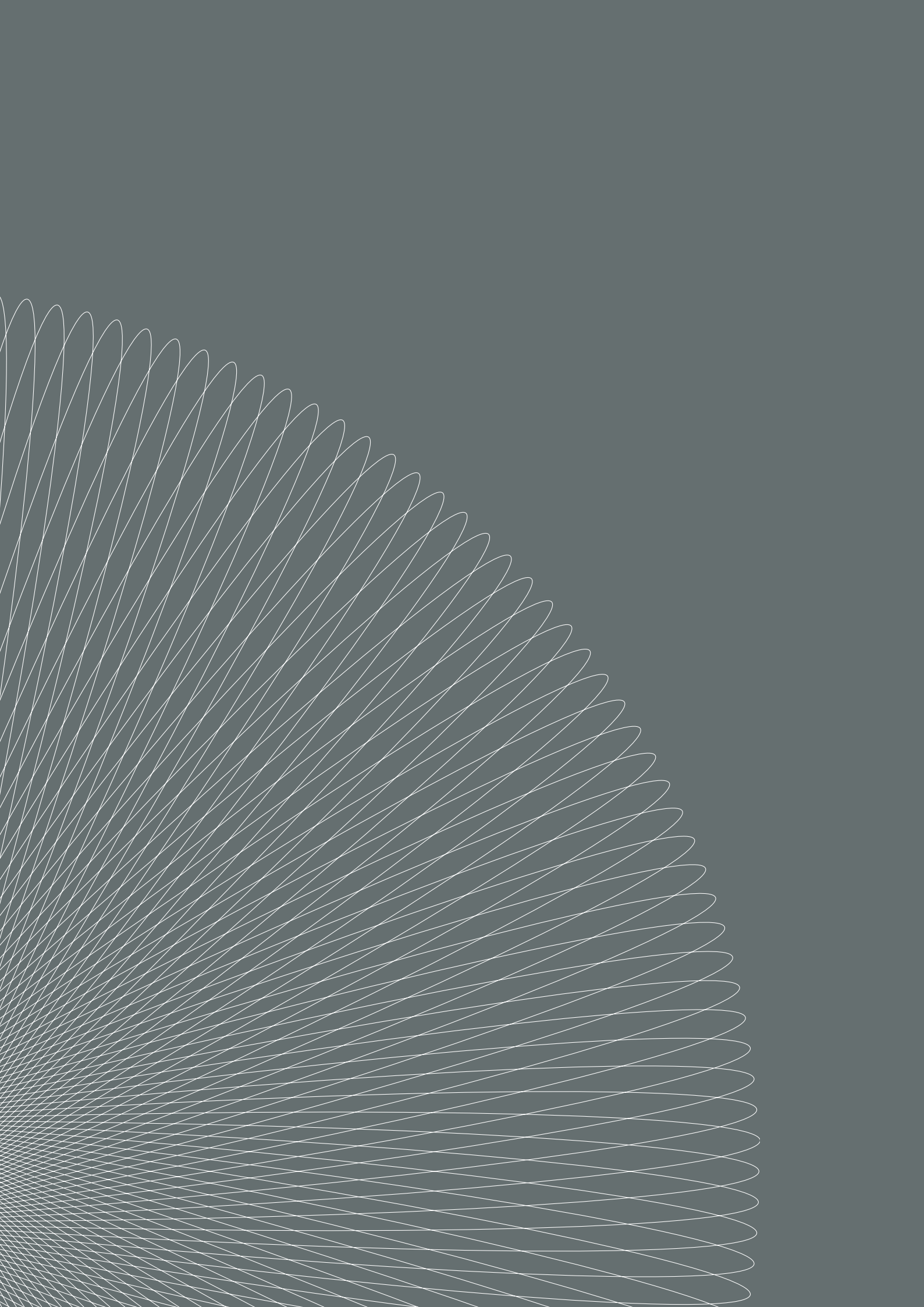
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INTRODUCTION

Rightful presence is an educational and social justice framework that states that marginalised people have an unconditional and legitimate right to belong and participate in a space simply because of who they are, rather than because space has been made for them. In an education setting, this approach assumes that autistic students have as much ownership of their school as any other student. This approach moves beyond traditional inclusion where the power to invite and make accommodations for autistic students belongs to non-autistic community members. Rightful presence shifts those power dynamics by valuing all identities equally.

In this issue of the Research Bulletin, we are looking at research that broadens the idea of what inclusion can and should be. It asks what true inclusion means for everyone and what all community members need to uphold the rightful presence of autistic students.

The Bulletin begins with an interview with two staff members from Middletown Centre for Autism. Ruth McCausland and Finola McElhatton have years of experience supporting autistic students who are struggling within the education system, as well as supporting educators and family members to understand those students and provide support. They share very practical, compassionate thoughts on the topic of rightful presence.

Please note that the views represented in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of Middletown Centre for Autism.

The language used in this Bulletin is autism-affirming and neurodiversity-informed. Some of the papers summarised use more medical and deficit-focused terminology and approaches. This Bulletin is created for autistic people, family members and professionals to learn more about research being conducted. The language chosen here is intended to be as inclusive as possible to the broad autism community.

Definitions:

Neurodiversity is the scientific truth that people vary in the way that their brains process and respond to information.

'Neurotypical' describes the majority of people. While all brains are unique, most people think, sense and communicate in similar ways. Traditional education and employment settings tend to suit neurotypical people well because they are systems built *by* neurotypical people *for* neurotypical people.

'Neurodivergent' describes the minority of people. The way that they process and respond to information differs from the majority. They may struggle in traditional education and employment settings that are designed for neurotypical ways of processing and responding.

INTERVIEW WITH RUTH McCAUSLAND AND FINOLA McELHATTON

How do you define inclusion and rightful presence?

Ruth: I always say inclusion isn't a place – it's a feeling. For me, inclusion is that moment when a child or young person walks into a classroom and thinks, '*I belong here exactly as I am*'. Not because they've masked well enough, not because the adults have made them fit into an existing mould or they've squeezed themselves into a mould that wasn't built for them, but because the environment has flexed to meet their needs.

And then there's rightful presence, which takes it a step further. It's the idea that every child or young person has an *unquestioned* right to be in that space. Their presence isn't conditional. It's not 'as long as they behave' or 'as long as they cope with the noise', not 'as long as they don't disrupt learning'. Their presence is a given. The conversation becomes: '*How do we shape this space so it works for them?*' instead of '*How do we shape them so they work for us?*'

It's a shift from permission to entitlement – and honestly, once you see it that way, you can't unsee it.

Finola: For me, inclusion isn't forced. It isn't a special week or a month but it's valuing every single person every single day and it's not only important for our schools but so important for our communities too. I am so passionate about rightful presence because I feel that sometimes it's forgotten that as educators we're responsible for supporting every single child or young person in our classes. We see so many kids spending their school day outside their classroom and that's the key phrase – it is their classroom. A classroom isn't for the teacher but for that group of children/young people and it should reflect their needs, preferences, strengths, interests and personalities.

Even as professionals visiting schools, some really feel like a home from home and they tend to be the places where inclusion is working really well.

Where inclusion isn't working in a school, what is the impact?

Finola: I think serious distress primarily for the children and young people – I'm not a mental health professional but over time I would say there's a massive impact on mental wellbeing; feelings of otherness, loneliness, isolation and sadly I have seen self-loathing and anger stemming from feelings of exclusion. It has very serious consequences for young people and how they feel about themselves.

I will also acknowledge the ripple effect on supporting adults too who might be feeling unsure of how to adapt or change school culture and might find themselves trapped in a cycle of reacting to distress instead of pro-actively planning to reduce it.

Ruth: Oh, you can feel it. When inclusion isn't working, the atmosphere changes, you can feel it in the air. The child or young person starts shrinking themselves – you see masking, exhaustion, withdrawal. Some children or young people go quiet; others go loud. Both are communication. Both are saying, 'This environment isn't built for me'.

And staff feel it too. Teachers become stretched, frustrated, sometimes even defeated or worried that they're 'getting it wrong'. The classroom becomes a place of tension instead of curiosity.

The biggest impact, though, is on identity. When a child/young person repeatedly experiences environments that don't fit them, they start to internalise the idea that *they* are the problem. And that's heartbreaking, because it's the opposite of inclusion. It's exclusion dressed up as 'trying our best'.

Part of your role is to support schools to create a more inclusive environment for students. What are some challenges or worries that you've seen from school staff before or during that process?

Ruth: I've heard every worry under the sun – and they're all completely understandable.

There's the classic: 'What if I don't have the skills?' And I always say, the fact you're asking that question tells me you care deeply. That's the best starting point.

Then: 'What if the classroom becomes unmanageable?' There's this myth that inclusion equals chaos. In reality, inclusion usually *reduces* stress responses because children and young people aren't fighting the environment.

Another big one: 'What if other students miss out?' This one comes up a lot, but inclusive practice benefits everyone – predictable routines, sensoryaware spaces, visual supports… these help neurotypical learners too.

And then the quiet worry: 'What if parents question what we're doing?' Staff sometimes fear being judged, but from my experience once families understand the 'why', they often become your biggest allies.

Underneath all of these worries is one truth: teachers want to do right by their students. They just need permission, tools, and time.

Finola: Change isn't always comfortable and with the pressures of teaching nowadays, it can be perceived as overwhelming to change our practice or to do things differently. It also takes time to see the impact you're having; in our role we support schools and families to try things, evaluate, reflect and try try again.

It also takes a village – so ensuring that everyone within or connected to a school values both our natural diversity as humans and inclusion is so important, and it really is everybody, whether that's school governors, maintenance staff or the pupils. It's great we have programmes now like LEANS to teach difference and diversity from a young age so that hopefully we have a more inclusive society in years to come.

What are some examples of rightful presence/ inclusion really working that you've seen?

Finola: I had the joy of supporting a primary school that was so grateful to have support from Middletown and one of the best examples was one of the pupils would feel annoyed if they arrived late in the morning and missed the hymn at school assembly. So whenever they arrived late, everyone sang the hymn again and it was a small thing, it only took 2 minutes, but it made a massive difference to how that child's day would go.

They also were really honest and reflective as staff; they acknowledged the pressures they were under in terms of delivering the curriculum but they saw the benefit of questioning 'how can I incorporate interests and strengths into these lessons? How can I support this young person to experience success?' and when they saw the impact of making those changes, they were just too delighted to see a young person engaging with curriculum, staff and peers and feeling happier at school.

Ruth: I've seen inclusion done beautifully – and the best examples are never flashy, they're always human. Honestly, some of my favourite moments come from postprimary. Teenagers are brilliant at showing you what inclusion *really* feels like when it's done well.

One was flexible participation: I remember a Year 10 student who absolutely froze during wholeclass discussions. Brilliant thinker, but the pressure of speaking out loud just shut everything down for him. So the teacher introduced three equal ways to contribute: speaking, typing into a shared Padlet, or sending a short voice note afterwards. The magic was that none of these options were treated as 'the special autistic workaround'. They were just… options. Within a few weeks, he was contributing more than ever – because his presence wasn't conditional on performing in a way that felt unsafe. He was allowed to show up as himself.

Another was around movement options in PE. PE can be a sensory minefield in postprimary – whistles, shouting, team dynamics, unpredictable movement. One school created a 'movement menu' for students who found traditional sports overwhelming. Things like walking laps, resistance bands, yoga, or sensory circuits. Importantly, here is the lovely bit: students weren't pulled out or hidden away.

These options were part of the *main* PE offered. Suddenly you had autistic students, anxious students, and honestly half the rugby team using the resistance bands or the yoga option on a Friday morning. Rightful presence meant everybody was allowed to move in the way they needed.

Another was quiet social spaces. One postprimary school turned an unused ICT room into a calm social space – soft lighting, beanbags, quiet games, no pressure to chat. It became this gorgeous little community. Autistic students used it to regulate, but so did loads of neurotypical students who just preferred a quieter vibe. And the best part? It wasn't framed as 'the SEN room'. It was just another social option. That's rightful presence – when students don't have to justify needing calm.

Alternative assessment: I worked with a Year 11 student who simply couldn't do timed exams. Not wouldn't – couldn't. Her nervous system just shut down. The school worked with the exam board to create courseworkbased alternatives and provided extended time in a quiet room for the parts she *could* manage. She ended up achieving qualifications that reflected her ability, not her anxiety. That's rightful presence: the system flexing so the student doesn't break.

Yet another one was around predictable transitions between classes. Secondary corridors can feel like a sensory assault course. One school introduced a visual 'journey board' for the whole year group – showing movement times, corridor expectations, and sensorysafe routes. Autistic students who previously dreaded transitions suddenly had clarity and control. And staff noticed calmer corridors, fewer incidents, and a general sense of 'we're all moving together'. Rightful presence meant the school changed the *environment*, not the student.

Rightful presence looks like small shifts that create big safety.

What advice would you give to school staff who are keen to create an environment of inclusion?

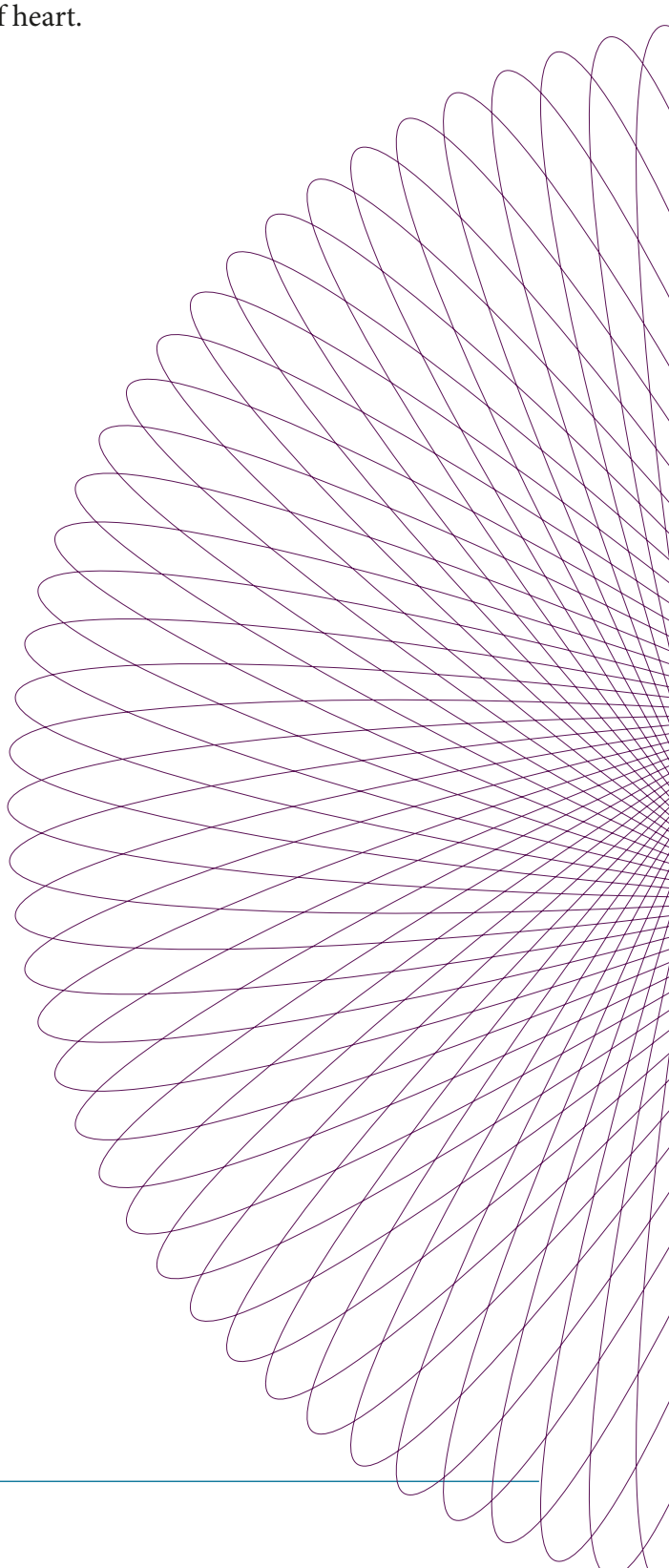
Finola: Hearing pupil voice is so powerful, and collecting that in a way that supports all forms of communication ensures that every voice is heard. Not only is this positive for schools but for learners to feel that their schools really care and are committed to having a school for all.

As a staff team, I advise making time for reflection and considering 'how inclusive are we as a school, what do we do well?' but also in true UDL fashion I would ask 'what are the barriers to inclusion here and how do we overcome them?' I think the UDL guidelines from CAST are a great tool for problem-solving.

Ruth: My biggest advice? Start small, start human, and start with curiosity.

- Listen to the student's lived experience – they are the experts in their own nervous system.
- Make the environment flexible before you make the student flexible. Adjust lighting, noise, seating, transitions – these are lowcost, highimpact.
- Normalise difference. If one student uses visuals, make visuals available to everyone. If one child needs movement, build movement into the day.
- Collaborate, don't diagnose. Ask: '*What's the barrier here, and how can we remove it?*' instead of '*How do we fix this behaviour?*'
- Celebrate progress, not perfection. Inclusion is a journey. You don't need to overhaul the whole school overnight.

Honestly – be brave enough to try things! The most inclusive classrooms I've seen weren't perfect; they were experimental, responsive, and full of heart.



MORE THAN INCLUSION: REIMAGINING SECONDARY EDUCATION THROUGH NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING PRACTICE

BACKGROUND

Neurodivergent students' difficulties can arise when education systems are organised primarily around neurotypical ways of learning, communicating, and participating. Focus therefore should move away from changing individual learners and towards creating educational environments that anticipate and accommodate neurodiversity.

Some particular challenges exist within post-primary settings. Secondary education can involve greater sensory demands, frequent changes of teacher and classroom, reduced continuity in relationships, increased academic pressure, fragmented support, and a stronger emphasis on standardised assessment. Together, these factors can make attendance difficult or impossible for some neurodivergent young people, contributing to school distress, exclusion, and emotionally based school non-attendance.

The Scottish education system is distinctive because its Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced to promote holistic development, flexibility, and learner-centred practice. However, participants reported inconsistent implementation, a mismatch between curriculum aspirations and assessment structures, and limited practical support for educators. Despite a local commitment to inclusion, participants described schools as constrained in what they could realistically do to support neurodivergent students.

Whole-school approaches seek to address these challenges by embedding inclusion across school culture, policy, neurodiversity-affirming teaching, relationships, and everyday routines. Such approaches can give teachers greater autonomy, recognise and support neurodivergent staff, reduce reactive crisis management and create environments in which learner diversity is anticipated, rather than addressed as an afterthought.

However, whole-school approaches have often remained aspirational with limited and inconsistent implementation for neurodivergent children and young people. The Neurodiversity in Scottish Schools (NISS) programme was developed in response to this gap. This article reports findings from the programme's first phase.

RESEARCH AIMS

To identify the systemic barriers and facilitators to the inclusion of neurodivergent young people in mainstream Scottish secondary schools, and to explore the lived experience, professional perspectives, and system-level tensions to inform the development of future interventions.

RESEARCH METHOD

The project involved fifty-three contributors: five neurodivergent young people, eight parents, and forty education professionals, researchers, third-sector professionals and business or enterprise representatives. They took part in workshops, interviews, and consultations. Participants were viewed as collaborators rather than solely as research participants.

Workshops were structured around three questions:

1. What are the systemic barriers and facilitators to inclusion in Scottish secondary schools?
2. What actions could address these barriers and strengthen facilitators?
3. How could such actions be delivered in an ethical, sustainable, and measurable way?

Workshops combined small-group and whole-group discussions using structured prompts and collaborative exercises. One-to-one interviews were available for participants who preferred to communicate on a one-to-one basis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study identified six connected themes that explained how participants understood the continued exclusion of neurodivergent young people in Scottish secondary schools and how education could be transformed to support meaningful inclusion.

Inclusion as a whole-school cultural project rather than an individual adjustment.

Participants agreed that inclusion is a cultural issue embedded in values, assumptions, and everyday practices in schools. Harmful school cultures were described as assuming that there is a single acceptable way of being, learning and interacting. Cultural change therefore requires schools to embrace flexibility, curiosity, and the normalisation of difference. Staff also emphasised that change must be led from the top.

Credibility, trust, and the politics of being believed.

Neurodivergent students' experiences are dismissed, minimised, or reframed. Over time this has an emotional cost which erodes willingness to seek help. Participants emphasised the need for safe spaces where young people could express needs without fear of punishment, disbelief, or stigma.

Teacher moral distress, burnout, and the erosion of professional capacity.

Education staff reported profound levels of emotional exhaustion, professional frustration and increasingly a sense of disconnection from their own values. Educators reported knowing what inclusive practice should look like, however, feeling restricted by an environment that denies time, training, and structural conditions that inclusion requires. This resulted in teachers feeling blamed for not doing enough, overwhelmed, underprepared, and emotionally depleted. Teachers reported lived experience-led training and reflective practice to be particularly impactful.

How systems can produce exclusion even when intentions are inclusive.

Participants felt that obstacles to inclusion went beyond individual schools to the wider education system that constrained what schools could affect. Participants identified rigid curriculum structures, assessment practices, insufficient individual accommodations as factors that they believed disadvantaged neurodivergent students. Also noted were educational narratives prioritising conformity and compliance. Highlighted was the education system drive to get back to normal after COVID when many neurodivergent students thrived with remote and hybrid learning offering alternative ways to access education. Without a systematic change to how schools operate, participants argued that even those educators most committed to inclusion will continue to face impossible demands.

Belonging, safety and the relational foundations of learning.

Neurodivergent collaborators emphasised the importance of being seen as whole people rather than problems to be managed. For many, feeling misunderstood, unaccepted, or emotionally unsafe made learning itself feel impossible. Parents also described being excluded from decision making or not being consulted, despite knowing their children best.

All participants agreed on the importance of partnerships between families, educators, and wider stakeholders.

Sustainability: why inclusion must be systemic rather than reactive.

Participants consistently emphasised that current approaches are often reactive, fragmented and crisis driven. This pattern is harmful, inefficient, and emotionally costly for young people, families, and staff. Sustainable support for neurodivergent learners must be proactive, planned, and institutionally supported and should be included in the school improvement plan, leadership structures, and everyday workflows.

Overall, the findings show that meaningful inclusion depends on coordinated change across school culture, relationships, teaching practices, and wider educational structures. Neurodivergent young people and their families must be recognised as credible partners, while staff need time, resources, autonomy, and the support required to work inclusively. Sustainable inclusion depends on the system moving beyond reactive individual adjustments towards approaches that anticipate and support learner diversity.

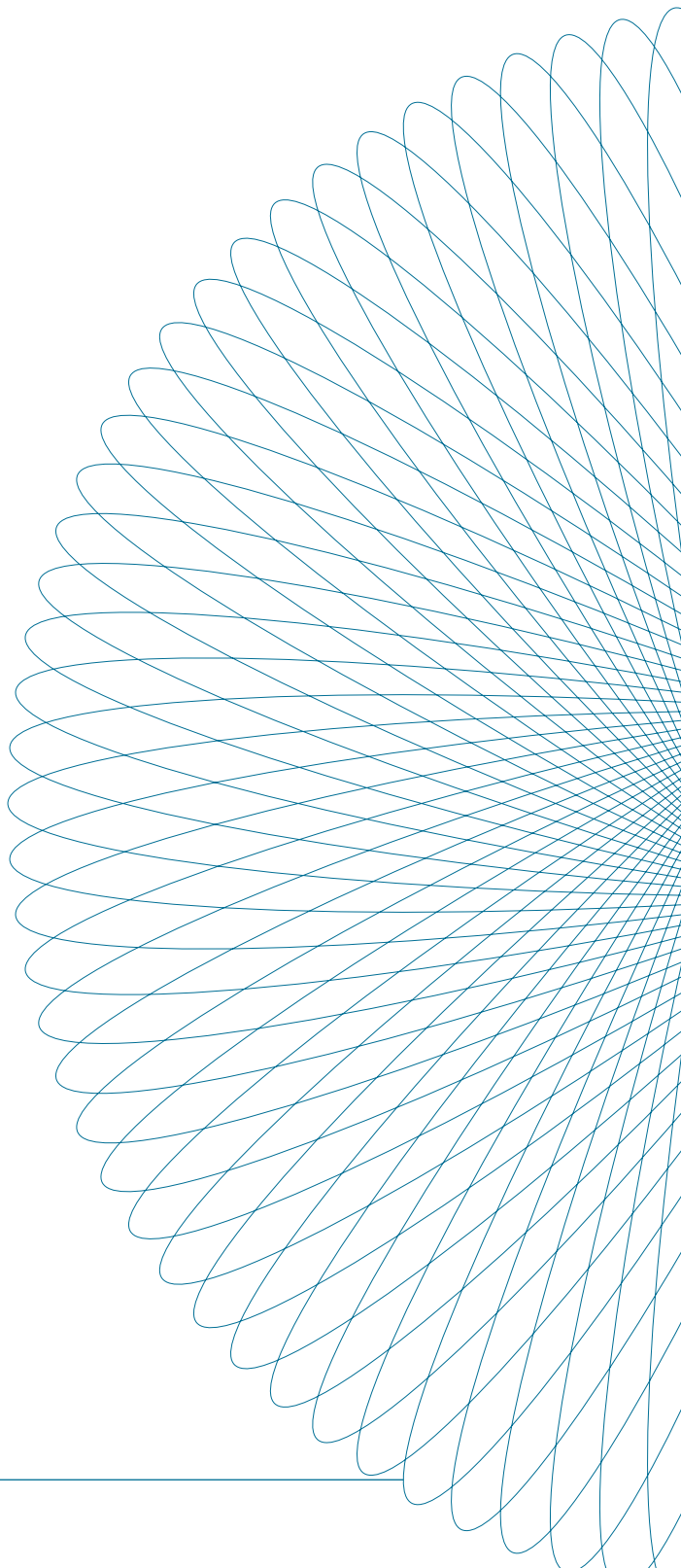
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (adapted by reviewer)

- Treat neurodiversity-affirming inclusion as a whole-school responsibility rather than a set of individual adjustments.
- Build staff reflection into professional learning and ensure training is designed or delivered with neurodivergent people. This can help educators understand the two-way nature of communication differences described by the Double Empathy Theory and increase opportunities to learn directly from lived experience.

- Listen to neurodivergent students, take distress and access difficulties seriously, and avoid interpreting difference through deficit-based assumptions.
- Prioritise trusting relationships and a genuine sense of belonging alongside attendance and attainment.
- Offer flexible teaching, communication and assessment options that reduce unnecessary barriers for all learners.
- Provide coordinated support for pupils who are unable to attend or access school, while addressing environmental and systemic causes.
- Plan for sustainable change through leadership, resourcing, policy alignment, and ongoing evaluation, particularly from the students.

Full reference

Lang, J., Wood, R., Inchley, J., Haughton, D., Turner, F., Gajwani, R., Minnis, H. and Press, M. (2026). More than inclusion: reimagining secondary education through neurodiversity-affirming practice. *London Review of Education*. **24**(1), article 6. https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.24.1.06



MEANING-MAKING WITHIN INCLUSION: EXPLORING PARENTS, TEACHERS AND STUDENTS LAY THEORIES OF ADHD AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

BACKGROUND

Lay theories are the assumptions, beliefs and explanations that people develop through experience. They are used to understand and respond to different phenomena. ADHD is one such phenomenon. Lay theories in education are important to examine because an understanding of stakeholders' beliefs about ADHD, its causes and recommendations give insight into how students may be included in the classroom.

Research is mixed on what stakeholders believe about ADHD. Studies show that teachers are divided between believing biological explanations or environment explanations, blaming poor parenting. Parents were equally mixed, believing a medical explanation or an environmental explanation (also focused on parenting choices). Young people with an ADHD diagnosis also showed differing beliefs. One study of 7–12-year-olds found that children held misconceptions about ADHD, while another study of Irish boys found that they felt the ADHD label was meaningless. A consistent finding was that students with ADHD felt chronically disempowered, rejected and misunderstood.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of the study was to explore the lay theories about ADHD held by key stakeholders: parents, teachers and students. Through this, researchers hope to develop an understanding of how beliefs may impact how students with ADHD experience inclusion.

RESEARCH METHODS

The students in the study ranged between 7 and 18 years old and they all had a diagnosis of ADHD. Nine were male and six were female, and some also had other co-occurring conditions. Parents were recruited through ADHD-related sources such as support groups and social media. Two were fathers and fifteen were mothers. Twelve teachers were recruited (four primary and eight post-primary).

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. All children were interviewed with a parent present in a nearby room. Parents were then subsequently interviewed. Most students chose to be interviewed at home. The students identified a teacher that they would like to have involved. They were then contacted and interviewed in their school hours. Interviews focused around the question 'How would you explain ADHD to someone who has never heard of it?' Responses were guided to explore participants' beliefs around cause, characteristics and treatment. Interviews ranged from 59–86 minutes and they were all transcribed and coded.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The responses were grouped into three broad themes that questioned participants' understanding of different aspects of ADHD:

- What is ADHD?
- Do people with ADHD have control of their behaviour?
- What are their beliefs around medication?

What is ADHD?

Parents felt that ADHD was a biological difference that had both positive and negative aspects. 'Difference' was not seen as negative and many parents were uncomfortable with ADHD being described as a mental disorder, disability or sickness. Positive attributes included hyperfocus, compassion, humour and creativity. Challenges mentioned were: forgetfulness, disorganisation, distractibility, immaturity and lack of awareness. Changes in behaviour were attributed to parent effort, maturity, medication and/or normative expectations.

Teachers described ADHD based on externalised behaviour such as hyperactivity, aggression and anger. Behaviour was typically described in relation to how difficult it was for them to manage. Some teachers felt that they had little knowledge relating to ADHD. Many teachers reported scepticism in relation to over-diagnosis and the impact of 'labelling'. They explained ADHD based on familial factors, personal attributes and/or environment. Most teachers needed to be prompted to identify any strengths associated with ADHD.

Children reported finding the label of ADHD as helpful. They described hyperactivity and emotionality as characteristics. Post-primary students were better able to articulate their understanding of ADHD, but they did still struggle to understand it. Some said that hyperactivity was not a part of their experience, but they did describe emotions, attention and forgetfulness. Several said that hyperactivity reduced with age, attributing maturity, medication and masking. The children needed prompting to find positives, but they did discuss the positive of being different. Boys were more likely to mention energy as a positive, while girls highlighted being outgoing.

Do people with ADHD have control of their behaviour?

Teachers assumed that students have at least some control over their behaviour, even if they believed it was more challenging. Some teachers described tension between supporting the student and supporting the rest of their class.

Parents said that it was difficult for their children to concentrate and control impulses, however they did believe that young people have some control. Hyperactivity was regarded as less controllable, but inattention and forgetfulness were regarded as more intentional. They did also ascribe some behaviour to external sources such as negative teachers or bullying. Some parents also blamed themselves for elements of their child's behaviour. They discussed the challenge of piecing part which behaviours are related to ADHD and which are not.

Children did believe that they had to work harder to control their behaviour, but none believed that behaviour was fully beyond their control. They believed that they had more control over overt behaviour and less over attention and memory.

What are their beliefs around medication?

Most participants were unaware that any other type of treatment was available for ADHD.

Teachers were broadly positive about medication, although they did worry about the potential for over-medication, dependency and impact on development.

Parents were positive about medication, finding it helpful with social challenges, emotion regulation and externalising behaviour. However, no parents believed that medication was the whole solution. Parents also shared the conflicting feelings about medication between them, other family members and educators.

The students who took medication were typically positive about it, with older students reporting that they required medication to concentrate. However, they tended to attribute improvements in behaviour to their maturity and growing understanding, rather than medication.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Given the variety of understanding and misconceptions held by all participants, education focusing on strengths and challenges, as well as practical, realistic supports, would be beneficial.

Both parents/carers and teachers may benefit from challenging their own assumptions, priorities and support needs. This may include an examination of their understanding of control.

Collaboration between parents/carers, educators and students may allow for a shared understanding of the individual student's experience of ADHD, with a more inclusive environment founded on shared meaning.

Full Reference

Carr-Fanning, K. (2024). Meaning-making within inclusion: Exploring parents, teachers and students lay theories of ADHD and their implications for inclusive practice. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. **24**, pp. 133–144. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12617

RIGHTFUL PRESENCE? TEACHER CANDIDATES NAVIGATING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR YOUTH WITH COMPLEX SUPPORT NEEDS

BACKGROUND

Inclusive education is an education setting where all students have a rightful presence. Rightful presence is the notion that inclusive education is about more than equity. It focuses on inclusion as a social justice issue. Historically, students with higher support needs have faced higher rates of exclusion. A rightful presence approach to education means that school staff take deliberate action to address injustice experienced by students of all support needs. It is based in the idea that students learn, grow and develop at their own pace. This individual development is prioritised over performance expectations.

The theory of rightful presence is based around three ideas:

1. School staff and students collaborate to establish what comfortable, healthy learning looks like. Students of all support needs are active agents and experts in their learning experience.
2. Inclusive education embraces meaningful relationships and participation in student life alongside academic opportunities.
3. Rightful presence is a social justice approach, which means that staff and students share a commitment to challenge knowledge and structures that uphold power imbalance.

From a rightful presence perspective, when teachers actively work to ensure that students with all levels of support needs are acknowledged and actively included, represented and respected, they are showing justice in action and are actively addressing inequities that students experience.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of the study was to examine teachers' understanding of and relationship to rightful presence in education. All of the teachers were actively involved in pursuing an inclusive classroom.

RESEARCH METHODS

Eleven teachers took part in the research. They were all pursuing master's degrees in inclusive education focusing on students with high support needs. They were also all qualified to work with students with disabilities. All participants taught in segregated classrooms within public schools. They were part of a teacher education programme aimed to provide teachers with knowledge, skills and confidence to be catalysts for change in primary education for students with high support needs. The course was founded in a commitment to inclusive practices, challenging ableism and highlighting practical ways to use inclusive theories.

Participants took part in focus groups between 2016 and 2020. Ten of the eleven took part in three to four focus groups, which ranged in duration from 35 to 78 minutes. They were invited to share insights into their current school programme and their plans and hopes in implementing inclusive supports for students with high support needs.

The majority of researchers behind the project are themselves public school teachers. Most are also former teachers of students with high support needs.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from analysis.

Signifying Spatiality

In this theme, teachers talked about how spaces and locations shape teaching and learning. The school space made an impact in a number of ways through segregation and limiting opportunity. Teachers discussed how students with complex needs are often segregated to specific classrooms, isolating them and also isolating the teachers who are separated from social and collaborative time with other staff members.

Students in a general education class are often still segregated in some way, e.g. kept to the back of the room. One teacher described students with high support needs as visitors within the classroom rather than integral members of the class.

Teachers were aware that students' social experiences were often limited, e.g. they were not given small jobs like passing a message to school office staff. Teachers were concerned that these enforced limitations fuelled stereotypes about students with high support needs, further impacting the students' sense of belonging.

Identifying Gatekeeping

In this theme, teachers spoke about barriers that impact access to education for students with high support needs. District and school administrators were most commonly listed as gatekeepers. The 'culture of special ed' was listed as a barrier, with high-support-needs students treated differently to the general student population. Budgets were also restrictive in how students could actively be included. School districts were mentioned as placing extra demands with limited support.

Principals could be gatekeepers. Some knew little about inclusive education, while some were open to the concept without providing any practical support. School administration could also present a barrier by showing little interest or involvement. General education teachers could also present a barrier within school administration and the classroom. Students may be prevented from accessing aspects of general education because it is assumed that they should be accessing special education.

Mitigating Control

This theme focused on how teacher candidates responded to gatekeepers. Some felt like they were constantly having to prove and evidence student progress in an inclusive setting. They prepared data for these challenges. This data was used to show that a student belonged in general education or to show that segregation presented no benefits.

Teacher candidates also adapted IEPs to address barriers, for example by increasing social time that students spent with peers or shifting time spent in general education rather than segregation. They also adapted goals included in the IEP to emphasise an inclusive focus. Further, they adapted the curriculum to move away from rote learning and highlight topics designed for their grade level.

The participants also highlighted the essential role of support staff. They found that shifting roles so that support staff were focused on facilitating student–student interaction rather than maintaining adult–student interaction, was beneficial. Finally, teachers focused on building relationships between students. They emphasised the importance of younger students sharing inclusive space to pre-empt societal ableism.

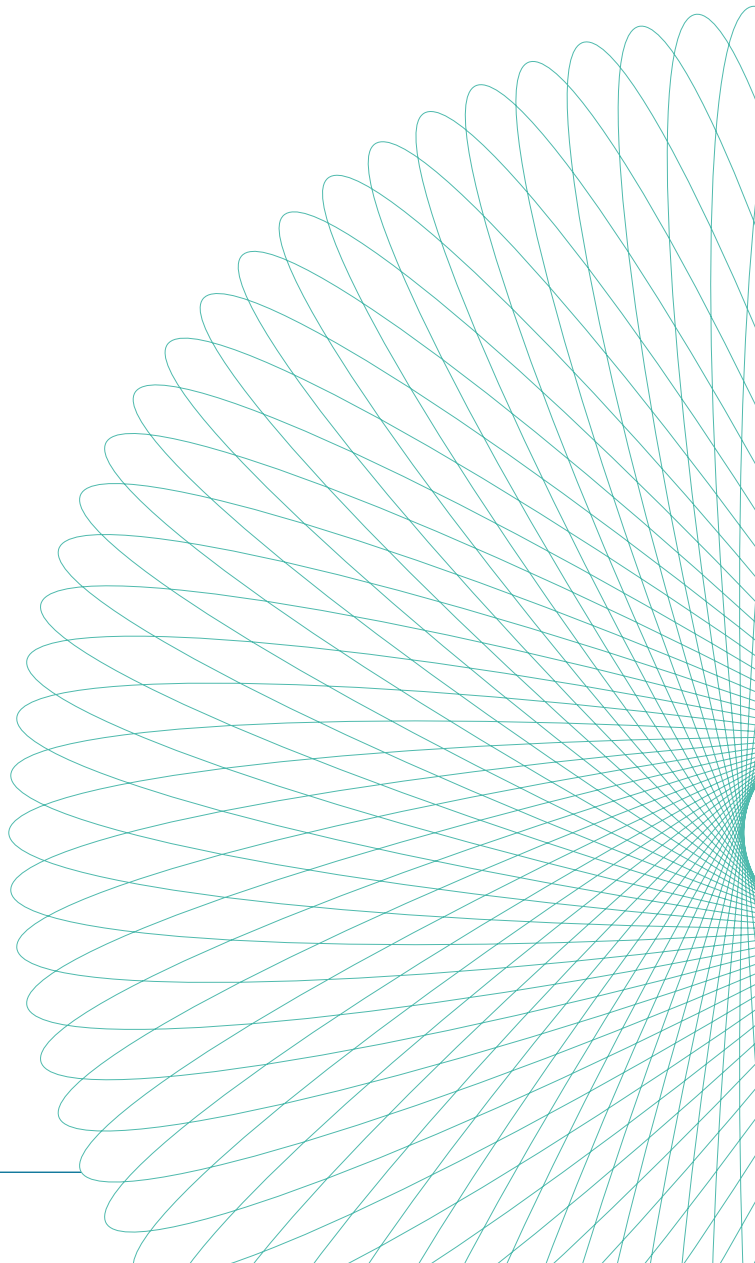
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

The paper suggested some recommendations for teacher training programmes.

- Educational systems exist within a broader context where people are marginalised, including disabled people. Educators should have opportunities to understand and explore ableism in society and how it impacts school life.
- Programmes and individuals who train educators should continually examine the context in which teachers work in order to understand how students with high support needs are marginalised. They should be given time to explore how they can address and disrupt ableism.
- Teachers cannot create change alone and inclusive education cannot be achieved in siloes. Special education teacher programmes should partner with general education and administrator preparation programmes. They should also partner with community and advocate groups to fully understand and tackle oppression and ableism.

Full Reference

Miller, A.L., Mansouri, M.C., Ruhter, L.C., Kurth, J.A., Morningstar, M.E., Toews, S.G., Wilt, C.L., & Andreoli, M. (2025). Rightful Presence? Teacher Candidates Navigating Inclusive Education for Youth With Complex Support Needs. *Exceptional Children*. **91**(3), pp. 260–280. https://doi.org/10.1177/00144029251317029



NEURODIVERSITY AND TRAUMA IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING

BACKGROUND

Early childhood education (ECE) systems continue to function within standardised frameworks that ineffectively support neurodivergent learners, who face considerable challenges. Such challenges include sensory overload, social exclusion, inflexible, one-size-fits-all teaching methods, insufficiently trained professionals and exclusionary disciplinary practices which may potentially result in trauma, impeding cognitive and emotional growth, leading to school-related anxiety and disengagement.

In high-income countries there are often experiences of intense academic pressures, while low- resource settings struggle with limited support services and stigma, deepening educational disparities.

Despite global developments in inclusive education, the intersection of neurodiversity and trauma in early childhood remains underexplored.

RESEARCH AIMS

This study aimed to investigate how exclusionary educational practices contribute to trauma, whilst evaluating the strategies for more inclusive, motionally supportive learning environments for neurodivergent children across diverse contexts.

The following key objectives guided this study:

- To examine the relationship between neurodiversity and trauma in early childhood education.
- To assess the impact of exclusionary educational practices on neurodivergent learners.
- To identify effective trauma-informed strategies for inclusive learning environments.
- To propose policy recommendations to improve teacher training and institutional frameworks supporting neurodivergent children.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a systematic qualitative secondary research design, drawing on reports from international organisations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Labour Organization (ILO), in addition to peer-reviewed articles.

Following a four-stage systematic selection process, 25 high-impact articles were chosen for in-depth analysis, with the inclusion of only peer-reviewed studies and authoritative policy reports.

A thematic content analysis was conducted to categorise findings into four key areas and policy comparisons highlighted challenges and effective practices across socioeconomic contexts.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings from this study provide insights into key aspects of neurodiversity and trauma-informed education, specifically highlighting the significant barriers neurodivergent children encounter in accessing inclusive education. This was particularly notable in low-resource settings.

Global disparities in inclusive education were reported to continue. For example, only 10% of neurodivergent children in sub-Saharan Africa receive appropriate educational support compared to 75% in high-income countries. These differences were identified to reflect broader issues of funding allocation, policy enforcement, and cultural perceptions of neurodivergence.

The impact of trauma was further identified as substantial, with trauma-exposed students at a higher risk of dysregulation and academic disengagement.

Four themes emerged from the analysis revealing that neurodiverse learners disproportionately experience negative impacts from segregated classrooms and punitive discipline, leading to increased anxiety and reduced social interactions. These included:

- ***Educational access*** continues to be a significant challenge, particularly in regions which have limited resources whereby only 10% have access to inclusive education, compared to those in high-income countries. Similarly in South Asia, neurodivergent children were found to be five times more likely to leave school early because of insufficient support services.
- ***Trauma-informed teaching*** plays a vital role in addressing these challenges. A meta-analysis found that children exposed to trauma were 35% more likely to exhibit executive functioning difficulties and dysregulation. Finland's integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was found to have contributed to increased student engagement and a decline in dropout rates. Similarly, South Africa's Gauteng Inclusive Education Pilot Programme has demonstrated encouraging improvements in students' emotional regulation and engagement. Therefore, inclusive approaches such as UDL, individualised learning plans, structured routines, sensory-friendly environments, and SEL were all associated with better academic engagement, emotional regulation, resilience, peer relations, and a sense of belonging, improving children's learning and wellbeing overall.
- ***Policy frameworks*** play a fundamental role in shaping inclusive education. Findings pointed to a significant gap between policy and practice particularly in countries of low-resource settings. Countries such as Canada and Finland, for example, have developed comprehensive legal frameworks that support inclusive education, supported by structured training programmes. In comparison, although South Africa's White Paper 6 aims to advance inclusive education implementation, it continues to face challenges, including insufficient funding and limited access to specialised teacher training.

- ***Workforce integration*** is a vital aspect of influencing the success of inclusive education, with research reporting that schools implementing structured neurodiversity training for educators saw a 25% increase in student engagement and academic performance. Research has shown that structured skill-building initiatives significantly improve employment retention rates among neurodivergent individuals. Key components contributing to this success include tailored vocational training, on-the-job mentorship and employer sensitisation programmes that promote inclusive work environments. Having these components in place ensures that neurodivergent employees receive adequate support in adapting to professional environments while fostering long-term career growth.

In summary, neurodivergent children are more likely to thrive when adults understand their individual needs, provide them with predictable environments, use flexible teaching methods and respond to their distress through the use of supportive means – rather than punitive measures such as exclusionary discipline which correlates with high dropout rates, social withdrawal and emotional distress. The research also emphasised that trauma and neurodiversity should be considered together to promote holistic child development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

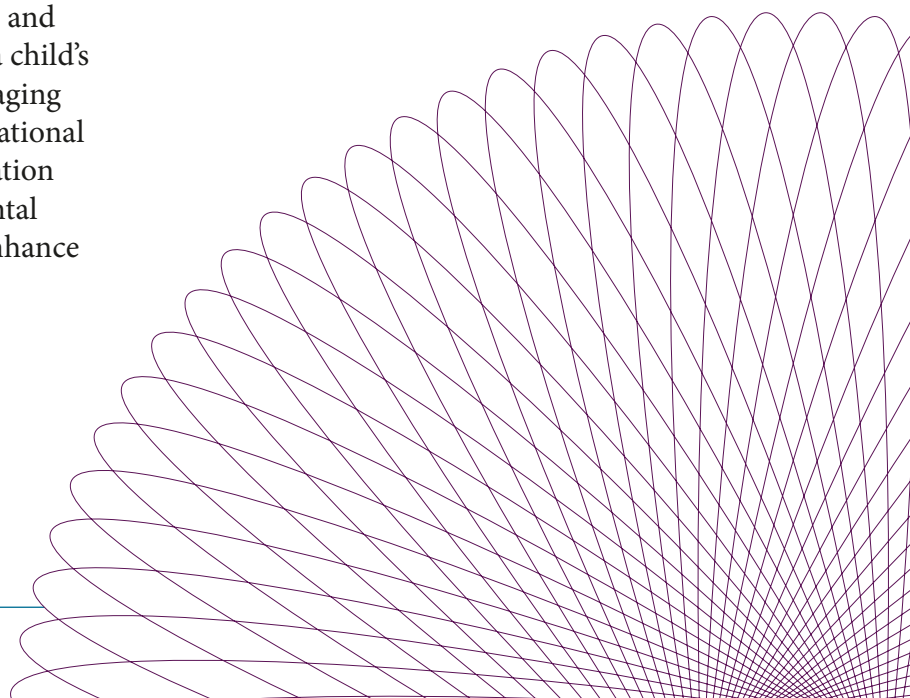
This study has several important implications for ECE practice, especially for neurodivergent children who may also have experienced trauma. To bridge the existing gaps in inclusive education, the authors outlined that governments and policy-makers should prioritise the following interventions, aligning with successful international frameworks whilst addressing local social economic constraints:

- *Adopt inclusive and trauma-informed teaching practices*. Teachers should recognise that when a child withdraws, is distressed, displays avoidance or dysregulation, this may be linked to trauma and unmet neurodevelopmental needs such as sensory needs. Educators should emphasise emotional safety, provide supportive relationships and de-escalation rather than punitive discipline that may increase distress. Building emotional skills can help children recognise and manage their emotions through having positive relationships and social emotional learning.
- *Adapt learning*, by using flexible and alternative teaching methods to allow children to learn, communicate and participate. The authors recommended moving away from one-size-fits-all teaching and towards having flexible approaches that provide children with a variety of ways to engage with learning, accessing information and demonstrating what they know through the use of assistive technology and e.g. Universal Design for Learning.

- *Strengthen teacher training* by investing in specialised training programmes and embedding neurodiversity-focused training, trauma-informed practice, and inclusive teaching. This is particularly vital for early years professionals as well as allocating targeted resources and establishing inter-ministerial coordination between health and education. Adapt successful models from Finland, Canada and Germany whilst ensuring alignment with local infrastructure and cultural contexts.
- *Enhance monitoring and accountability mechanisms* through establishing independent oversight bodies to track the implementation of inclusive education policies and ensure compliance.
- *Secure sustainable funding,* allocating targeted financial resources to support infrastructure development, assistive technologies and teaching capacity-building programmes. This will help provide schools and other settings with access to appropriate resources such as specialist support, resources and services required to ensure effective inclusion.
- *Stronger collaboration and working together*: teachers, parents, families, and relevant professionals should share information and work together to support and address a child's individual needs. This extends to leveraging public–private partnerships and international collaboration by encouraging collaboration between governments, non-governmental organisations, and private entities to enhance funding and programme delivery.
- *Further research* is required to enhance evidence-based policy-making and implementation strategies, such as the employment of:
  - Longitudinal studies on policy effectiveness – assessing the long-term impact of inclusive education policies on neurodivergent outcomes.
  - Mixed-method research on implementation barriers to explore the practical challenges educators face in applying inclusive teaching strategies.
  - Comparative studies across different socioeconomic contexts to evaluate how countries with similar economic constraints have successfully implemented inclusive education frameworks.
  - Interventions for workforce integration by investigating how early education interventions contribute to long-term employability of neurodivergent individuals through vocational training programmes, job coaching, and workplace accommodations.

Full Reference

Patilima, H. (2025). Neurodiversity and trauma in early childhood: Implications for inclusive learning. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*. **15**(1), p. 1704.



A NEUROINCLUSIVE SCHOOL MODEL: FOCUS ON THE SCHOOL, NOT ON THE CHILD

BACKGROUND

Schools can play a key role in children's development, but some students face barriers that prevent them from participating and reaching their full potential. Autistic students often describe significant challenges encountered in their school day, which can impact negatively on how they view themselves. They face environmental challenges and misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge about autism from educators and classmates. Within this context, many teachers report that they do not feel appropriately prepared or supported to teach autistic children.

Many traditional 'interventions' focus on developing the students' skills rather than focusing on reducing the significant barriers that autistic students face.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of this research was to establish the key features needed in a school environment to allow meaningful participation for autistic students and their classmates. The paper created a conceptual model of an inclusive school.

RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers wanted to create a model that was based on scientific literature, but adapted for practical use in the classroom. To achieve this, they used a number of methods. They adapted their learning over cycles so that they could incorporate new information and adapt their model as they learned. The structure of the project was: 1. Analysis and exploration, 2. Design and construction and 3. Evaluation and occupations.

In cycle one, the team conducted a literature review focused on inclusive practices, held focus groups with school staff, created a pilot study and interviewed occupational therapists. Evaluation was conducted at the end of cycle one.

In cycle two, the team conducted a literature review focused on the experiences of neurodivergent students and their families. They also interviewed three parents of neurodivergent students (two of whom were neurodivergent themselves).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study grouped recommended desirable features under three broad categories:

1. School's Social Environment

Celebrating Neurodiversity: A foundation of the school ethos is the benefits of inclusion of all, with celebration of diversity and the strengths of all community members. All students engage in neurodiversity awareness activities. School leaders promote a neurodiversity-informed ethos to all students, staff, family and broader community. Professional development is ongoing to inform the school community about neuroinclusive approaches.

Providing Safe and Caring Spaces: Students should have access to safe and caring spaces where they can be themselves, socialise in a comfortable way and be confident to share their perspectives. Staff can become trusted adults offering support in non-stigmatising ways. The curriculum allows opportunity to understand others and develop ways to interact that are comfortable for all. Neurodivergent students should have an opportunity to spend time with their neurodivergent peers.

2. Physical Environment

Free from Excessive Stimuli: The environment should be free from excessive visual, auditory, tactile or olfactory sensory stimuli. Suggestions to address this include: classroom acoustics and noise reduction, noise breaks and quiet spaces, visually uncluttered spaces and removing unpredictable physical contact when passing through the school.

Appropriate Visual Support: The school environment can be adapted to provide visual stimuli that offer instruction, explanation or expectation for all students. Involving neurodivergent students in the development of these visuals can help to make them more meaningful.

Clearly Defined Spaces: The school has spaces that are clearly defined based on their functions and expectations. Large spaces such as the school yard or canteen are divided into smaller zones with their uses clearly defined.

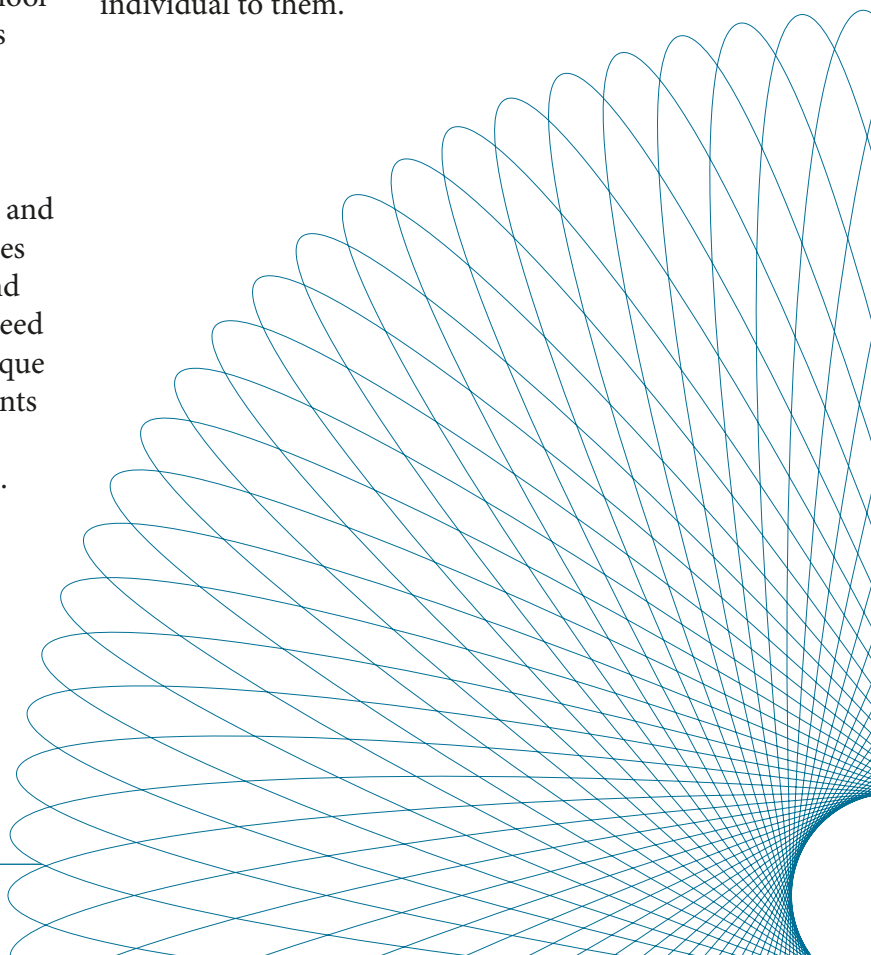
3. School Activities

Harnessing Passions and Strengths: Passions and strengths are incorporated into school activities such as classroom themes, teaching, games and visual supports. To achieve this, school staff need to give time to get to know their students' unique passions and strengths. Neurodivergent students can be given the opportunity to share their knowledge and interests with their classmates.

Variety of Options: Students are encouraged to make choices and have agency through a variety of options being offered according to ability, need and interest. They should have agency regarding the equipment or resources used for an activity. Flexibility can be woven into assessments and deadlines.

Being Predictable and Structured: School activities can be predictable and structured, offering clear, familiar routines and activities with set attainable milestones. The day can be structured through timetables, while changes can be announced in advance. Tasks are broken down into smaller, manageable chunks.

Incorporating Stimulating and Restorative Activities: The school can actively incorporate elements of the day that restore or stimulate students, allowing them to recharge their batteries and feel regulated in ways that are individual to them.



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- The authors describe this work as a call to focus on changing schools to support all students (and especially neurodivergent ones) to feel welcome and participate in a meaningful way in their school. It is not exhaustive. It is a guide to examine what might be changed to foster wellbeing and participation.
- To create an inclusive school environment, educators can consider the social environment, the physical environment and school activities.
- To implement change, it may be most useful to take a tiered approach, focusing initially on changes that can be made for all students, with personalised strategies implemented through collaboration with specific students.
- While the majority of occupational models of school support focus on changing the student, this model argues that a focus should be on changing the school so that neurodivergent students can comfortably and safely participate.

Full Reference

Rajotte, E., Grandisson, M., Couture, M.M., Desmarais, C., Chrétien-Vincent, M., Godin, J. and Thomas, N. (2025). A Neuroinclusive School Model: Focus on the School, Not on the Child. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*. **18**(2), pp. 281–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2024.2341643

UNMASKING INCLUSION: RECLAIMING NEURODIVERGENT CHILDHOODS IN SCANDINAVIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

BACKGROUND

Inclusion is a core principle of Scandinavian Early Childhood Education (ECE), founded on values such as equity, participation, and universal access. However, despite strong inclusive traditions, many everyday practices continue to be shaped by expectations of developmental conformity and school readiness. As a result, neurodivergent children, including autistic children and those with other neurodevelopmental differences, may be expected to adapt to educational environments that are not designed around their needs.
The authors argue that this creates a tension between the ideals of inclusion and the realities experienced by many neurodivergent children.

RESEARCH AIMS

This paper aims to:

- Critically examine current inclusion practices in Scandinavian ECE.
- Explore how neurodivergent children are positioned within existing inclusive frameworks.
- Review international discussions on neurodiversity, inclusive language, and rights-based education.
- Propose a conceptual model of neurodiversity-affirming inclusion that better supports neurodivergent children.
- Encourage greater dialogue between Scandinavian inclusive traditions and emerging international neurodiversity perspectives.

RESEARCH METHODS

The authors draw on existing literature related to Scandinavian inclusion policies and practices, neurodiversity, autism, inclusive education, and children's rights. Through a critical review and theoretical analysis of these bodies of work, they identify strengths and limitations in current approaches to inclusion and develop a conceptual framework for neurodiversity-affirming inclusion in early childhood education.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The authors found that:

- Inclusion in Scandinavian ECE is often interpreted through developmental norms that prioritise school readiness and typical developmental trajectories.
- Neurodivergent children may be physically included in educational settings but not always fully included in ways that respect their sensory, communicative, social, and cognitive differences.
- Support is often reactive and diagnosis-dependent, with staff lacking the resources or training to implement inclusive practices proactively.
- Deficit-based perspectives continue to influence practice, potentially leading to attempts to normalise or 'mask' neurodivergent behaviours.
- A neurodiversity-affirming approach offers a more inclusive alternative by recognising neurological differences as natural forms of human diversity rather than deficits.
- Effective inclusion requires acceptance, flexibility, environmental adaptation, and recognition of children's rights and voices.
- The proposed model emphasises designing environments that fit children rather than expecting children to fit existing systems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

The authors argue that practitioners and policy-makers should move beyond deficit-based models and adopt neurodiversity-affirming approaches to inclusion. They advocate for learning environments that are intentionally designed to accommodate diverse sensory, social, communication, and learning needs. They also emphasise the importance of professional learning opportunities that help educators understand and support neurodivergent children more effectively. The authors suggest that inclusion should be understood not simply as placement within mainstream settings but as creating a genuine sense of belonging, participation, and acceptance. They further recommend that neurodivergent perspectives should play a more prominent role in research, policy development, and educational decision-making so that inclusive practices better reflect the lived experiences and rights of neurodivergent children.

Full Reference

Hagen, Å.M., & Kalandadze, T. (2025). Unmasking Inclusion: Reclaiming Neurodivergent Childhoods in Scandinavian Early Childhood Education. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/02711214251371621

CONCLUSION

Autistic students have a right to feel safety, community and ownership within their education experience. This issue of the Research Bulletin explored how we can build an understanding of that rightful presence so that all community members take on the responsibility of creating a safe, comfortable environment.

YOUR OPINION

The Centre trusts that you have found this Research Bulletin informative. It would be appreciated if you would take a few minutes to provide the Centre with feedback in relation to this Bulletin by clicking on the survey link below.

Research Bulletin Feedback Rightful Presence

NOTES



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The Centre's Research and Information Service welcomes any correspondence including suggestions for future bulletins to: research@middletownautism.com

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