

Executive Summary

Article: [A reflective analysis on neurodiversity and student wellbeing: conceptualising practice strategies for inclusive practice](#)

Link: [Spaeth+Pearson Article.pdf](#)

Journal: [Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice Vol 11 Issue 2 \[2023\] pp109-120](#)

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This article offers a reflective, practitioner-focused analysis of how higher education can better support neurodivergent (ND) students, drawing on the authors' own lived experience as neurodivergent academics. It challenges the "implied student" model—i.e., the unspoken assumption that students learn, communicate, and behave in neurotypical (NT) ways—and argues that such assumptions inadvertently exclude ND learners. [\[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF\]](#)

The authors position neurodiversity as a natural form of human variation rather than deficit, urging educators to move away from neuronormative expectations about communication, engagement, emotional expression, and academic behaviours. They highlight how ND students often face long histories of misinterpretation, stigma, masking, and even harmful behavioural interventions (e.g., Applied Behaviour Analysis) that have affected their wellbeing and confidence within educational spaces. [\[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF\]](#)

A central theoretical frame is the **Double Empathy Problem (DEP)**, which argues that communication difficulties between ND and NT people arise from mutual misunderstanding and mismatched social norms—not impairment within the ND individual. Educators' reliance on NT expectations can therefore lead to misjudgement, negative perceptions, and exclusion of ND learners. [\[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF\]](#)

To address these issues, the authors advocate for **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**—a proactive, flexible, student-centred teaching framework that reduces reliance on diagnosis and individual adjustments by making learning environments inherently more accessible. They also integrate principles from decolonising pedagogies, emphasising the need to challenge normative assumptions and embed social justice into teaching practice. [\[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF\]](#)

The article proposes **six key strategies** for inclusive practice:

1. **Do not assume bad intentions; recognise strengths**
 - Challenge personal biases; avoid misinterpreting ND behaviours; adopt a "students as partners" approach. [\[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF\]](#)
2. **Reconceptualise attendance and attention**
 - Attendance ≠ engagement; students may engage differently due to sensory, social, or attentional differences. Provide varied participation options and compassionate facilitation. [\[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF\]](#)
3. **Be flexible and offer meaningful choices**

- Replace rigid expectations with options (e.g., alternative assessment formats). Focus on intended learning outcomes rather than particular modes of demonstration. [[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF](#)]

4. Avoid using group work as the default

- Group work can be overwhelming; provide alternative routes for active learning and clear guidance/roles when group work is necessary. [[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF](#)]

5. Consider the sensory environment

- Sensory sensitivities significantly impact learning. Offer quieter spaces, alternative work locations, or information about sensory characteristics of teaching rooms. [[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF](#)]

6. Make expectations and relevance explicit

- ND students may struggle with implicit norms; explicit instructions, clear rationales, and scaffolded activities support understanding and self-advocacy. [[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF](#)]

The authors close by emphasizing that inclusive practice is a continuous process requiring openness, compassion, and willingness to learn. Educators need not be experts in neurodiversity to make meaningful change; small, thoughtful shifts in mindset and practice can significantly improve ND students' wellbeing and academic experience. [[Spaeth+Pearson | PDF](#)]