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# ***Neurodiversity Acceptance and Affirmation in the Classroom***

Sue Fletcher-Watson

*Learnus Annual Lecture, November 2022*

<https://medium.com/@suefletcherwatson/conflicts-of-interest-47a89a0c8e52>

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@SMRCResearch



**Autistic mentors & APOs:** Kabie Brook, Fergus Murray, Autism Rights Group Highland, Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh, Participatory Autism Research Collective, University of Glasgow Neurodiversity Network.

**Diversity in Social Intelligence:** Catherine Crompton, Sonny Hallett, Emma Flynn, Dani Ropar, Noah Sasson, Claire Evans-Williams, Harriet Axbey.

**LEANS:** Alyssa Alcorn, Dinah Aitken, Sarah McGeown, Will Mandy, Fergus Murray, Liam Peacock

**Neurodiversity Alliance:** Francesca Fotheringham, Catherine Crompton, Katie Cebula, Karen Goodall, Sonny Hallett, Harriet Axbey



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# Outline

## The status quo

- Core Deficit theories
- School inclusion

## Neurodiversity

- What is it?
- The neurodiversity paradigm
- Addressing common myths

## A neurodiversity-affirmative school

## Applying the paradigm in practice



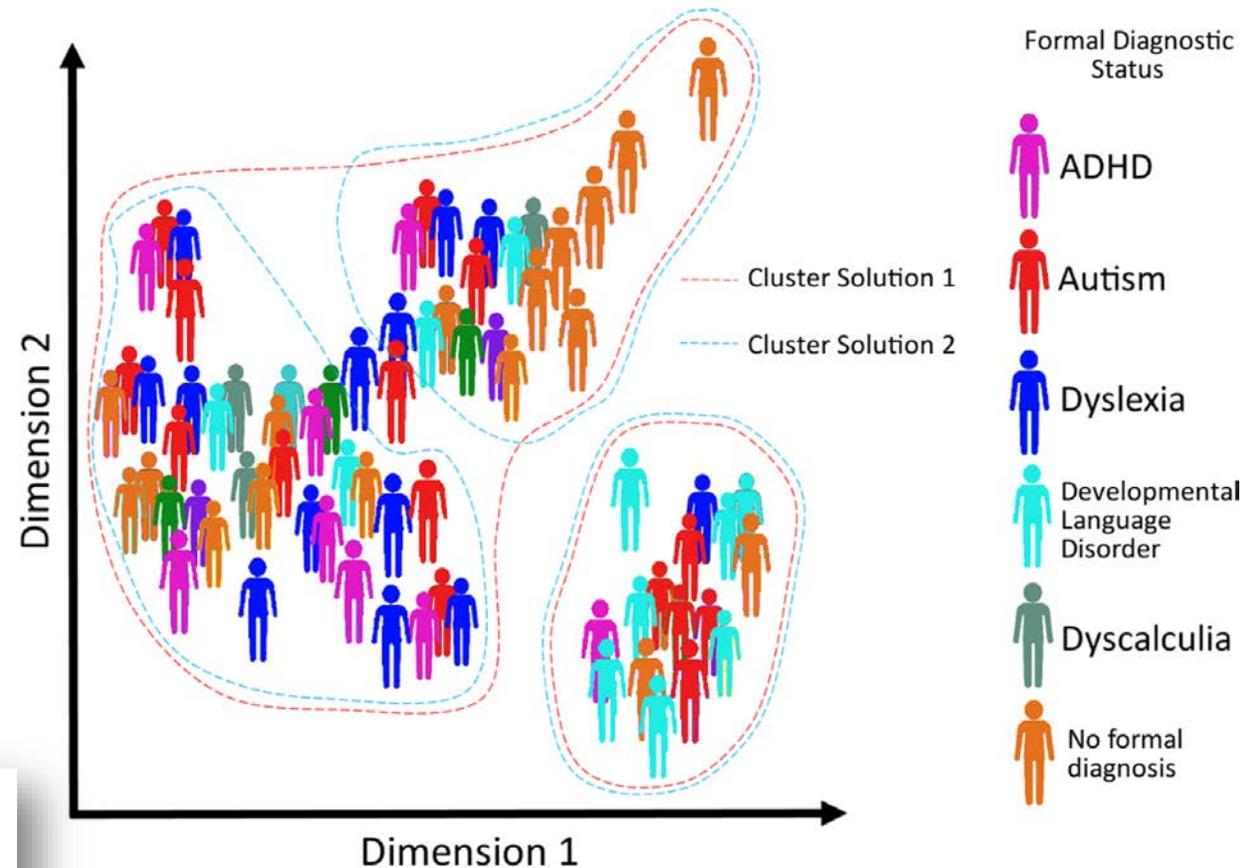
# What are core deficit theories?

- Boiling diversity and complexity within and between diagnostic categories down to single “explanatory” roots
- Core
  - Everyone in a diagnostic category is similar in some (simple, fundamental) way
- Deficit
  - Diagnostic categories represent aberrance from the ideal
- Examples
  - Theory of Mind and autism
  - Executive dysfunction and ADHD
  - Magnocellular theory and dyslexia
- These drive intervention
  - Identify and treat
  - Downstream impacts



# Show me the data: challenging the "core" assumption

1. One can group children by
  - a) cognitive profile
  - b) neural profile
  - c) genetic profile
  - d) diagnostic label
2. These groupings do not map onto one another
3. They do not necessarily predict learning outcomes either



The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry

Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry \*\*:\* (2021), pp \*\*-\*\*\*

ACAMH The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health  
doi:10.1111/jcpp.13481

## Annual Research Review: The transdiagnostic revolution in neurodevelopmental disorders

Duncan E. Astle,<sup>1</sup> Joni Holmes,<sup>1</sup> Rogier Kievit,<sup>1,2</sup> and Susan E. Gathercole<sup>1,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; <sup>2</sup>Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, Radboud University Medical Centre, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; <sup>3</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK



# Show me the data: challenging the “deficit” assumption

- Autism is defined clinically by social and communication deficits
- So why do these “deficits” disappear during autistic-autistic interactions?
  - Diffusion chain results
  - Qualitative reports
- Similar discussions for multiple diagnostic groups
  - Questioning labels
  - Greater focus on context and cultural variation
  - Role of the environment, other people

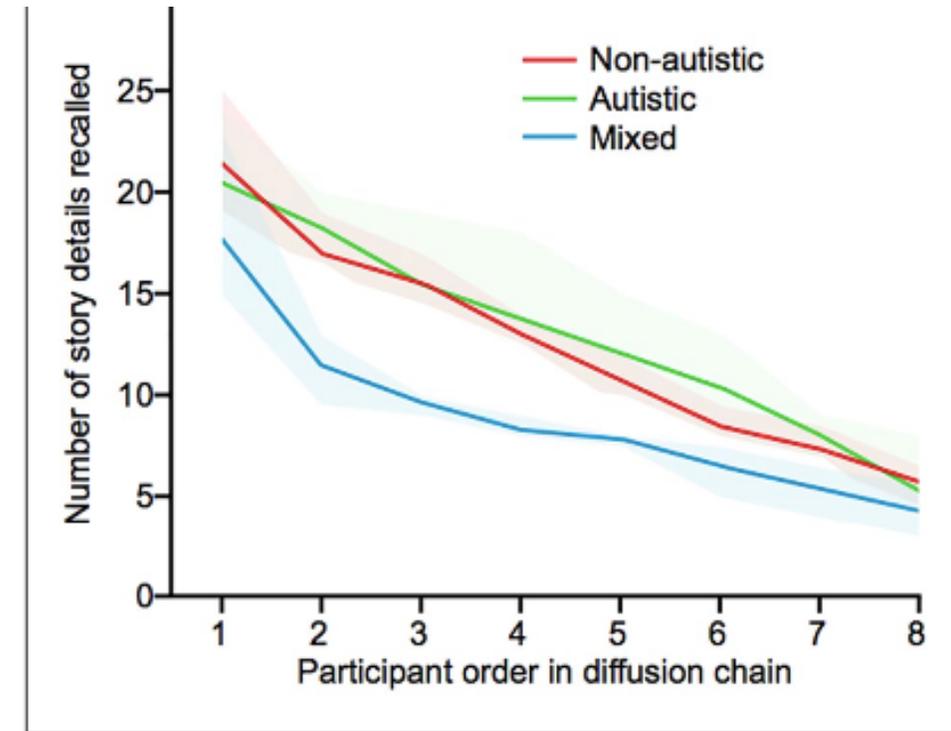
Damian Milton

Kilee DeBrabander, Desi Jones, Kerriane Morrison, Noah Sasson

Hidetsugu Komeda, Morton Ann Gernsbacher

Lizzie Sheppard, Dani Ropar

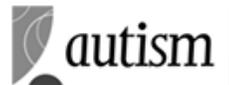
Yu-Lun Chen, Kristie Patten



Original Article

## Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective

Catherine J Crompton<sup>1</sup>, Danielle Ropar<sup>2</sup>,  
Claire VM Evans-Williams<sup>3</sup>, Emma G Flynn<sup>4</sup>  
and Sue Fletcher-Watson<sup>1</sup>



Autism  
2020, Vol. 24(7) 1704–1712  
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# Setting the scene: UK schools

## Great stuff

- Inclusion as standard
- Specialist environments available
- Dedicated staff
- 11<sup>th</sup> in world rankings
- 99% enrolment rate
- Culturally valued



## Tough stuff

- Under-resourcing
- Curriculum pressure
- Systemic inequalities
- Poor neurodivergent outcomes
  - Exclusion, participation
  - Mental ill-health / low wellbeing
  - Bullying, victimisation





One week

Scarlett is clearly bright but fidgets and has trouble concentrating in class

Teacher gives Scarlett a fidget toy, wobble cushion and movement breaks

Refer Scarlett for diagnosis

Scarlett on the CAMHS waiting list for 18 months

Scarlett assessed for ADHD

Scarlett not diagnosed, another 12 months for second opinion

Scarlett ADHD diagnosis confirmed

Scarlett gets help at school

Three years

**What about clinical support?**

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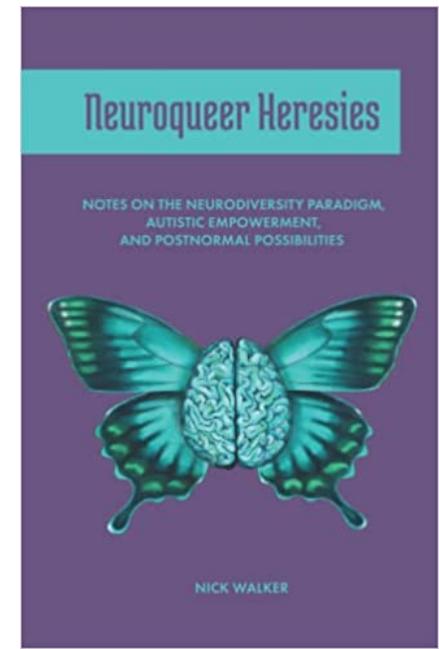
## A neurodiversity-affirmative school

## Applying the paradigm in practice



# Neurodiversity: a paradigm shift

- Neurodiversity is the fact that all human beings vary in the way our brains work.
  - take in information in different ways
  - process it in different ways
  - thus behave in different ways
- The Neurodiversity Paradigm
  1. Neurodiversity is naturally occurring
  2. No one way of being is better than another
  3. Neurodiversity operates like other equality & diversity dimensions
  4. Strength in *diversity itself* – collective not individual value





## Using Nature to Understand Neurodiversity

1. Naturally occurring variation
2. Equal value
  - outcome dictated by environment-need match
3. Majority and minority / divergent status
  - individual and group-level differences (ND / NT)
4. Strength in diversity
  - a rich and varied biome
  - orchards are capitalist!



# Common misunderstandings I



Neurodiversity is a synonym for SEND (or ASN, or ASL)

- Risk of changing the language but not actions
- Risk of reinforcing stigma by failing to deliver on inclusive potential, cf “special needs”

*“ND is not a classificatory term dividing us from them. We are all Neurodiverse. We live on a Neurodiverse planet in which amoral nature generates endless genetic diversity, while we humans have evolved the capacity to make judgments about nature’s bounty. What Neurodiversity brings us is a challenge **to find a place for everyone and to distribute the bounty fairly.**”*

Singer: *Neurodiversity: its politics, not science!*  
February 2021, [Neurodiversity2.blogspot.com](https://neurodiversity2.blogspot.com)

# Common misunderstandings II



## Neurodiversity focuses only on the strengths and talents of individuals

- Risk of putting additional pressure on ND students to excel in something
- Risk of dividing ND into more / less valuable and failing the radical impact of the idea
- Risk of reinforcing capitalist value system: measure people by their grades, and then earning power

*“Discussing autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, [this article] claims the term neurodiversity was created to “shift the focus from the negative connotation of these conditions toward the positive,” a statement that waters the entire concept down into a floppy milquetoast version of its former self. It’s not a nice euphemism for autism, and it’s about far more than just fighting negative connotations.”*

Meadows: *You’re using the word “neurodiversity” wrong.*  
August 2021, [medium.com](https://medium.com)

# Common misunderstandings III



## Neurodiversity paradigm rejects the concept of disability

- Risk of failing to be inclusive and beneficial to everyone – esp. people who identify as disabled and / or having a mental illness
- Risk of equating “value” with “low support needs”, so “everyone has equal value” → no-one gets any support

*“we should ... not jump to rejecting the very possibility of mental pathology, or of a “wrong” brain ... Rather, we must work on allowing more space for individuals and groups to self-define as healthy or ill, different or disordered, perfect or broken, in need of either medical or political intervention, or whatever combination of these.”*

Chapman: *Negotiating the Neurodiversity Concept: Towards epistemic justice in conceptualising health.*  
August 2021, Neurodiverse Age

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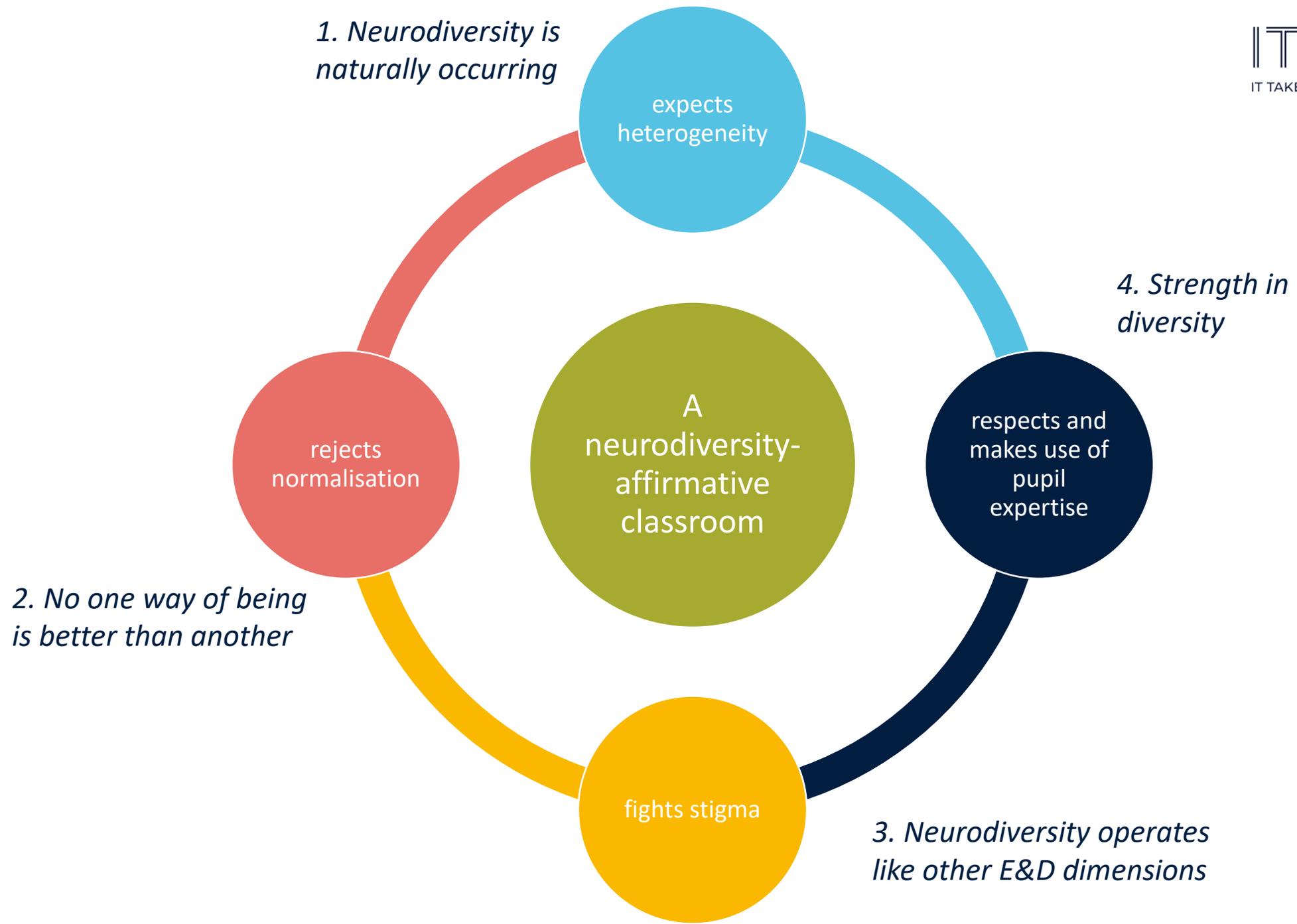
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## Expect heterogeneity

- Vigilant to stereotypes based on gender or ethnic norms
- Consider co-occurrence
- Make resources freely available

## Make use of client expertise

- Create an environment where ND people can be “out”
- Actively cultivate pupil self-knowledge
- Facilitate access to community

## Reject Normalisation

A note on attendance goals

- Separate diagnosis from goals
- Facilitate rather than correct
- Set outcomes based on flourishing

## Fight stigma

- Use your expertise politically as well as in education
- Work with parents, siblings and communities
- Challenge assumptions



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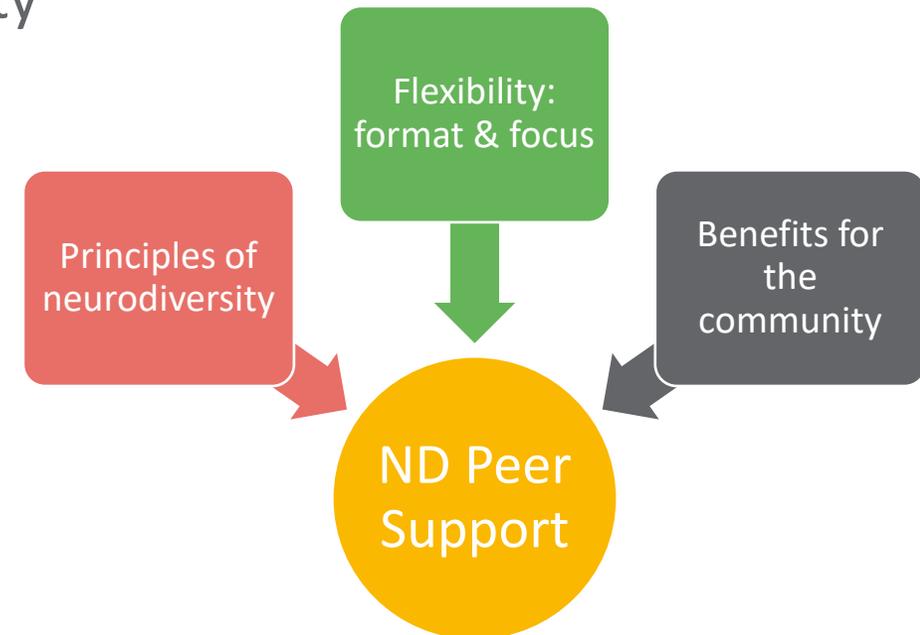


# The Neurodiversity Alliance

- Lots of evidence of preference to be with other autistic people
  - Peer support models
- Interviews suggest need to include other ND people
  - a positive outlook on neurodivergent identity
  - sense of belonging
  - shared self-advocacy and academic skills
- New model created
  - Co-designed
  - Inspired by existing LGBTQ+ provision
- Mixed-methods evaluation in three schools



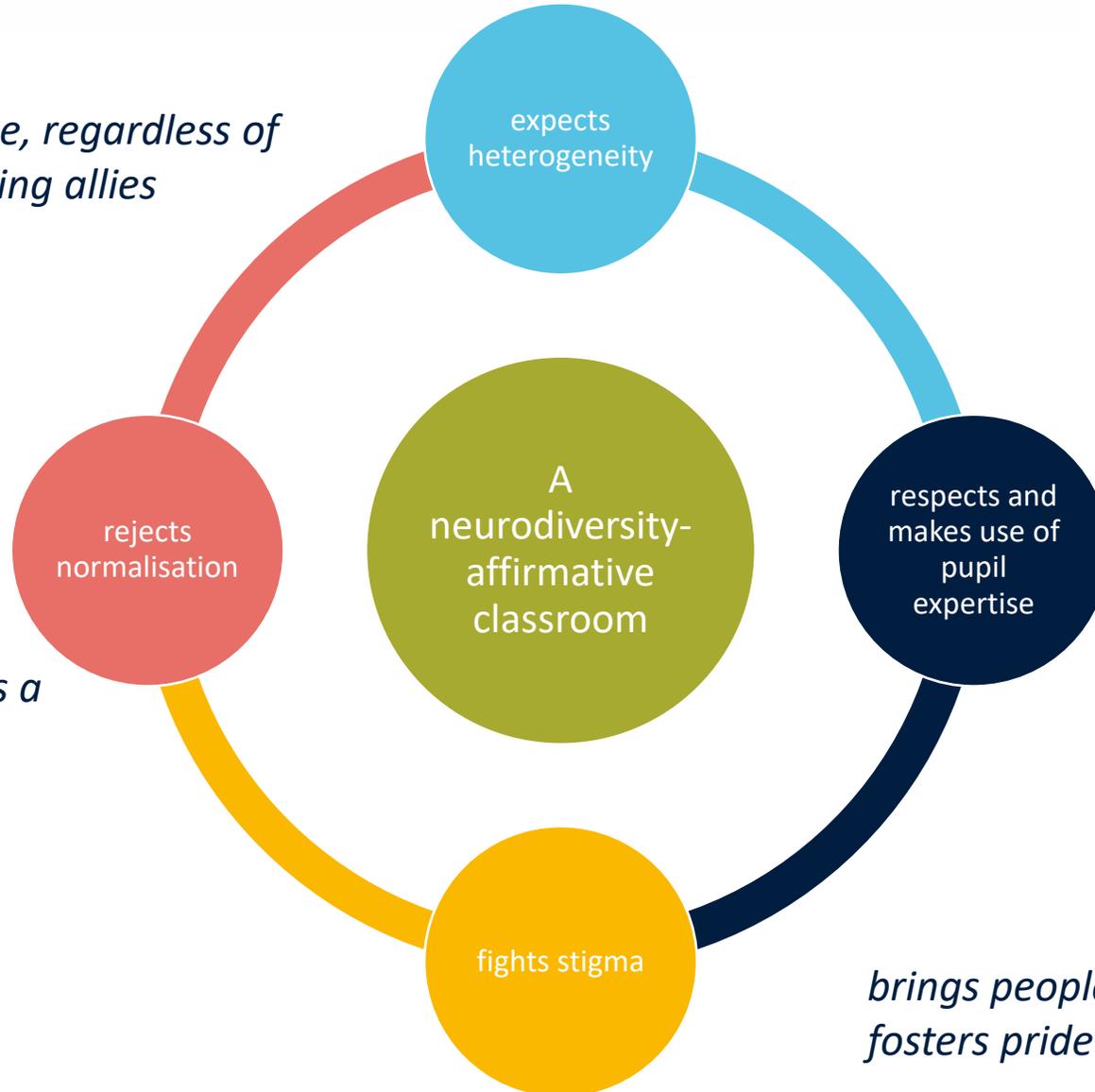
Francesca Fotheringham  
@NeuroAlli\_UoE



*The co-design remit*

# The Neurodiversity Alliance

*Includes everyone, regardless of diagnosis, including allies*



*shares knowledge, creates a sense of belonging*

Francesca Fotheringham  
@NeuroAlli\_UoE

*Co-designed.  
Uplifts pupil expertise;  
role for campaigns and leadership*

*brings people together,  
fosters pride*

[sue.fletcher-watson@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sue.fletcher-watson@ed.ac.uk)

@SueReviews

@SMRCResearch



# Learning About Neurodiversity at School



Alyssa Alcorn  
#LEANSproject

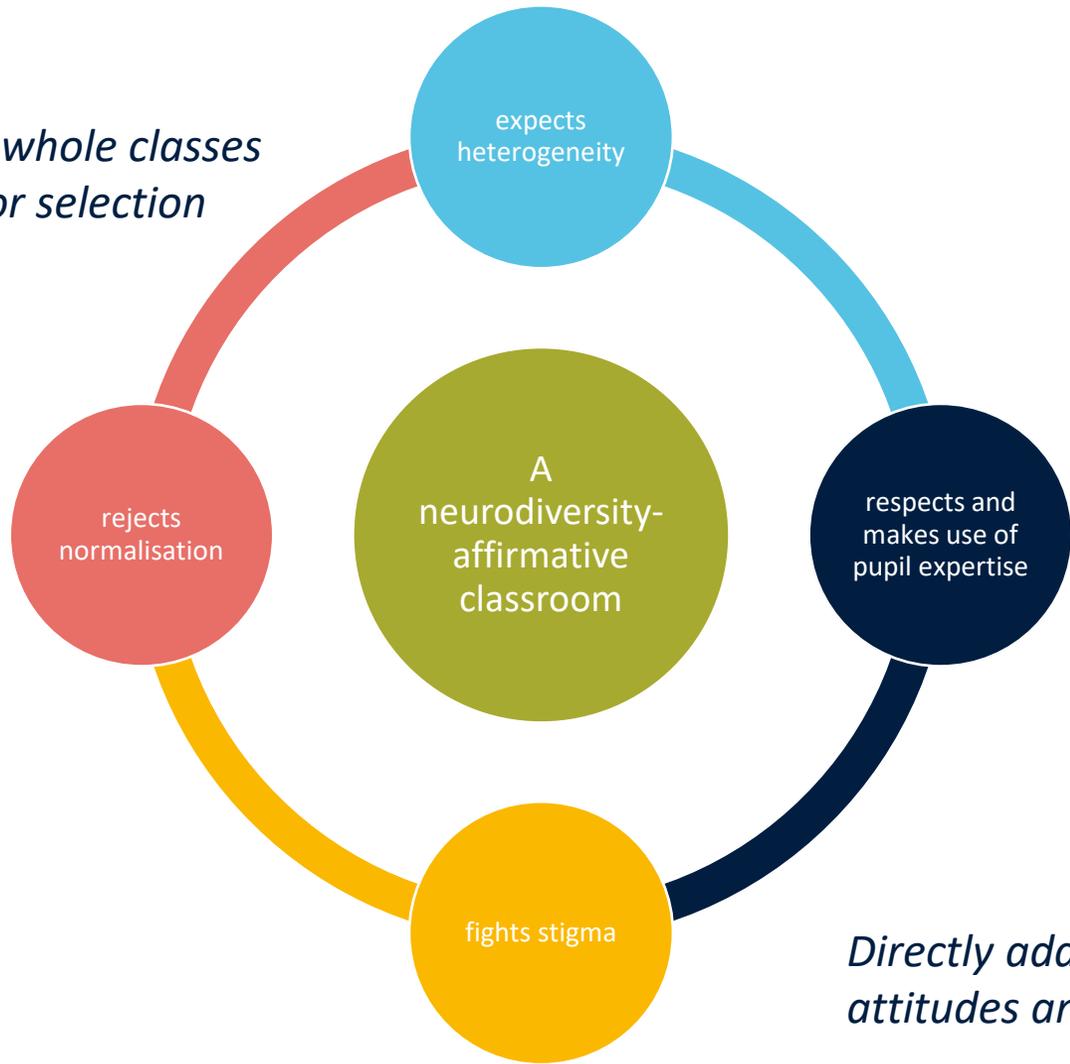
- Directly addressing the environment created by other people
  - Teaching *about neurodiversity* as a whole class
  - Distinctive from separation + support model
- Open participatory design process
  - Learning objectives & activities
- Comprehensive resource for primary schools
- Evaluation
  - In eight classrooms, four schools: feasibility and outcome
  - Strong focus on risk of harms
- Published; free to download
  - LEANS Champions
  - Parent pack



# Learning About Neurodiversity at School



Alyssa Alcorn  
#LEANSproject



*accessed by whole classes  
no filtering or selection*

*teaches about  
neurodiversity, rather  
than teaching ND pupils*

*Participatory design  
Stories showcase  
respectful practice*

*Directly addresses knowledge,  
attitudes and actions*



# Take Home Messages

## New ways of understanding neurodivergence

- Core deficit models rest on dual unfounded assumptions

## We are not delivering on the goals of inclusion

- ND kids are literally excluded: from school, socially, and even while learning
- Practitioners need new ways of working that maximise wellbeing and participation

## Defining neurodiversity and the neurodiversity paradigm

- Neurodiversity includes everyone – your classroom, your colleagues and your community
- Neurodiversity is naturally occurring, and collectively valuable
- Neurodiversity operates much like other dimensions of diversity

## What would neurodiversity-affirmative services look like?

### How can we create them?

- Collaborative, co-produced research-evaluated resources
- Joining forces to campaign for systemic change





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<https://www.ed.ac.uk/salvesen-research>

My new blog site

*Rants and new ideas*

<https://medium.com/@suefletcherwatson>

It Takes All Kinds of Minds

*Educators, ND people of all ages, inclusive learning sessions, parent & carer perspectives, policy*

<https://itakom.org/>

Twitter: [@suereviews](#) and [@SMRCResearch](#)

Mastodon [@suereviews](#)

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