

Mark Le Messurier's KEYNOTE SPEECH (July 2023) for Inclusive Education Workshop, Adelaide – *Special Education Resource Unit (SERU)*

TOPIC - The liberation of NEURODIVERSITY in schools

"The agitation between ethics and realities"

Good afternoon! Thank you for being with me at this Keynote. Thank you to SERU for all you do! The contents of this workshop comes from my heart, my clients and from my newest books on screen.

Before moving on I have a special mention. Em Mainey is the person behind the Facebook page, NeuroWild. She is an American speech pathologist, artist, and passionate neurodivergent advocate. As well, she is a mum to three Autistic children. Her gift is the clever way she combines her art, neurodiversity-affirming attitudes, and comments that challenge as infographics. Em has given me permission to use her work with you today. I'm so grateful. I know that you'll be inspired by what she does, and the visuals will deliver a host of every day, practical tips too! Also feel free to photograph any that really resonate with you.

Understandings about the neurodivergent world are changing at light speed in the community, and subsequently in schools. These days, we are all appreciating that many of our colleagues, parents, and students, are neurodivergent. Yet, we're at an awkward crossroads in education. Are you aware that the number of SA neurodivergent students, sent home, suspended, or moved on from schools last year were vastly overrepresented? Right alongside them were students with disability, with challenging behaviours and those experiencing disadvantage.

We know this highlights a struggle educators have with our most vulnerable group in schools. The truth is, most educators are good people, want to be inclusive and want to offer children hope and futures. A big part of this difficulty are the funding models. For a school to gain a few more resources and options to support students, educators are made to jump through time-consuming and hard-to-navigate administrative hoops. And, even when funding is achieved, it is often short-term, conditional and difficult to reestablish. One of my friends, recently wrote to me. –

"Mark, additional funding is the only hope for this boy, but the way the Department's application is structured it will take an educator at 20 hours to do this. There will be no guarantee of funding after they spend that 20 hours. They will also require a functional behavioural analysis from a psychologist. This is expensive as it will take another 20 hours to prepare, and likely yield information we already have. And, the Department wants this to be done on top of an educator's normal workload. It is not doable, but educators and leaders keep doing it because they want the best for kids. "

Funding is defended by bureaucrats protecting the system. They are not bad people, but their job is different to ours. They do not view a student's needs in the personal way we do. And, this is THE hot and messy, reality that is often glossed over.

And, I cannot overlook it. To do so would mislead you and disrespect our most vulnerable students. Each of us in this room knows until there is a helpful change in the way funding is accessed there will be a continuing tension between 'the rights of a student to be included' and the 'practicalities of being included'.

Recently, I met with 'The Assistant Minister for Autism', Emily Bourke. I was so impressed. She has a full heart and is driven to improve the wellbeing of those with Autism, difference, and disability in schools and in the

community. Emily knows there are too many barriers, that prevent the accomplishments of neurodivergent young people. And such barriers are sure triggers for mental health difficulties too.

If you come across an unnecessary barrier in school, or in the community, and it needs correcting, share it with Emily. Direct families to her as well. She wants you to send our stories - the good, the bad, the ugly - so she can better understand. If she knows she can act for you and make changes. You know, this is a world first so be part of it! I recently wrote to Emily when I discovered that if a person has a diagnosis of Autism or ADHD, they are secretly disqualified from being able to join the SA Police or the Australian Armed Forces. That's a basic discrimination. Wouldn't you think people would be chosen on their qualities, assets, experience and personal potentials? This is just one discrepancy between what's right and what happens in the wider community.

Today, science and the neurodiversity movement are revolutionising the way we think about, discuss and offer supports to people on the ever-expanding spectrum. Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, coined the term neurodiversity in 1998. She was an early campaigner for equality and inclusion. It is quite a surprise to some when they hear that we now describe conditions as - ADHD, Autism, PTSD, anxiety, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, intellectual disability, tic disorders, including Tourette's syndrome, and more, under the neurodivergent umbrella. We now know that their emotional and behavioural differences are the DIRECT RESULT of 'physical differences' in brain structures.

Interestingly, we'd never say to each other, "Hey? How neurotypical are you?" Yet my Autistic clients are often asked, "How Autistic are you - level 1, 2 or 3?" They don't like it and nor should they. Mind you, they often say, kinda tongue in cheek, ...

"Mark, those neurotypicals? They're obsessed with eye contact. With an endless need for small talk to fill in the silences. And what about their verbal drive to make sense of the emotional world and abandon perfectly good logic!! And because of this, we must make huge allowances so they can fit in with us!"

We must be hugely sensitive when applying the descriptors 'neurotypical' and 'neurodiverse' because they inherently set us apart. They can oppose inclusion and worth. Many say, we are all neurodiverse. Probably. Many say that we all sit on some kind of gigantic multi-dimensional neurodiverse spectrum. Probably. There's no doubt, each of us is unique with distinctive combinations of abilities, needs, strengths and challenges. BUT ... yes, you knew a BUT was coming ... and it's an important BUT. BUT ... we are not all neurodivergent or disabled. As well ... being neurodivergent is not the same as having a disability, but disability is linked to neurodivergence. A disability is recognised when a person has persistent difficulties, or limitations, to do what most others take for granted. It must be also understood, that for many, being neurodivergent and/or disabled can become their core identity. It becomes the essence of who they are – because every element of their lives is affected by their unique neurology.

Embracing neurodiversity means stretching our thinking beyond medical definitions to recognising the whole person. So increasingly in the autistic community, many prefer using the terms 'autism' or 'autistic' and never referred to as ASD. This is because the 'D' in ASD stands for 'Disorder'. It is not neuroaffirming language. Personally, I think so many of the neurodivergent young people I work with have enough to deal with, without being referred to as disordered. Many also prefer the use of identify-first language. This means we'd say – "Autistic person" rather than "A person with Autism". Just as we'd say, "Deaf person" rather than "A person who is deaf". Why? Because by placing the noun first we proudly emphasize the value of the person. Personally, I think that rather than making assumptions, it's best to ask the individual about the language they prefer. It a good conversation starter and clearly shows your sensitivity and willingness to connect.

So, parts of a neurodivergent brain look different because the brain is built and wired-up differently. And because of this, a neurodivergent has an operating system that is a variation of the human rhythm. It's like being a fabulous Mac living in a PC world. There's nothing wrong. Just different; and this style brings strengths, and challenges too!

I only have time to introduce 3 people whose contributions to neurodiversity are remarkable. First up is Hans Asperger. Hans was an Austrian physician. In 1944, his landmark paper described Autism in children. He wrote more than 300 publications. He also recognized the upsides to Autism. He wrote, "... not everything that steps out of line, and is thus different, must necessarily be inferior. In fact, because of their divergent ways of thinking and experiencing the world autistic people can accomplish great things." His work in Autism was ground-breaking.

Years later, in 1981, this wonderful woman - Lorna Wing built on his Hans's work. She was a psychiatrist and pioneer in the field and advanced the understanding of Autism worldwide. She proposed the condition we used to refer to as Asperger's syndrome in 1976. At the time she identified a group of children with milder Autistic traits who, with skill building through early interventions, grew into adults that had, full, rich and independent lives. Today people are identified, medically, as levels 1, 2 or 3 on the AUTISM SPECTRUM with level 3 showing the strongest traits.

Finally, here's psychologist, Tony Atwood. He lives in Queensland, and is an Associate Professor at Griffith University. His career spans five decades. He truly is a world's expert on Autism. But the real honor is that his work has helped every single Australian – parents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, educators and allied health professionals - to understand and appreciate a condition that was once veiled in mystery and ignorance. He continues to lecture, make podcasts and do interviews to take the unnecessary mystery away from Autism.

I have some FAST AUTISM FACTS for you. Officially, about 1 in every 150 Australians have Autism. Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) has revised its autism prevalence rates to 1 in 70 people. However, many are saying Autism is likely running at 1 in 44 people. That equates to about 2 Autistics in each Australian classroom. One thing is for sure, more children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes, and cancer combined.

Autism is a co-occurring condition. This means, up to 70% of Autistics also have at least one other condition. As educators, this creates two challenges. First, is to ensure a young person is identified as Autistic when you feel they should be. Yes, I know, that can be problematic! Secondly is to make sure any co-occurring conditions are identified as well as the Autism. And, to make matters more complex, some of the co-occurring conditions do not appear until later in adolescence. So, just when you think you've got it all nailed down, it can get more complex.

We think that about 60% of children with Autism also have anxiety. Yet, in the neurotypical population anxiety runs at about 25%. Some say, there's been a 20% increase in anxiety in both populations since the beginning of COVID.

About three quarters of those identified with Autism have the co-occurring condition of ADHD or ADD. In the neurotypical population ADHD or ADD, or both, run between 8 to 10%. The Principal Audiologist of 'Little Ears,' says close to 40% of their clients with Autism also meet the criteria for Auditory Processing Disorder. Yet, in the general population only 5% of children meet the criteria for APD.

The - 4:1 ratio - is another fact. The 4:1 male to female ratio is one of the most consistent findings in Autism. Similarly, the 4:1 male to female ratio is also a consistent finding in ADHD. Boys always win!

Autism has no single known cause. Given its complexity, there are probably many causes. We understand that both genetics and environment play roles. It tends to, but not exclusively, run in families. One of the most stabilising things kids need is a blueprint to work from. Let me explain. There's Beth and she's an Autistic mum. Beth describes herself as being the 'black sheep' of the family always dressed in a snazzy zebra costume! At 34 years of age Beth and her 9-year-old daughter were both identified with Autism! Her daughter's comment was, "If you can do this mum so can I." They threw a PARTY, well, as much as a 'party' as they could

handle with sensory issues and food intolerances – so they ate cake and watched a movie! Beth's daughter described the feeling as though she could finally breathe and breathe with her mum.

We also know that if you have Autism, you're more likely to get totally, absorbed in stuff. Totally passionate about stuff! Life generates an all-or-nothing style: something is either 'absolutely not interesting and you can't make me do it' or 'absolutely fascinating and you can't stop me from doing it'. Special interests can range from the quirky, to the bizarre, to the marvellous. While some obsessions can push the balance of life right out of whack, we also appreciate the comfort, relief, escape, pleasure or a sense of authority they provide. And, who knows, it may lead them to wonderful things in the future!

Another fact is the different literal, perspective neurodivergence can bring. I have two delightful Autistic insights through a client of mine, Tom. The first one happened when he was in year 7. He told me there was NO WAY he was going on the school camp and thrust the glossy camps brochure at me. Then he snatched it back. 'I'll read it to you,' he said. He read the offending part, "This resilience building camp boasts a range of activities that will change you forever." He stopped and threw the brochure down in disgust. He looked at me and said, "How dare they. I don't want to be changed forever. I like who I am. How arrogant to take people away and change them. I'm not going!"

Then, in year 8, he refused point blank to participate in a maths test. I asked him why and he said, "It's my teacher, and what he said. Two days ago, he had the whole class made 'cheat sheets' ready to use them in the test. How bad is this? The teacher is helping everyone to pass the test by making them cheat off sheets with the maths formulas on them? I'm not doing it. I won't do that test. I'm not going to cheat." We sorted it. Needless to say, we started to refer to them as 'formula sheets.'

My final fact for now, and it's worth knowing to deepen your awareness and sensitivity. It is that people who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are 5 times likely to be Autistic. Gender-diverse people are far more likely to report they are Autistic, or suspect they have undiagnosed Autism.

This is the time to raise parents' anxieties about their child being "different." Each of us dream for our children to grow up, feeling comfortable with who they are, to be accepted by others and to live a life without limitations or barriers. A long time ago Emily Pearl Kingsley wrote 'Welcome to Holland'. Emily never imagined how iconic her piece of writing would become. It has won multiple awards and draws us together, to appreciate the anxiety, surprise, grief, and trek to acceptance that confronts every parent raising a child with beautiful diversity. I'd like to read it in the hope it deepens the connections you forge with parents, friends and perhaps within your own family.

"Well, it's like this..... When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to ITALY. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. The Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. You may begin to learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all so very exciting! After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go.

Hours and hours later, the plane lands and the flight attendant announces your arrival - "Welcome to Holland".

"Holland?!?" you say. "What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to ITALY."

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a terrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy BRAND NEW guide books.

And you must learn an ENTIRELY NEW language. And, of course you will meet a WHOLE NEW group of people you would never have met.

Holland, well, it's just a different place. It's slower-paced than ITALY, less flashy than ITALY. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around.... and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills....and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

*But everyone you know is busy coming and going from ITALY... and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there, and the things their family got up to. And, for the rest of your life, you will say "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned."
And the pain of that will never, ever, ever, ever go away... because the loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss.*

But... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to ITALY, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... all about Holland.

Emily Pearl Kingsley

That can be tough to sit through! I'm sorry if it was. It touches each of us in a different and tender way.

Welcome to Holland reminds me of so many of the families I work with. The challenges of raising a neurodivergent child cannot be overlooked and is a frequent trigger for relationship break downs. And, this isn't confined to couples, but includes the loss of extended family leaving parents isolated from the very people they most need.

Deb is now a single mum. She's 40 and has 3 kids - 2 are neurodivergent. She has had to develop THAT new guidebook - different priorities and different options to manage her children's emotions, sensory issues and emotional regulation.

She says, "Then there's the cooking. The demand for food to be cooked and presented in a specialised way. Sometimes cooking a meal more than once because, for some reason, it couldn't be accepted the first time. I love our life but it's not the family I had in mind when I started out. The way people look at us sometimes, as if to say, "I wouldn't put up with that! If only you parented better. To be honest, I probably thought that before I began this journey. What I've learnt is that nurturing their emerging self and keeping that separate from their wobbly emotion and behaviours is everything."

As I mentioned earlier, the medicalising of these conditions – words such as disability, disorder, syndrome, and deficit - have long negatively influenced community attitudes too. I can explain with a recent example ... Last year, as a South Australian of the Year. I spoke to many, many year 9, 10, 11 and 12 students on several SA Australia Day Tours ... No easy feat. You're much easier to be with.

So, I was in Pt. Pirie talking about Autism. I said ... I'm so sorry the term ASD (AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER) has got the shameful word 'disorder' in it. Autistics are not disordered. Not less. If you are Autistic, you are perfect as you are. Be proud of who you are. My call is to value the idea of neurodiversity so you, your friend, or someone you know can grow into it and feel proud about the way it is.

Then it happened ... Afterwards ... A Year 10 student came up to me with 3 friends in tow. She explained her revelation. She was certain she was Autistic and was being supported by her parents and a psychologist. But she had been refusing to complete an assessment because of the shame of feeling LESS identification would cause for her. Now she's heading off with all guns blazing knowing she is wonderful just the way she is.

By the way - as it turns out, I have ADHD. I don't see myself as deficit or disordered. But I was not a good fit at school. I was a gorgeous academic failure. Couldn't string two words together on a page because I couldn't sit long enough. Never passed out of high school. My degrees and 16 books came much later when I could keep my 'bum on a seat'.

We need to help each other shake off thinking from a 'deficit' viewpoint, and work from a healthier strength-based model. Yes, early intervention is invaluable. But an overfocus on shortcomings, deficits and topping up deficiencies is an ill-conceived and unhealthy approach. Experience teaches us that a strengths-based approach is best. We have learnt that time, growth, maturation, some targeted skill building, all wrapped in loving connectedness are the primary collaborators to leading a life with meaning and purpose.

So, there are two facts to take away. The first is that our neurodivergent kids are not broken, not deficit, not disordered, and do not need to be fixed up. They simply walk to the beat of another drum.

The second is they always will walk to the beat of THAT different drum. They will grow up to be adults with Autism, or ADHD, or Tourette's, or LD's or whatever. Please, let's value neurodivergence so our kids can grow into it with pride. Without our acceptance and positivity about their diversity, they cannot grow into their uniqueness with pride. A simple way to do this is to enjoy and discuss the pleasure of their quirks, talents and interests with them, while supporting them to overcome barriers and challenges.

As humans, we're wired to connect. In fact, our mental health depends on it. As well, connection can happen in all sorts of ways. Yet so many of the children, teens and young adults I work with share how desperately they want connections but are rubbish at initiating and sustaining them.

This is what inspired the writing of 'What's the Buzz?' – our friendship /social skills program. We are so proud of it. And, Em's right, Teaching 'Social skills' SHOULD have nothing to do with teaching all kids how to be BEAVERS. We never dreamt that 12 years later 'What's the Buzz?' would grow into 3 programs, be backed by independent clinical research, positioned in 140 countries and in several languages, and become the gold-standard in teaching Social and Emotional Literacy.

Every so often we're asked to explain how 'What's the Buzz?' is neuroaffirming? Does it respect differences in individual's abilities and how they interact with the world around them? Might it inadvertently encourage 'masking' and 'ableism'? These are important questions to be asked in everything we do in private practice, in schools and in the community. 'What's the Buzz?' embraces that all human beings experience the social and emotional world differently, and because of this, have the right to express their feelings and actions in their own, compassionate, way. We also coach that it is perfect to show emotions, in ways that are true to one's self. After all, our incredible uniqueness brings refreshing and creative perspectives to every social interaction.

Yes, we are teaching the 'social and emotional code' - a favoured system for communication, but increasingly we must acknowledge it is not the only system, and nor are we expecting anyone to strictly adhere to it. On this, there is a clear difference between respectfully perspectives around the 'social and emotional code' and 'forcing' a young person to have their Autistic identity suppressed. As well, many young people, including many Autistics, want to understand the 'social and emotional code' so they have the option to use what neurotypicals access. More than anything this is about choice, authenticity, and upskilling.

We deeply understand the notion of 'masking' and 'ableism' where a person (especially an Autistic person) can be made to feel less, or vulnerable, and intimidated by not being true to themselves. More on 'masking' and 'ableism' a little later. Our goal in 'What's the Buzz?' is to show there are 100's of social and emotional issues that crop up in life, and there are 100's of ways to work assertively, and kindly, with them, and sometimes solve them. No one prescriptive way is the way.

I should share a little about the WTB groups we run at Wayville. We have a huge BEAVER population! We run 16 groups of 10 kids, teens and adults each week. We start children at 5 years, and they do WTB 5, 6, 7 times and more. Our oldest groups are in their mid-20's, and they have taught us something I must share with you. Initially, I held a view that my job as an educator was to teach kids new skills and, then let them fly solo. That certainly works for some. But, I've learnt there remains a large cohort of young people, especially those neurodivergent thinkers, that need and thrive on the continuity of a safe, welcoming and structured group. Without the opportunity to come along each week to connect and share with the other BEAVERS and SQUIRRELS, they would not be connecting. They'll tell you - they'd be at home, probably in their bedrooms, and most certainly feeling lonely – even sad or depressed.

In this safe setting they often want to compare their thoughts and feelings with others. They'll say, "Just want to check if this is normal!" And, you'd be amazed by the affection in their sharing. A few weeks ago, someone asked, "Hey? Has anyone else here got Autism?" Plenty of hands went up and a positively encouraging discussion about Autism followed. And by the way, where else do you get such quality conversations? The next moment another called out, "So does that make you a single A battery?" "What do you mean?" was the reply. "Well, Autism is a single A. I have Autism and ADHD, so I'm an AA battery." Within a heartbeat another group member chipped in, saying, "Then, I'm a AAA because I've got Autism, ADHD and Anxiety!"

Please – never forget just how vital it is to HOLD a safe, place where children and teens can breathe and have fun together, while they learn. Wonderfully, an increasing number of schools are arranging diversity groups. The quotes below come from a group of 10-year-old boys as they finished up in their group late last year.

"Thanks for liking me for who I am. I didn't have to pretend. You just liked me!"

"I hate doing stuff after school. Mum made me do this. I've told her I want to come back."

"This is the first time I've ever felt part of a group. Thanks for your friendship."

"You have all been so friendly to me but not just in here – before the group starts and after."

"Tuesday has been my best day of the week because of you. Thank you for being my friends."

To me, these quotes affirm diversity, difference, acceptance, and connection – the very spirit of everything we do in every situation. Yes, we see so many kids and young people who feel different for all the wrong reasons. Feeling like this is a certain trigger for mental health difficulties, and this was our motivation to develop 'What's the Buzz?' Knowing how to create friendship and good connections are a vital protective factor against these dark forces. Yes, finding one's tribe, or knowing how to find it, is literally lifesaving. And, this is a reminder that nurturing diversity and celebrating connectedness must take centre stage in everything we do with children – in music, in maths, in PE, in class assemblies, in sports teams – everywhere.

I promised I'd touch on Autism masking, so here goes. This is when an Autistic person feels they must suppress a 'natural Autism-related behaviour', and replace it with a socially expected behaviour, to fit in. There is the temptation here for an unaware neurotypical to say, "Oh, come on! What's the big deal? We all mask to some degree. It's how we get by!" Yes, that's true. We all mask by making small adjustments that help us fit in better or adapt to the circumstance at hand. But when an Autistic masks, it calls for a monumental and disproportionate effort. The cost being - exhaustion, anxiety, confusion about one's own identity, depression and an increased risk of suicidal thoughts. The process of learning and applying social skills, particularly for an Autistic person is nowhere as easy, or as natural, as it is for the average neurotypical (that's if such a beast exists – but you know what I mean). We must be sensitive to this fact.

Let me explain with my client, BJ. He's in year 8 this year;

BJ, is overwhelmed by having to make eye contact with others in conversation. He knows it's a big thing that shows respect and connection. His kind parents and teachers have insisted he does it over the last 12 years because it is what is expected. He tries, but it turns into a distressing hardship where he looks at the floor or the ceiling while his eyes water. He would do it, if he could. He can't. But, from a place of love, he's been pressured to mimic a non-verbal behaviour because it is customary.

And, here sits our new learning.

A better and more respectful approach is to understand the utter intimidation BJ feels when having to make eye-contact. Then, to give him the freedom not to do eye contact when he feels he can't. BJ is a beautiful, kindhearted person. He would do eye-contact if he could!

This is from Michael who's 43 years young;

"I've learnt to copy socially successful people. These days, during introductions, at functions and in meetings, I imitate the speech and body language that will help others see me in a favourable light. Want to know the truth? I do it really well. I run a hugely successful, NATIONAL IT business and take time out after such events to recover from exhaustion and feeling like a fraud."

This one happened last Monday! Richard who is 12 was, as usual, effervescent, and pacing my room as he debriefed about the last 2 weeks of school. He is beautifully neurodivergent (Autistic and ADHD) and is led by his warm heart, intelligence and enthusiasm for learning – and for life!

"How's it going with your teacher," Richard? I asked.

"She doesn't get me. You know what I'm like. I'll call out when she asks a question because I get so excited about learning. But, she doesn't like it. So, when I call out, she uses her disapproving face. She stops and stares at me. Everyone else stops and stares at me too. Once she's finished her stare, she continues and excludes me. She treats me like her puppy. She thinks if she doesn't reward my calling out, I'll stop doing it. She has no idea how many times I stop myself from calling out! I'm not trying to upset her. I like her."

This case study is from Mel, who's 35. You'll enjoy this! She writes -

"A few years ago, I watched my sister-in-law give her mother a bunch of flowers. I had never done this. Honestly, my thinking was, why spend so much money on something that will die and give you awful hay fever while dying? But I witnessed my mother-in-law's pure joy! In that moment I learnt. Since then, I bring her a bunch of flowers each time we visit, because she loves them, and me, for it. I even arrange them in a vase for her despite having a panic attack over choosing the most appropriate bunch each time. Life would be easier without these bloody flowers."

What about 11-year-old, Ella?

She is kind, friendly and calming to be around and has steadiness and wisdom beyond her years. As an Autistic, she has always been hugely noise sensitive. For the first 5 years of school, every week, she endured overwhelming and hectic noise in the gymnasium during her PE Lessons. It was unbearable but she masked up and persevered to fit in and be compliant. She spent a lot of the lesson with hands on ears and would meltdown once she arrived home. By year 4, the principal – against her better judgement - "allowed" Ella to wear ear defenders. Her better judgement was for Ella to get used to the noise because that's what happens in the real world with real people. Her ear defenders helped, but she didn't like looking different. Then, in year 6 a new PE teacher arrived. She found the noise in the gym intolerable and called it an unsafe work environment.

She shared the problem with students, staff and parents. Ella felt, for the first time, she could share her noise problem with this teacher. The PE teacher made it clear that the problem was big for Ella, for her and for everyone. She also acknowledged the depth of Ella's distress. Subsequently, she bought enough ear defenders for everyone, in every lesson, including herself.

While on PE. I have too many Autistic clients, usually boys, who are crushed by having to take their school uniforms off, and be semi-naked, in front of peers as they change into their PE uniform. Many mask because getting an exemption feels too hard – there will be discussions, judgements and justifications that trigger their inadequacy. So, they get changed in change rooms that do not offer adequate privacy and are hardly supervised. They are so embarrassed and uncomfortable that they become obvious targets. As we know, there are such simple solutions to this, to PA systems blasting memos and music into classrooms, to noisy assemblies, sports days and so on. There are always solutions when we choose to look for them!

Meet my client and friend, Dylan. He's 16, bright, fabulous at science, dislikes English and especially poetry. He's Autistic and hates anyone referring to it as his 'SUPERPOWER'. His teachers often talk about the gap between his beautiful intellect and low academic output. They forget the impact of his dysgraphia because it's kind of invisible. Dylan does not have the same communication and social skills as his peers, and because he presents so well, it's easy to forget this. Everything he does is harder. With great effort he can learn anything, but it is hard to make THAT LEARNING into a generalised skill ready to apply next time. So, what Dylan learns today in this lesson is not be easily retrieved in your lesson tomorrow, or next week.

To illustrate the EVERYDAY STRESS of his brain having to deal with a neurotypical world, Dylan has a brief activity for you. He wants you to copy the 3 sentences on screen on to a sheet of paper. Could you grab a pen and a sheet of paper to write on? Dylan wants to show you what being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world feels like. He wants you to follow a new set of rules. The new rules are on screen. As you copy the paragraph substitute *each vowel with an @ sign* Are you ready? Start now! You have 60 seconds. Go, go, go! After 60 seconds STOP.

Well, what feelings did you experience? Was there any frustration, annoyance, distress or anxiety? I'm sure there was. Please bank those annoyed, anxious, stressed or frustrated feelings away so you can identify with the day-to-day struggle neurodivergent students face simply because their learning style and processing is different. As you know, they can't change this as it is a consequence of their brains being built differently. Dylan, and the previous examples, highlight what masking and ableism can feel like. It is very much a new awareness that is emerging. Together, let's keep this kind of conversation going and spread awareness.

Today we would never think a dyslexic student was being uncooperative if they refused to read out loud in front of the class. Our learning and empathy helps us to understand THAT in a heartbeat! This sort of barrier was gently removed for dyslexics years ago. The truth is, neurodivergent children, especially Autistics, face such barriers, in classrooms and schools every day. And when challenged by a frustrated or overwhelmed neurodivergent child it is too easy for a teacher to think, or say;

- *"You will do it. Everybody else is."*
- *"No. You can take a sensory break after you finish."*
- *"No. You can't have a break because I don't believe in them."*
- *"Well, you need to make a choice. It's maths now or maths at recess."*
- *'You're a year 9 student! Don't be ridiculous!'*

What about the educator who made the terrified 15-year-old - with a pigeon phobia - help her scare the pigeons away? When questioned later, she sincerely believed that flooding senses fixes phobias in Autistics, and that was her role?

- *"Doing this maths is about having a resilient mindset. I can't make allowances for you"*
- *"You might not feel like doing the maths, but in real life you'll have to do things you don't want to do."*

- *“One day, when you get a job, you’ll have to do what you’re told.”*

Forcing students, neurodiverse or otherwise, will not help their esteem, growth or academic outcomes . It harms.

- *Or a school report that says – ‘Tommy strives to present his written efforts legibly however this remains an area to improve.’ Yet, 10-year-old Tommy who is Autistic, dysgraphic and has hypermobile joints is doing his best. Little wonder why Tommy feels shortchanged.*

And, don’t forget this one. I hear it all the time in my work ...

“The measure of success, according to the Department’s bureaucrats, is for a child to attend school FULL-time” Full-Time school is not THE measure of success, in my humble opinion. THE measure of success is when we engineer conditions at school, whether they be part-time or full-time, where a child can make connections, learn and thrive. So many of my clients are doing just that and will never be able to cope with harsh reality of full-time school.”

How do we sort through such negative, ignorant and damaging mindsets? It starts with us realizing that what a child does in a tricky moment, does not define them or their future. It starts with us growing an awareness, so we really do know what’s outdated and what constitutes progressive thinking.

As I start to wrap up, I want to pose a question. Why does a tension exist between truly ethical considerations for neurodivergent students, and what currently occurs in day-to-day practice? To answer this, let me return to where we started. Most educators are good, well-intentioned people, who want to be inclusive and offer children hope. However, unsupported teachers and leaders can only do so much. And frequently, their unsupported effort comes at a huge cost to their health.

As you know, I mentor many educators. So often they are tired, overwhelmed, and burnt-out. Without exception, these good, good people tell their version of the same old story...

- *Having him in my class changed everything.*
- *I needed support never came. The experience smashed me and the class I had hoped to create. I felt like an epic fail.*
- *Sometimes I wished his family would withdraw him from school.*
- *I dreaded getting out of bed each morning to face the day in my classroom with too little help.*
- *I hated myself for this – but prayed he’d be sick, so I’d have respite.*

While funding is one aspect to this equation there is another part that is deeply personal. As a father with an Autistic daughter, and 2 Autistic grandchildren, I’ll be brave and raise it. How do you feel about neurodivergence, particularly AUTISM? I’m not asking for your politically correct response. I’m speaking to your inner self. How you feel about this kind of difference deep inside? After all, the early years are often characterized by an emotionally messy and challenging experience for everyone, no matter how many clever people continue to popularize it. So, Autism becomes a distinctly different experience for each of us.

The truth is, our reactions to it, our discomfort about it, or ease with it has a lot more to do with our own attitudes and values, than with Autism itself.

- *Do you embrace it?*
- *Do you see it as a variation of the human condition?*
- *Or do you see it as a blight you must somehow endure?*
- *Are you fearful of it?*
- *Are you accepting of it?*

More to the point – can you grow, and be a positive force of their lives?

I hold great hope for the expansion of neurodiversity in our schools. Yes! There is a tension between our desires, and the consistency of what's currently happening on the ground. Yes! We are caught up in a liberation! And, thanks to the neurodiverse movement and sensitive souls like yourselves there's no going back!

And while on you – never underestimate what you do. Even if you are constrained. You already reach incredible goals with young people and their parents - just quietly - each day without fanfare. This is an educator's lot. You deftly guide young people towards realising seemingly simple goals that can make a huge difference in their lives. Sometimes it's helping someone to believe that they are 'good enough'. You turn up each day with THAT smile on your face. You switch on your kindness and emotional steadiness for everyone, even when you're not steady yourself. But you know a POWERFUL secret. It is that many of your students (and their parents) require much more than your TEACHING. They thrive on YOU, because the level of emotional comfort you offer can be a rarity in their lives.

The real spirit of the session has been to strengthen a neuro-affirming place in your heart. My goal has been to touch you personally. I hope the session has been honest, left you encouraged, and touched on a few of the unfair, and unnecessary, barriers you and our neurodivergent young people face. My hope is in education. Education opens the way to acceptance, and where we can embrace differences as a beautiful variation in the wondrous human experience.

When this happens, we'll give neurodivergent children the best opportunity to grow into their uniqueness with pride.

Thanks, for being with me and for being part of this very necessary ripple effect!