Neurodiversity Affirming Schools

Transforming Practices So All Students Feel Accepted & Supported

EMILY KIRCHER-MORRIS and AMANDA MORIN

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Dedication

Emily: To Dave, who juggles our podcast production and my endless “big ideas” with unwavering support and love, and to our three neurodivergent children, Grayson, Maggie, and Trevor, who remind me daily why this work matters.

Amanda: To Jon, who believes in me even when I don’t believe in myself, and to Benjamin, Jacob, and Megan for teaching me what it’s like to be a neurodivergent parent with neurodivergent kids.

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Chapter 1

The Neurodiversity-Affirming School

Points to Ponder

- What impact does a neurodiversity-affirming school have on neurodivergent students?
- Why do some people prefer identity-first language over person-first language?
- How can you begin to destigmatize neurodivergence in your community?

What words would you use to describe the way your students feel in your classroom? What words would your students use? Do the two align?

We all hope students describe their classrooms as places where they feel calm, accepted, included, seen, and understood. We want students to feel not just comfortable but confident in being their authentic selves, seeking support, and knowing they'll be treated with respect. But getting there requires creating a culture in classrooms and schools where students feel safe to take both academic and social risks.

While some students do feel safe to take risks, there are groups of students who don't, in large part because they do not experience the privilege of authenticity. Students who come from marginalized backgrounds are frequently asked to bend or hide their identities to fit within a school model that wasn't created with their needs in mind. Many

students need to code switch between the language they use with their friends and family and the more formal language of academia. And neurodivergent students may mask and camouflage their differences to engage in “expected” behaviors.

Educators have made strides toward creating more inclusive environments for students from diverse backgrounds and continue to do this work today. But we are just beginning to gain an understanding of neurodivergent students and how we can structure our schools to support them.

This chapter shares a brief history of the neurodiversity movement, names which conditions fall under the definition of neurodivergent in this book, and explores ways students might be identified (as well as barriers to identification). It also places learner variability in the context of neurodiversity and shares strategies for destigmatizing neurodivergence and using neurodiversity-affirming language in your school community.

A Brief History of the Neurodiversity Movement

The term *neurodiversity* was first used in the 1990s and was originally attributed to sociologist Judith Singer. Recent discussion and research instead show that the term was collectively developed in the mid-1990s by autistic members of an email list known as Independent Living (Botha et al. 2024). However, most people remained unfamiliar with the term until the mid-2010s, when the neurodiversity movement really began to take off. Google Trends for *neurodiversity* since March 2011 (figure 1.1) shows a relatively steady line until 2019, when the frequency of searches begins to grow rapidly.

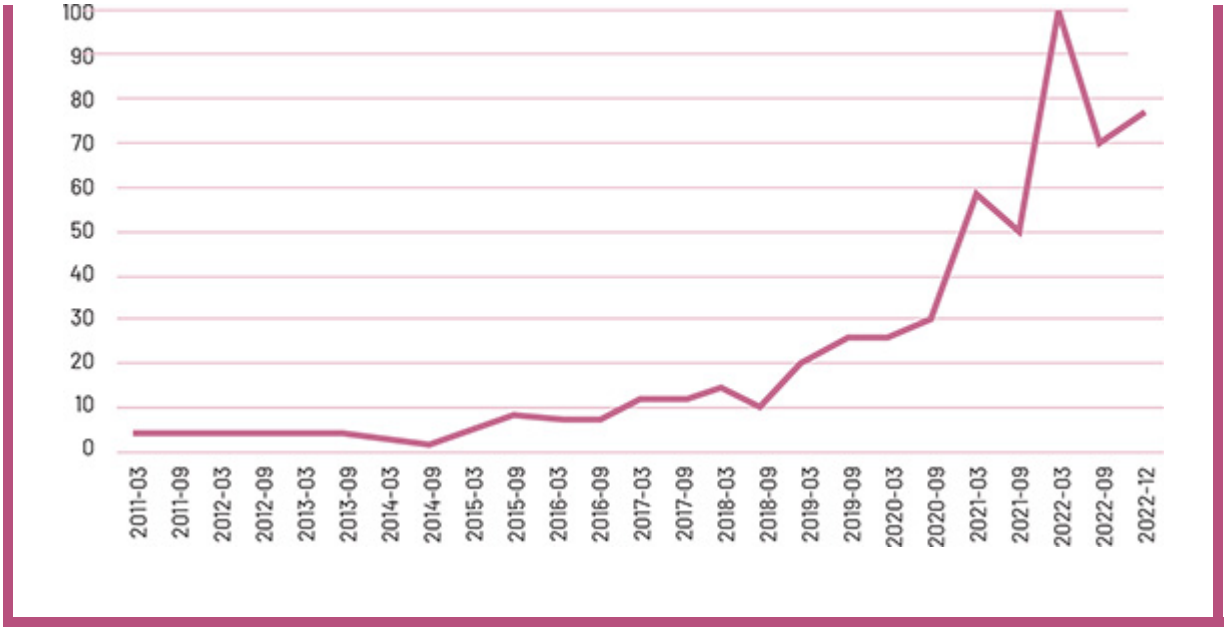
While the concept of neurodiversity encompasses a variety of diagnoses, it was initially embraced in the autism community. In 1994, the American Psychological Association added the diagnosis of Asperger’s to the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders (*DSM-IV*). This new categorization provided an opportunity for more children who previously may have received no diagnosis to be identified and receive support. Practitioners were trained in understanding Asperger's, and better tools were developed to help identify it. Concerns about the increasing rates of diagnosis were wrongly attributed to environmental influences, when really improved awareness and better diagnostic processes were behind the increase in numbers.

In 2013, the fifth edition of the *DSM* (*DSM-5*) was released, and Asperger's was absorbed under the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. (In the UK, the diagnosis is called autism spectrum condition, a much more affirming term in our view.) The children who were initially identified in the late 1990s and early 2000s were reaching adulthood and became the first strong advocates asking for a shift in the way they were treated and viewed. Since, prior to the *DSM-IV*'s addition of Asperger's, most people diagnosed with autism were nonspeaking and had high support needs in many areas, this "Aspie" generation was the first to really understand their own needs and begin advocating for the autism community at large. They used the term *neurodiversity* to help others understand that just because autistic people operate in the world in a way that is deemed different, this doesn't mean their way of being is wrong.

FIGURE 1.1 Frequency of Google Searches for *Neurodiversity*, 2011–2022





The term was then gradually adopted by other groups. People diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, Tourette syndrome, OCD, and more, began to embrace the concept of neurodiversity. These folks began shedding labels of “dumb,” “lazy,” “weak-willed,” or “crazy” and claiming the label of “neurodivergent.” This recognition—that one’s brain may be wired to experience the world in a unique way—has liberated so many from the belief that there is something wrong with them. They began healing from the trauma of growing up in a world where they were not only misunderstood but often punished for being different.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a hand in accelerating the neurodiversity movement. The complete disruption of daily life that it caused led many people to question the status quo. Some parents watched their children attempt to complete online school and noticed previously unobserved signs of inattention or difficulty with reading, math, or another subject. Some neurodivergent adults, suddenly able to work from home, realized how much effort they’d expended camouflaging their differences in the workplace and how much their overall wellness improved once they were able to let down their masks and complete their work in a comfortable environment that accommodated their sensory needs. Students who were extremely stressed and dysregulated in the general classroom setting

showed improvements in their academic performance when they weren't forced to navigate the social world of peers.

People began asking questions and seeking out information about neurodiversity, and for the first time, the general public began to listen. Neurodiversity became a mainstream topic, through social media, blogs, podcasts, and the media. Notable individuals, from actors to tech gurus to politicians, began identifying themselves as neurodivergent and sharing these labels with their followers and fans. When the time came to return to school and work, not only did people feel empowered to self-advocate for their needs in a way they hadn't before but some schools and workplaces were also beginning to understand how to respond to those needs. Today, the voices of neurodivergent people seem to finally be heard.

The neurodiversity movement is truly a political movement. It is a disability rights movement. It is the recognition that just because someone doesn't fit the definition of "typical," this doesn't mean that they are broken and in need of fixing. The leading edge of the neurodiversity movement focuses on the importance of changing the environment and culture that has held back neurodivergent people for too long.

While there is no specific organization that is responsible for the neurodiversity movement, we have identified are some common goals that unite advocates. These include the following:

- destigmatizing the process of seeking and receiving a diagnosis
- building awareness in the general public about the needs of neurodivergent people
- depathologizing characteristics of neurodiversity and viewing them outside the context of the medical model
- improving services and support for neurodivergent people in schools, workplaces, and the community
- creating a sense of community and belonging for neurodivergent people

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