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Reflections on Studying with a Neurodiverse Difference

Keith Murphy

Technological University Dublin, keith.murphy@tudublin.ie

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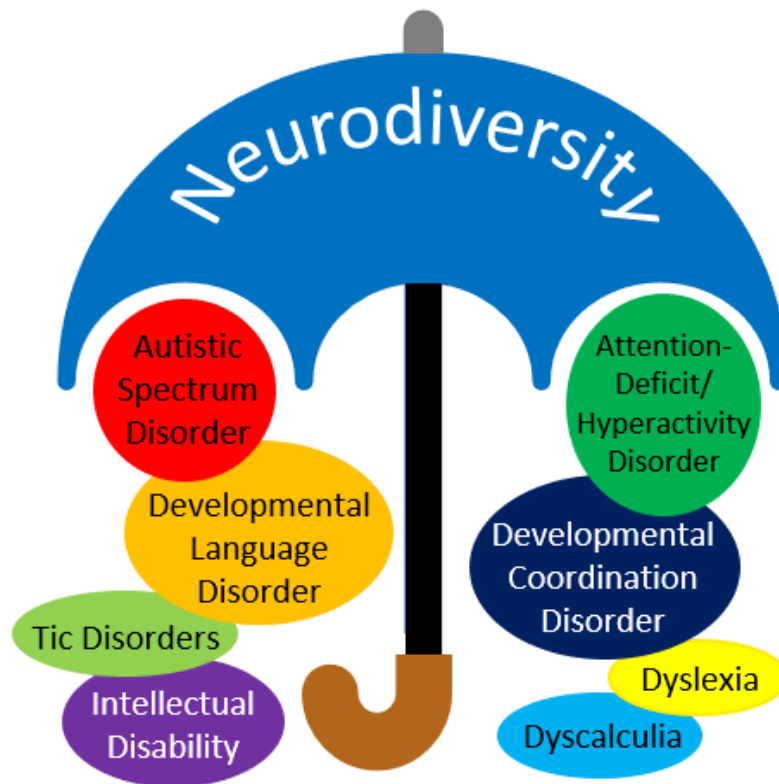
Museum of Childhood Ireland

Músaem Óige na hÉireann

Reflections On . . . Studying with a Neurodiverse Difference

By Keith Murphy

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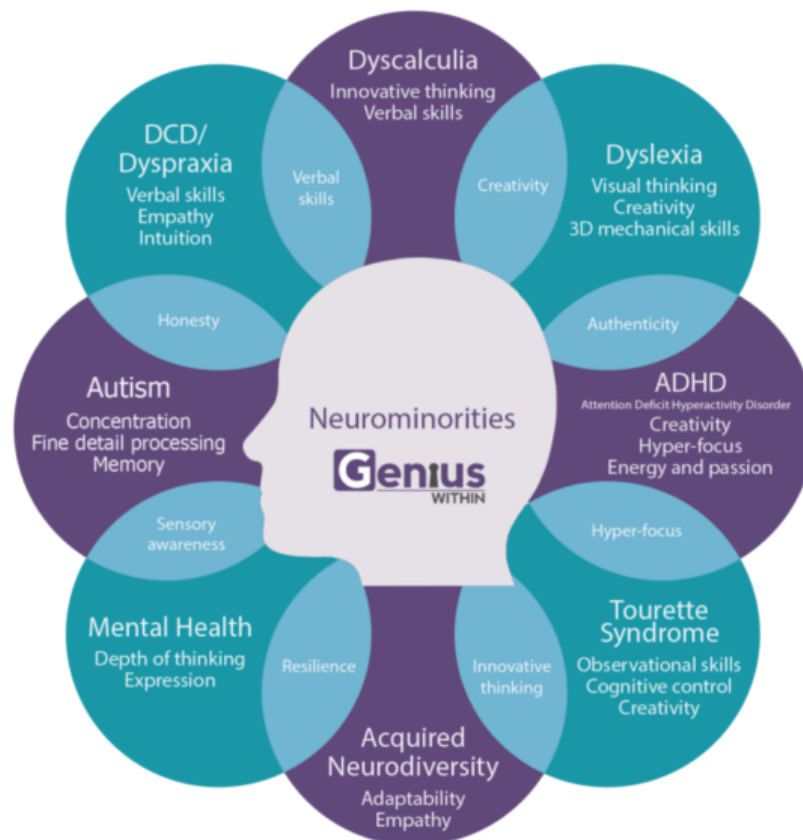
Neurodiversity encompasses the concept that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one “right” way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and **differences are not viewed as deficits**. The word neurodiversity refers to the diversity of all people, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or learning disabilities, as well as other neurological or developmental conditions. The neurodiversity movement emerged during the 1990s, aiming to increase acceptance and inclusion of all people while embracing neurological differences. Judy Singer (1996), an Australian sociologist, coined the term neurodiversity to promote equality and inclusion of “neurological minorities,” or what is often termed as **neurodevelopmental disorders**.

While it is primarily a social justice movement, neurodiversity research and education continue to play an increasingly important role in changing how the world views and address certain disabilities and neurological conditions. Other terms often used are:

- Neurodiversity: The diversity or variation of cognitive functioning in people. Everyone has a unique brain and therefore different skills,

abilities, and needs.

- **Neurodiverse:** This describes the diversity and variation of cognitive functioning in people. Neurodiverse is typically used to describe neurodivergent people.
- **Neurodivergence:** This denotes cognitive functioning which is not considered “typical,” such as autistic, dyslexic, and dyspraxic people.
- **Neurodivergent:** This describes people who have a neurodivergence.
- **Neurotypical:** This is a neologism widely used in the neurodiversity movement as a label for non-neurodivergent people, that is, anyone who has a typical neurotype. This excludes autistic people, and those with ADHD, dyslexia, and so on.



Studying with a Neurodiverse Difference

Different people think differently, not just because of cultural differences or variations in life experiences, but because their brains are “wired” to work differently. Today, neurodiversity is broadly defined as an approach to learning

and disability that suggests diverse **neurological conditions** appear as a result of normal variations in the human genome. Neurodiverse advocates and educators typically promote and support inclusion-focused services, accommodations, communication, and assistive technologies. They also challenge misconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes about neurological differences, and deliver training to raise awareness and educate educators on how to identify and support their neurodivergent students.

At present, a lot of educators lack the knowledge and skillsets needed to ensure their neurodivergent students realise their potential. One way to support neurodivergent students would be to cease educating through a rote and memorising system and reward creativity and innovative thinking – these are part of the skills that neurodivergent students have. Another important step would be to embrace the technology available to us. We can type and avail of spellcheck in nearly all other aspects of our lives. However, we continue to disadvantage both neurodiverse and neurotypical students by insisting on written work as assessments (see <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com> for more information and resources).

How Do I Study as a Neurodivergent?

Instead of focusing on what is supposed to work or works for others, focus on what works for you and do that. When you have discovered what works for you, seek out advice and resources specifically geared toward your experiences. Remember, “comparison is the thief of joy.” If it is something you can do yourself, try to identify the supports and resources you need. If not, try to source help from a parent, carer, the **Neurodiversity Ireland website**, and/or a professional to support you with this. Some helpful resources which can be arranged include extra time in exams, assistive technologies, readers, scribes, and even noise reduction earphones for exam rooms or other rooms you may use. Practise Stim. **Stimming** is not a shameful activity and it can be helpful for anyone who seeks to regulate their emotions (find out more about stimming here: **Understanding Stimming**).



Advocate for yourself and for others who may not be “there” yet. Discourse and literature surrounding neurodiversity is often dominated by notions of disability, deficit, lack, vulnerability, and social expectancies around achievement in education. When students identify neurodiversity as a limitation, it becomes a barrier to successful learning and has a negative effect on their identity, which impacts them socially and academically. However, an easier pathway to success in your studies can be achieved when you view neurodiversity as a difference as opposed to a deficit and study through a Neurodiverse Approach. Examples of this can be found in my research: ***Experiencing Dyslexia Through the Prism of Difference***. Schools, universities, and employers are required to offer additional supports and resources to people who are neurodiverse. If you are unsure, but feel that you should be able to access additional supports, you can find more information at this **Citizens Information link** as well as the Neurodiversity Ireland website previously mentioned. Whenever I think of supports, I think engage, engage, engage! Although this type of engagement involves disclosure,

I would encourage everyone to disclose their neurodiverse difference so long as it can be disclosed in a safe environment.

Neurodiverse people live in a world that is not always designed for them, which can generate a lot of struggles that are unique to them. This often centres around cultural perceptions and prejudices that being neurodiverse is “bad.” However, neurodiversity should be thought of in the same manner that all cultural diversities and differences are. Be kind to yourself! In those moments when the society we live in is not accommodating you, remember how brilliant you are doing. The idea of neurodiversity is now embraced across the world and the term is used as means of empowerment and to promote the positive qualities possessed by those with a neurobiological difference.

FIGURE 2

True cultural transformation requires organizations to move from exclusion to belonging²⁶



Source: Deloitte analysis.

Deloitte Insights | deloitte.com/insights

What Can be Done to Help?

The implementation of a state-wide awareness and educational campaign around neurodiversity and inclusiveness would greatly benefit our society. People working and volunteering in the neurodiverse sector need to be given continuous professional development on neurodiverse differences. This should include what neurodiverse differences are, what they are not, how these differences affect a student's educational experience, and what can be done to develop more inclusive classroom settings. The need for additional funding is a

must. Only through adequate investment in training and in the latest technologies can we create a more inclusive and neurodiverse environment, which will enhance ALL student's educational journey. See and learn about my own journey of studying with a neurodiverse difference (**Dyslexia**) here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icwoIYxLDLo>

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of the Museum of Childhood Ireland.



Dr Keith Murphy is a lecturer at the Department of Humanities in **Technological University Dublin**. He teaches on their Applied Social

Care degree programme and supervises postgraduate research students. Keith's interdisciplinary research interests span the fields of education, anthropology, and neurodiversity. He is an advocate for students in higher education who identify as neurodivergent. Prior to teaching at TU Dublin, Keith completed a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Sean Gaelige, a Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education, a Master's degree in Education, and a PhD in Anthropology at **Maynooth University**. His PhD thesis, "Experiencing Dyslexia Through the Prism of Difference," explores how dyslexia impacts students' experiences at third level.

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