



References

# Teachers can be neurodivergent too: Considering and supporting neurodivergent educators

Dr Catherine Ollerhead (Bristol Medical School, Health Professions Education) – co15794@bristol.ac.uk



## Key Definitions

**Neurodiversity** → the naturally occurring variation in how individuals perceive and interact with their environment<sup>1</sup>.

**Neurodivergent individuals** → individuals who differ from the socially deemed 'normal' cognitive processing style. Neurodivergence is an umbrella term, encompassing a range of conditions, including autism, ADHD and dyslexia.

## Introduction

- An estimated **15-20% of the global population** are neurodivergent<sup>2</sup>
- However, there are **no published statistics on prevalence** of neurodivergence amongst educators
- There is also a **lack of literature** discussing neurodivergent medical educators, their experiences, strengths and support needs
- This gap represents a contemporary issue in medical education
- Understanding the needs of neurodivergent medical educators is crucial to ensuring **adequate workplace adjustments** are offered, allowing them to **reach their potential** in education and act as **role models** to neurodivergent students

Aim

**To review literature discussing neurodivergent educators and healthcare professionals, in order to understand potential barriers, support needs and strengths of neurodivergent medical educators.**

Hypothesis

**Neurodivergent medical educators face stigmatisation and barriers within the workplace, but bring strengths to medical education that risk being overlooked if accommodations are not made**

## Methods

- A **literature review** was conducted in April 2025, using search terms '*neurodivergence*', '*neurodivergent*', '*healthcare*', '*teacher*', '*medicine*', '*medical education*' and '*medical educator*' on the PsycINFO, MEDLINE, Embase and PubMed databases
- Papers were **screened for relevance** initially via titles and then abstracts
- **No literature was found discussing neurodivergent medical educators**
- **In** absence of directly relevant literature, the review included papers discussing neurodivergent **healthcare students** and **professionals, school teachers** and **higher education academics**
- Historical and socio-cultural frameworks were used as lenses to explore issues neurodivergent medical educators may encounter

## Results

Twenty-seven papers were included in the review, with main themes detailed below:

### Medical Model of Disability

- The **medical model of disability** still dominates conceptualization of neurodiversity, often framing neurodivergent individuals as having deficits incompatible with effective teaching and information delivery
- This is evidenced by use of the term "**disability**", **requirement for diagnoses** to prove need for reasonable adjustments, and the **bolt-on nature of adjustments**
- Education literature discusses how neurodivergent educators' deficits may **reduce their ability to transmit knowledge** and skills to learners

*Classmates stated that 'an autistic teacher trying to help autistic children was like the blind leading the blind'<sup>3</sup>*

### Strengths of neurodivergent educators

- Neurodivergent educators have a **diverse range of skills** to offer to their roles
- Research participants identified strengths including **empathy, student support** (especially for students in difficulty), **creative teaching methods, adaptability, problem-solving** and **leadership** skills
- Institutions risk **wasting potential** neurodivergent educators bring to their field if misunderstanding and maladaptive environments continue to predominate

*"Supporting neurodivergent educators is critical because they bring unique strengths and perspectives to the classroom"<sup>5</sup>*

### Holding Neurodivergent Educators to Outdated Standards

- Medical education has shifted from **didactic, teacher-centred learning** to **learner-centred education**, where teachers act as facilitators, mentors and "guides on the side"
- Several papers discussed how neurodivergent educators' deficits may **reduce their ability to transmit knowledge** and skills to learners
- This teaching style is **out of line with current teaching practices**, with focus placed on neurodivergent individual's deficits rather than learners' needs

*"One trainee teacher who informed her school of her dyslexia was told absolutely no spelling errors would be tolerated"<sup>4</sup>*

### Stigmatisation, poor adjustments and wellbeing impact

- Papers frequently discussed experiences of **stigmatisation and disempowerment**, negatively impacting wellbeing and self-identity and creating **reluctance to disclose** neurodivergent status to employers
- **Poorly adapted workplaces** are common, and reasonable adjustments were often withheld until proof of diagnosis was provided
- Advocacy required by individuals to adequately adjust their workplace takes time and reduces potential teaching capacity

*"Stigma silences and excludes neurodivergent scholars"<sup>6</sup>*

## Discussion

- **Barriers** such as lack of awareness, stigma, resource constraints and limited institutional buy-in persist
- **Speaking to neurodivergent medical educators** is the first step to understanding how best to support our colleagues
- We also need to consider **who our current medical education practices serve**, and why they persist
- **Redesigning reasonable adjustments** in line with universal design would show an institutional commitment to inclusion – universal design is the concept that workplaces should be **inclusive as a baseline**, with a variety of support options available to all employees without question
- This allows **optimisation of everyone's workplace** to facilitate productivity, benefitting neurodivergent and neurotypical educators alike

## Conclusions

- Neurodivergent educators are viewed through a **medical model of disability**, with 'deficits' used to discredit teaching ability
- This continues to **perpetuate misunderstanding** and stigma, **impacting wellbeing** and overlooking neurodivergent educators' unique skill sets
- Identifying workplace barriers, questioning current norms and adopting universal design to create inclusive workplaces can **start to address the issues** highlighted by this literature
- **Neurodivergent educators' voices** must be central to proposed change