Neurodiversity: the new ‘normal’

There are many types of flowers. Daffodils, roses, lilies, daisies, orchids – all different and all beautiful. We do not consider any one type of flower superior to any other. We do not try to make the rose more daffodil-like because we consider daffodils the best sort of flower. Flowers are not expected to be the same; this natural variation is accepted and celebrated as part of biodiversity.

There are different types of everything – flowers, trees, birds, rocks – and, of course, people. One specific aspect of human diversity is neurodiversity, or the diversity of ways in which humans think, learn and relate to others. Some estimates suggest that around 20% of the population could be neurodivergent in one way or another.

Unfortunately, this natural diversity of cognitive functioning is not yet recognised by our education and other systems. Some ways of being (such as those labelled with dyslexia, ADHD or autism) are currently considered ‘inferior’. They are not yet seen as a natural aspect of human variation to be accepted and expected.

Despite huge advances in our understanding of autism and other neurodivergent conditions, it is still the medical model of disability which dominates in schools. We diagnose, giving pupils labels of ‘disorders’ and ‘deficits’, implying they are in some way inferior to their peers. We recognise that different flowers need different environments to thrive – some need sun, others shade, some flourish in sandy soil, others in chalky ground – yet assume all young people will benefit from the same environment and inputs.

Why we need a neurodiversity model

Having worked in several roles within the education system over the past decade, I am a firm advocate that adopting the neurodiversity paradigm brings innumerable benefits to all.

At present, many mainstream staff feel overwhelmed by the range of needs in their class, believing they need to do something wildly different for each child. I often hear statements such
as, ‘I’ve got one with ADHD, one with ASC, one with dyslexia and one with dyspraxia – how am I meant to teach all of them with 30 others to consider’.

Many mainstream teachers still believe that the SENCO or teaching assistant is responsible for meeting the needs of students with identified SEN, as these pupils require something ‘different’ that they have not been trained to teach.

Focussing too much on labels and diagnoses leads to assumptions and stereotyping. Staff might expect certain differences and difficulties, without getting to know the individuals.

Focussing only on those with identified SEN ignores the many others who also function differently but who do not quite meet the criteria for a diagnosis, or who on the surface appear to be ‘coping’ due to their ability to mask, copy or follow others.

Supporting neurodiversity

Implementing the neurodiversity paradigm in an educational setting simply means viewing things from a different perspective. It is about realising differences in brain function are a normal and natural aspect of human variation to be expected and accepted. It is about anticipating and preparing for a neurodiverse student population even before pupils set foot through the door.

Examples of this approach include:

- making available for all a range of resources and equipment such as pencil grips, phonetic dictionaries and helpful software - those who do not need them will not use them but being available for all reduces stigma
- producing written materials and signage which is clear, unambiguous and illustrated with helpful visuals
- having a clutter-free environment free of auditory and visual distractions
- ensuring all staff communicate clearly and consistently, allowing additional processing time and different ways of responding
- giving all students the opportunity to work in quiet areas when needed and to spend social times in quieter areas when required
- recognising that there are different – but equally valid – ways of doing things, and promoting acceptance of individuality and difference within the classroom
- having policies and practices which do not discriminate or place neurodivergent students at a disadvantage.

These changes at a whole-school level (which are just as relevant to secondary schools as well as primary schools) will benefit a large proportion of the student population while disadvantaging nobody. Preparing for difference reduces staff stress and workload.
Of course, a small minority of pupils will need additional, highly specialised support, but from my experiences there are many needs which could be met effectively simply by changing the environment, policies and practices within the mainstream classroom.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of adopting the neurodiversity paradigm is that it encourages more helpful and accepting attitudes towards neurodivergent individuals and in society in general. Simply accepting that it is normal to be different can go a long way in increasing self-esteem, confidence and achievement in individuals.

References