Developing the Principles on Which to Co-Design a Compassionate Neuroinclusive Peer Mentoring System

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An Introduction to the Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm is the movement that posits the evolutionary nature and universal design of the diversity of human neuro-cognitive capabilities and potential. This diversity covers a wide spectrum of traits that are expressed in forms such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD, tourettes, etc. Evidence suggests that over 20% of humankind meets the threshold for these differences that we have narrowly defined in our current medical model as ‘neurodevelopmental disorders’ and in our education system as ‘learning difficulties’ (Lloyd, 2022).

This paradigm embraces differences in human neurocognitive abilities. It is a social movement aligned with the social theory of disability - the idea that it is not the individual who is disabled but society that disables them (Singer, 2017). Given the knowledge that as many as 1.4 of 7.9 billion people have a brain that is structurally and functionally different (Lloyd, 2022), the Neurodiversity paradigm posits that these different minds must have an evolutionary purpose (Armstrong, 2011).

A key component of the neurodiversity paradigm is the role that context plays in our perception of a person's neurocognitive abilities (Lloyd, 2022). The human brain is an incredibly complex organism that must be understood within the human biopsychosocial ecosystem. The biopsychosocial experience that each brain has undertaken within its environment means that each brain shapes its environment and is a product of its environment (Doyle, 2020). We can consider ourselves and our sense of self as a product of a ‘mind’ - made up of both our brain and nervous system - that controls and is influenced by the world we physically and perceptually inhabit (Lloyd, 2022). The nature of perception means that every individual uniquely experiences the world. A combination of different genetics and our distinct lived experiences shape how we understand and respond to events that happen to us in our lives. This can be neatly exemplified by those on the neurodiversity spectrum whose neurobiological differences lead to a further layer of experiential diversity that influences how those individuals interact and respond to the world we live in.

(Austin, 2017) suggests that whether a person is regarded as disabled, competent, or gifted is determined by the context in which said person exists; the value of what our brains can do is understood within the context in which the brain expresses its skills. This is the fundamental argument upon which the neurodiversity paradigm and by extension, this article, stands. Reimagining what our educational context might look like with an aim for compassion and neuroinclusivity can reshape how neurodiverse children experience and internalise education.

An Economic Imperative for the Acceptance and Cultivation of Neurodiversity

Sidestepping the well-rehearsed arguments about equality of opportunity for the sake of brevity, the neurodiversity paradigm postulates that there is also an economic imperative to improving our understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity. Major industries such as technology, computing, bioscience, and web-based media have been actively recruiting a neurodiverse workforce for some time (Austin, 2017). Likewise, companies on the cutting edge of technology, e.g. Google and Apple argue that their success can be attributed to innovation and 'thinking differently'. By breaking the norms of how 'things are done' they rebuke the idea that all decision-makers should be of 'like mind' (Smith & Kirby).

The following figure illustrates some of the strengths commonly associated with neurodiversity that the companies above may be seeking.

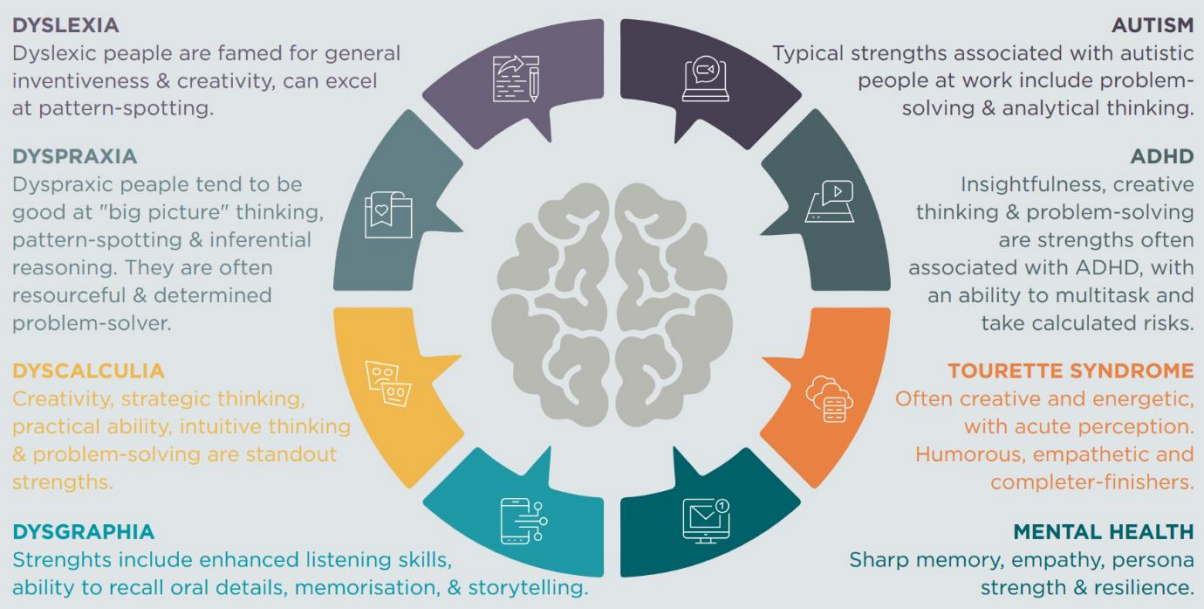

Figure 1: Strengths Commonly Associated with Neurodiversity (Lloyd, 2022)

It is this development in mindset, albeit within the context of generating capital, that has helped encourage further value to be seen in these individuals. However, the education system is failing to move with the times.

What we are experiencing in the capital generation sphere, but only very gradually in the education sphere, is a paradigm shift from the medical model to the neurodiverse model. This means moving away from finding and fixing deficits within the individual to re-understanding the harm associated with the impairment being the individual's interaction with their biopsychosocial environment.

We can conceptualise the medical model as a deficit-based classification - the terms ‘special needs’ or ‘learning difficulties’ immediately come to mind. This puts children in a box and defines their potential before they can understand what that means. The deficit-based model is based on the key competencies considered necessary at any given stage in a child’s development. However, slowly the discourse around what makes an excellent educator and what children need from their education is changing, reflecting our growing understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity itself (Hamilton & Petty, 2023)

Neurodiversity in Education

As education has developed in the UK so too has the accessibility to it, and therefore the education sector has a much larger and diverse student population. Despite this, neurodiversity is one dimension of difference that has not received much attention in the pedagogical literature (Pino & Mortari, 2014). Regarding the lower well-being and employment outcomes for this student population, (Anderson, Stephenson, & Carter, 2017) suggest that there is a disconnect between the needs of the student population and the motivation to make improvements.

(Hamilton & Petty, 2023) propose that we must consider how best to support neurodivergent thinkers to thrive within the university setting both for their current well-being and post-university opportunities and for the benefits that society will likely experience by fully enveloping them. Furthermore, they propose looking to compassionate pedagogies for building a learning platform based on strength-based and affirming approaches (Gibbs, 2017).

Importantly (Hamilton & Petty, 2023) make explicit that educating educators on what is best for them does not fall to the neurodiverse student. However, individualised, compassion-informed pedagogy based on direct input from neurodiverse students can be transformative (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). This is a concept that (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023) use to great effect that I hope to touch on later.

Neurodiversity and Emotional Welfare in Education

As with universities, schools play a pivotal role in children’s lives and development; shaping their capabilities and helping them live up to their potential. However, many children encounter obstacles that negatively affect their engagement in school and also their quality of life. … states that this is particularly true for autistic students, who often find their school

experience to be challenging. Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are victims of bullying and harassment and tend to develop a negative self-perception during their time in school (Sreckovic, Brunsting, & Able, 2014). Furthermore, it has been suggested that many neurodivergent pupils experience difficulty with learning and classroom participation, and feel frequently victimised by their neurotypical peers (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023). This contributes to the lower well-being, self-confidence, and higher anxiety that neurodiverse children typically experience when compared to their neurotypical peers (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023).

(Able, Sreckovic, Shultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2014) propose that the mismatch between the strengths and needs of autistic students and the features of school environments contributes to this situation. It has been suggested that the lack of structure and predictability in school activities can be anxiety-provoking for some students (Able, Sreckovic, Shultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2014). The noisy and sensory-stimulating nature of school can also affect the participation of autistic students (Barry, Holloway, & McMahon, 2020). It is thought that it is a lack of understanding and knowledge about autism in peers and in a school setting that leads to a negative attitude toward these students in particular (Rajotte, et al., 2024).

Certain practices are recognised as effective for intervening with autistic children (Rajotte, et al., 2024). However, these practices are often poorly adapted to the school context (Long, et al., 2016) and tend to focus solely on developing students' skills rather than reducing barriers - a philosophy inconsistent with inclusive education (Rajotte, et al., 2024). A more inclusive education demands that schools adapt to the needs and strengths of neurodiverse students so that all students can reach their potential and feel valued (Antoninis, et al., 2020). In reaction to this thought process, (Rajotte, et al., 2024) have designed a neuroinclusive school model worth analysing when considering what a peer mentoring system with similar tenets might look like.

The Neuroinclusive School

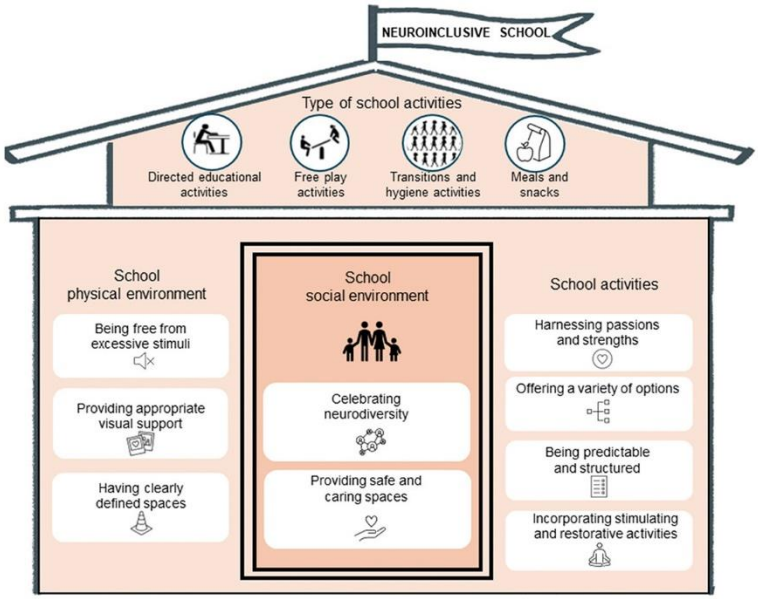

Figure 2 – Illustrative Representation of the Neuroinclusive School (Rajotte, et al., 2024)

(Rajotte, et al., 2024) regard the school social environment as a fundamental tool to implement the neuroinclusive school philosophy - mirroring the consideration that it is a neurodivergent person's biopsychosocial environment that causes harm, not their condition. They recommend that at its core, a school environment should both celebrate neurodiversity and provide safe and caring spaces for students (Rajotte, et al., 2024).

Through explicit or hidden curriculum, people in the school should be taught and perceive the benefits of inclusion for all. Everyone in the institution should see that each student has unique strengths regardless of their neurological profile (Rajotte, et al., 2024). Thus, altering the environment in which students exist.

(Rajotte, et al., 2024) suggest that this can be done practically by implementing some of the following practices; schools should offer neurodiversity awareness activities to help students understand their strengths and the needs of others and to encourage greater generalised acceptance. Furthermore, reflective activities should be implemented that help students and staff alike see their cognitive biases and reflect on how their own and their peers' differences bring value (Lüddeckens, Anderson, & Östlund, 2022). Leadership figures in schools should intentionally promote a culture that values neurodiversity among school staff, families, and the broader community (Lüddeckens, Anderson, & Östlund, 2022). All students should have access to spaces where they can be themselves, socialise in a way that suits them, share their thoughts and ideas, and have respectful, meaningful discussions about finding

solutions to issues that are challenging them (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023). Schools should endeavour to provide all of the above. Students who feel supported, safe, and comfortable at school have higher social participation and well-being at school (Tanner, Hand, O'Toole, & Lane, 2015).

While the Neuroinclusive School model is undoubtedly a brilliant guide for how schools could be, implementing holistic cultural change is not a simple task. (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015) suggest the task of changing culture in a school takes 3-5 years. As such I believe it is worth considering beginning to implement larger-scale cultural change through smaller initiatives such as peer mentoring.

Peer Mentoring as an Intermediary Step to Fully Neuroinclusive Schools

Mentoring occurs when a senior person or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior person or student over a period of time (Collier, 2017).

Typically, the mentor in question is older and more experienced within the context in which the pair find themselves, drawing upon that experience to support the mentee's efforts to improve or advance in that sector. Peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age and power for psychosocial support (Collier, 2017). Despite their similar age, it is typically considered that a mentor should have a higher level of experience than the mentee.

There are three relative advantages of using peer mentoring over a standard hierarchical system: relatively low cost for effectiveness, a large pool of potential mentors, and a shared perspective between mentors and mentees which can increase the efficacy of the intervention (Collier, 2017).

Neuroinclusive Peer Mentoring

While peer mentoring is not in itself a new phenomenon and has been shown to work for a variety of purposes, such as: promoting mental health and well-being (Hart, Cropper, Morgan, Kelly, & Jorm, 2020) and helping disabled students (Nalugya, et al., 2023); most schemes thus far have typically involved a neurodiverse student being mentored by a neurotypical student (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023). While it appears that this kind of mentoring can achieve its aims, it is centred on the idea that by engaging with neurotypical individuals, neurodiverse mentees will more thoroughly understand social rules and norms (Bottema-Beutel, Park, & Kim, 2018). The implication is that these interventions seek to reduce neurodivergent 'symptoms' and problem behaviours (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023). By positing that

neurotypical patterns of behaviour are ‘good’, we stigmatise neurodiverse ways of thinking and communicating.

As such, there has been a push for research around peer mentoring that is intentionally and specifically designed for neurodiverse students. The study by (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023) highlights the areas which a neurodiverse group of students highlighted as essential when co-designing a new peer-mentoring scheme. These align nicely with the values found in positive counselling and the neuro-inclusive school model.

The group of neurodiverse students highlighted the central role of the group facilitator - the teacher who spearheads the peer mentoring scheme in the school. The individual should be attuned, and enthusiastic, though not necessarily neurodivergent themselves. They should advocate for and empower students, and should receive explicit and representative support from the school’s senior management team (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023).

Furthermore, the group suggested that inclusiveness was also imperative. That any diagnosed, undiagnosed, or even neurotypical individual should be able to be involved in the peer mentoring scheme (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023). They recommended a strong focus on practical inclusivity and highlighted a strong need for flexibility within the program (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023).

Finally, the group in question sought to actively address the negative perceptions amongst neurotypical individuals of neurodiverse individuals (Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023).

(Fotheringham, Cebula, Fletcher-Watson, Foley, & Crompton, 2023) strongly suggested that peer support designed for and by neurodiverse students should be implemented in mainstream schools. This was caveated with the warning that facilitator skills, school alignment with the neurodiversity paradigm, and the risk of gossiping and bullying should be carefully assessed before and throughout implementation.

The Role Compassion Should Play in Neuroinclusive Peer Mentoring

Building on the recommendations in the previous section, I believe it is also worth embedding the principles of compassionate pedagogy and positive psychology within a neuroinclusive peer mentoring scheme.

There are a few definitions of compassion in philosophical and psychological literature. Most include two key components: the ability to see suffering in others (including minorities) without negative judgement and the motivation to act to prevent or alleviate suffering (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Nusbaum suggests that compassion is teachable and is learned through experiences with others and reflections based on those novel experiences (Nussbaum, 2003). Furthermore, (Nussbaum, 2003) suggest that a prerequisite for compassionate responses is acknowledging one's vulnerability.

The principles of compassion-focused therapy are relevant. Evidence suggests that in autistic people, the accumulation of shame and fear over past negative experiences associated with abnormal behaviours in social or classroom settings can lead to increased and incentivised masking behaviours (Miller, Rees, & Pearson, 2021). These are reported as a relevant driver of poor mental health in neurodivergent people (Miller, Rees, & Pearson, 2021).

Compassion-focused therapy is increasingly recommended for neurodivergent clients and relatedly there is an ever-growing focus within the field on encouraging an individual to thrive within difference while explicitly avoiding implications of treating or reducing the expressions of neurodiversity (Robinson, 2018).

The Role of Positive Psychology

Lawrence Fung suggests drawing from the principles of positive psychology, positive psychiatry, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and Chickering's seven vectors of development to guide our thinking in the area of neurodiversity-informed efforts (Fung, 2022).

The core tenets of positive psychology are well-being, contentment, satisfaction, flow and happiness, and hope and optimism (Fung, 2022). Whilst there are many themes and definitions of positive psychology the field can be summarised by the following three sentences (Hart & Sasso, 2011):

1. Virtues, character strengths, positive personality traits and related attributes and abilities, and talents.
2. Phenomena indicative of happiness, positive emotional well-being, subjective sense of fulfilment, and satisfaction with the quality of life
3. Developmental process of becoming, growth, fulfilment of capacities, actualisation of potential and development of the highest/authentic self.

Fundamentally, positive psychology can be understood by just the three key underlined words: strengths, fulfilment, and growth (Hart & Sasso, 2011).

Positive Psychiatry is also a key tenet of the strengths-based model of neurodiversity. It is discrete from traditional psychology, the salient differences are illustrated below (Jeste, Palmer, Rettew, & Boardman, 2015).

Variable	Traditional Psychology	Positive Psychology
assessment focus	pathology	positive attributes and strengths
research focus	risk factors, pathology	protective factors, neuroplasticity
treatment goal	symptom relief	increased well-being and growth
main treatments	medications, short-term psychotherapies	psycho-educational interventions to enhance positive attributes
prevention	largely ignored	important focus across the lifespan

Table 1: Salient Differences between Traditional Psychology and Positive Psychology

Another important facet of the strengths-based model is Chickering's Seven Vectors of Development (Fung, 2022) which includes: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. These principles indicate the seven milestones a young adult must reach to develop into a fully-fledged, well-adjusted adult.

Embedding positive psychology tenets and compassionate pedagogy teachings within a peer mentoring system reframes the initiative. It potentially removes the binary nature of the mentor-mentee relationship and encourages student reciprocity. Each student has a lot to learn from the other; framing neurodiversity as a unique strength rather than as a disorder and relying on foundations of compassion encourages this joint learning.

Some Notes on the Practicalities of a Neuroinclusive Compassionate Peer Mentoring Scheme

We can draw inspiration for the best practical techniques by which to work collaboratively with neurodiverse individuals from other sectors - namely the positive psychiatry sector. (Maddox, et al., 2020) suggests clinicians working with autistic individuals should: clearly explain what clients can expect and what is expected of them, establish a mutual understanding of what is being spoken and what is being implied, provide clear structure for sessions with the client and expectations of self-led tasks, take measures to avoid crowded, brightly lit, or noisy spaces. For other neurodiverse groups, (Young & Bramham, 2012) suggest including planned breaks and switching between tasks to avoid lengthy attentional demands or long stretches of high-priority work. These are perfect examples of principles that can be brought across when implementing a neuroinclusive peer mentoring scheme.

For the purposes of this article, and specifically involving the one-to-one nature of peer mentoring, mentors and mentees should be guided by principle but should endeavour to work on a case-by-case basis, seeking input from parties involved about what is working best for them.

Compassionate Neuroinclusive Peer Mentoring – the Fist Step in Total Educational Reform

What neurodiverse children need is a broader educational and cultural reform. This is an arduous, slow and expensive process. The scale of governments and education boards makes it challenging to strategise exactly how we might bring about such cultural change. However, what is evident is that peer mentoring offers an affordable, effective, and time-efficient system by which we might begin to initiate the necessary change locally (Collier, 2017).

Utilising the principles of the neuroinclusive school, positive psychology, compassionate pedagogy, and the strengths-based model of neurodiversity; we can develop a compassionate, reciprocal peer mentoring system. By building this alongside neurodiverse students and emphasising the values described above, we put our high school students in the best position to benefit from such a scheme. From the success of this scheme comes a grassroots method to wider cultural change within each school – one of the overarching goals of the neurodiversity movement.

This paper recommends taking the values and practices discussed above and embedding them within a peer mentoring system co-designed by neurodiverse high school students. This initiative can then be implemented in local schools and improved iteratively each year.

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