

Inspiring world-class
teaching professionalism



Understanding neurodiversity in the context of equality and inclusive practice

A professional guide for teachers

In partnership with



Salvesen Mindroom Centre

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What is this guide for?

Increasingly, we have begun to read and hear about neurodiversity: this guide aims to give you a working knowledge of the key terms that you need to know in order to take neurodiversity into account when practising inclusion.

The purpose of this Professional Guide is to provide support for teachers to reflect on their actions and consider whether they may need further advice or professional learning. This guide is intended to complement your employer's policies and is to help you to develop your understanding of the concept of neurodiversity and how it interacts with equalities legislation and inclusion. A series of guides have been

produced by GTC Scotland, two of which are on autism and dyslexia and may be helpful further reading on additional support needs. You can access all the guides on [the GTC Scotland website](https://www.gtc.scot.nhs.uk/)

The guides do not form part of the Professional Code for teachers. Teachers and schools may find them useful professional learning and discussion tools but they are not intended for use in any competency or conduct process. They are part of GTC Scotland's services to teachers to enhance teacher professionalism as part of our advisory role as the professional body for all of Scotland's teachers.



What is expected of teachers?

Understanding and valuing diversity are at the heart of the professional values of social justice, integrity, trust and respect. It is only by continually developing your

understanding of the full range of diversity, and what that means for individual learners, that you can achieve meaningful inclusive practice.

How to understand the link between neurodiversity, equality, and inclusive practice

Neurodiversity describes us all

The term 'neurodiversity' was first coined in 1998. It is used to describe the phenomenon of neurological diversity (including brain structures, connections, and functions) that is a feature of all humans. Humanity is neurodiverse – everyone has different brains. Each person differs individually from the next: neurodiversity means there is a wide variation in brain processes, and therefore in individuals' experiences and behaviours. Sometimes these variations are substantial enough to give rise to more categorical differences, corresponding to diagnostic labels such as autism and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). An individual alone cannot be neurodiverse, but a group of people may be neurodiverse if they differ in their neurotype.

Like a diverse ecosystem, variation is almost certainly beneficial to humankind and neurodivergence in individuals can come with advantages, too.

Within neurodiversity, an individual may be neurodivergent

'Neurodivergent' is a term that describes people whose underlying neurology gives rise to differences in both experience and behaviour that can be labelled (or categorised). Neurodivergent is a useful

collective term that encompasses a large range of people who commonly experience barriers to learning.

People with autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia as well as people with ADHD, DLD (developmental language disorder) or Tourette syndrome (TS) may all be described as neurodivergent (though as individuals they may not choose to self-describe in that way).

Using neurodiversity terminology in practice – an example

It is not unusual for the terms neurodiversity and neurodivergent to be interchanged, and thereby incorrectly used. Additional terms include 'neurotypical', which refers to the majority neurotype. Neurotypical people differ from each other at an individual level, just as is the case for people with autism or those of any other neurotype. Nonetheless, neurotypical is a useful term to describe the dominant neurotype.

To help avoid confusion around these terms, here is a worked example:

A University research centre conducts research into neurodiversity and its consequences for learning. The researchers are particularly interested in how neurodivergent people learn differently from neurotypical people. Classrooms and curricula have historically been

created for the neurotypical majority, so practitioners, pupils and researchers need to work together to create and evaluate adaptations to accommodate different neurotypes and support inclusion.

Some challenges arising from neurodiversity in schools – and a potential solution

A neurodivergent child may meet the legal definition of disability, in which case they will be entitled to have 'reasonable adjustments' made: a legal right that flows from the Equality Act 2010. You are already familiar with the terms 'learning difficulties' or perhaps 'hidden disabilities', which would raise a flag for you to consider whether equalities legislation applies. The same considerations arise with neurodivergence.

A neurodivergent child or young person may be assessed as having additional support needs, in which case they will be entitled to receive additional support to learn. However, many neurodivergent learners may appear to manage well in school and do not have a diagnosis or any recognition of their neurodivergence. For example, girls are much less likely to be identified as having autism than boys. Meanwhile, pupils with dyslexia may not receive a diagnosis until after they have left school: some of those who remain in education only eventually undergo an assessment at college or university.

Equally, some instances of neurodivergence become identified as 'behaviours', most commonly when learners with ADHD are mistakenly thought to be acting in deliberately challenging or provocative ways. This can lead to unfair disciplinary actions and even to exclusion from school. These outcomes may amount to discrimination.

A potential solution to these challenges is to pause for reflection when you encounter a child or young person who is not meeting your professional expectations – are they not working towards the potential you believe they have? Are they behaving in superficially inexplicable ways? Do they seem unhappy in themselves? At that point you should consider whether, in a world of neurodiversity, this child may not be neurotypical and may benefit from adapted learning materials – which can also be made available to everyone.

Remember that neurodiversity encompasses everyone – this is the real power of the concept and the key way that it differs from some other language around classroom inclusion. Neurodiversity frees us from identifying, labelling and ameliorating specific difficulties by instead encouraging us to provide accessible and inclusive education to the whole class (not just selected individuals who may also need additional support) and to approach each learner on their own terms, regardless of diagnostic label.

What you can do

Familiarise yourself with your employer's policies and ask yourself:

- The Equality Act 2010 and the duty to make reasonable adjustments apply to many learners who are neurodivergent. Do you know who to go to in your school or wider organisation/employer for advice on this legal duty?
- Are you comfortable with the idea that you do not need to be a specialist in specific neurological conditions in order to provide good support? For example, if you have a child with TS in your class, you may want to learn more about TS but you do not need to be specifically trained in how to teach a child with TS.
- The best source of information about a neurodivergent learner is the learner and/or their family – are there opportunities for you to exchange this kind of information face to face with the child or their family? If not, how could you find out more?
- Have you already instituted accessible learning resources or adaptations for learners in your class, now or in the past? Are there ways for these to be made available to the whole class



and become part of your standard practice?

- What are your goals for your class? Take a moment to step back and consider whether you can shift your perspective when you think about what you want a learner to achieve while they are with you. For example, is it more important to do every question on a worksheet, or to do a subset of questions well? This kind of thinking can help us move focus away from productivity and onto quality of learning.

Additional resources

Guides on autism and dyslexia have been produced as part of this series of professional guides.... [↗](#)

- Education Scotland provides a *definition of additional support needs*. [↗](#)
- Enquire explains about *duties relating to equality and making reasonable adjustments*. [↗](#)
- *GTC Scotland's Professional Standards for Teachers*. [↗](#)
- Judy Singer coined the term Neurodiversity and provides a *detailed articulation in her blog*. [↗](#)
- *Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions (2014)* by Nick Walker, an American academic, gives a helpful exploration of terminology and the broader concept of neurodiversity. [↗](#)
- Salvesen Mindroom Centre has a *guide to learning difficulties* where you will find many of the neurodivergent categories described. [↗](#)
- Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre provides a *range of research publications, podcasts and book reviews*. [↗](#)
- Some employers *actively seek to recruit and support neurodivergent staff*. [↗](#)



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