



# Less Lecture, More Tools

Neuroaffirming Language for Autism-Inclusive Classrooms



## Welcome Slide

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Director of Innovation



## Land Acknowledgement



In the spirit of reconciliation, we gratefully acknowledge that we are located on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Îyârhe Nakoda Nations (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations), the Métis Nation of Alberta (District 5), and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

## We are all unique



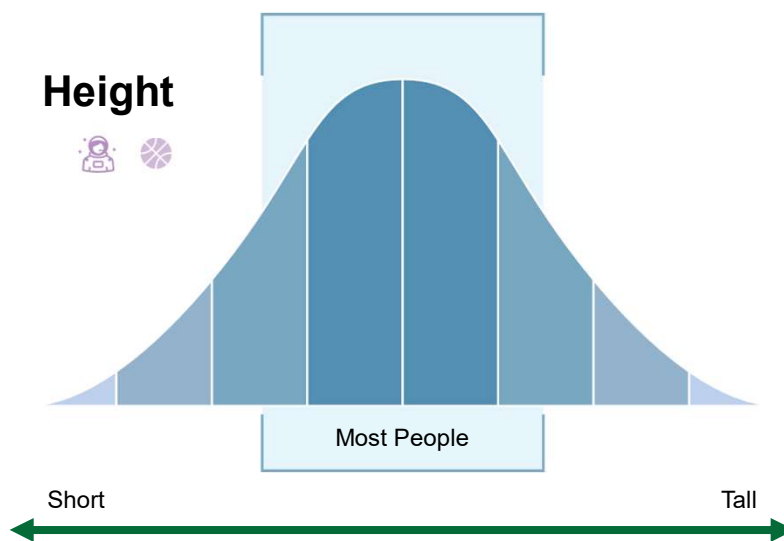
There is natural human variation between individuals

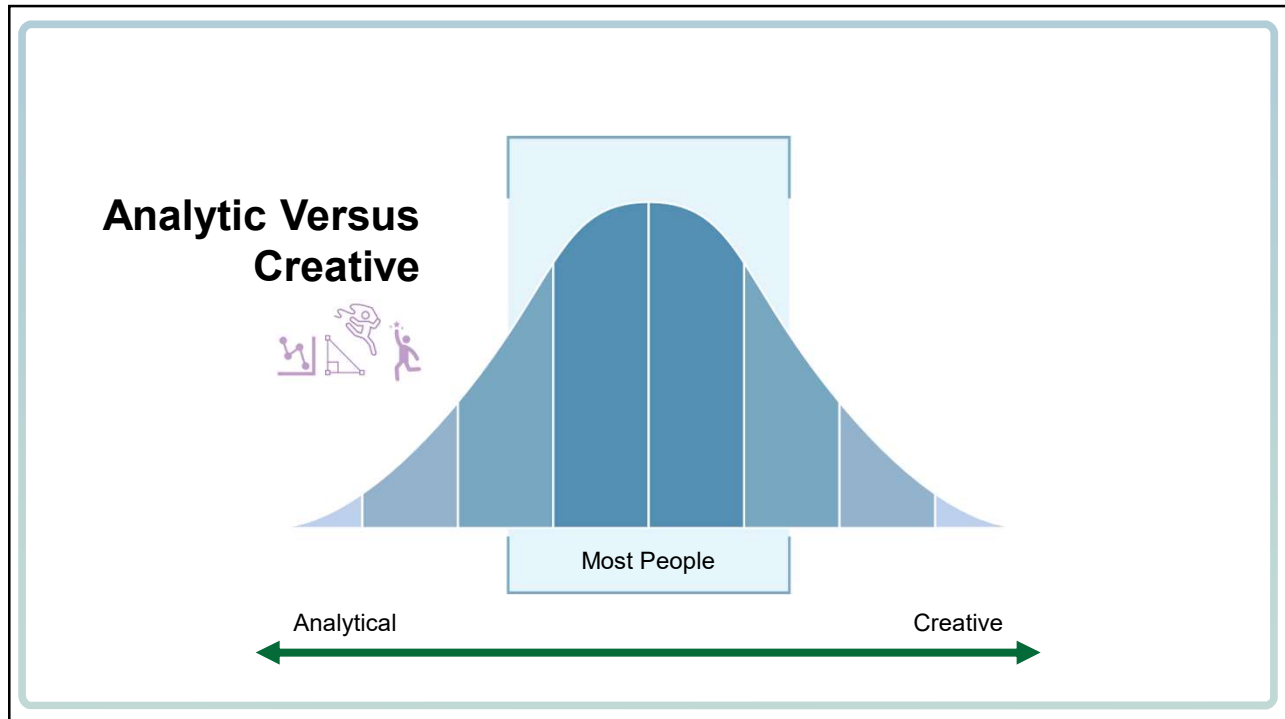
- Physical features
  - Height
  - Hair colour
- Psychological features
  - Skills
  - Process the environment
  - Learn

# What will we be doing today?

## ... Talking about unique humans.

- Consider neurodivergence and Autism as a form of culture.
- Recognize how neurotypical norms influence interpretations of behaviour, communication, and expectations.
- Apply existing intercultural knowledge and practices to support neurodivergent and Autistic students.
- Reflect on how language shapes expectations, relationships, and student self-concept.
- Identify and reframe examples of stigmatizing, deficit-based, and medicalized language commonly used in educational settings.
- Practice using neuro-affirming, neutral, or strengths-based language to describe students, learning needs, and support strategies.






## Why does this matter?

There is natural human variation between individuals

- Physical features
  - Height
  - Hair colour
- Psychological features
  - Skills
  - Process the environment
  - Learn

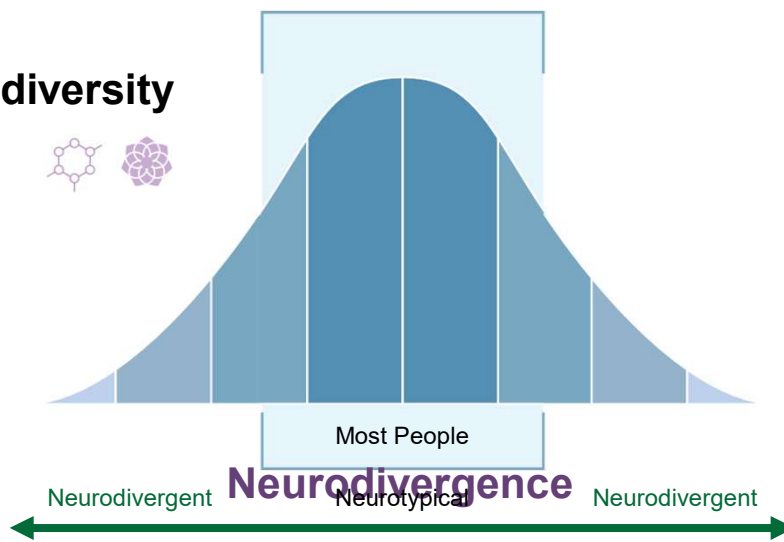
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# What is Neurodiversity?

Neuro = neurology, and how it works

Diversity = difference

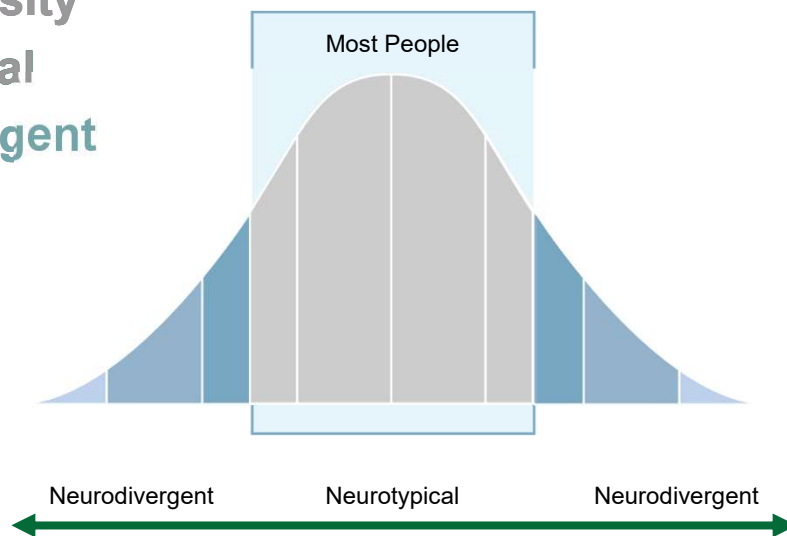
## Neurodiversity

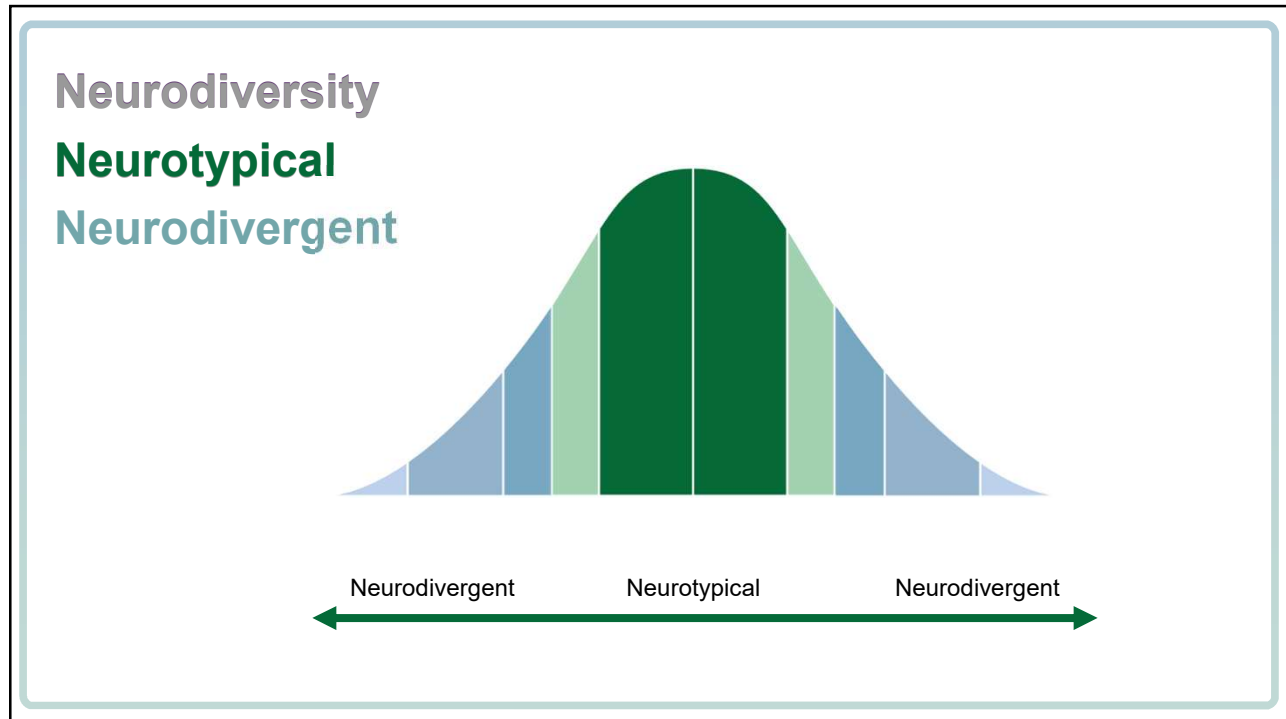


## Definitions

- **Neurodiversity:** Normal variation in brain function and behaviour
- **Neurotypical:** Typical brain function, representing the majority of people
- **Neurodivergence:** Different brain function representing the minority of people

**Neurodiversity**  
**Neurotypical**  
**Neurodivergent**





## Examples of Neurodivergence

Hyperlexia	Synesthesia and Aphantasia	Intellectual, Cognitive & Learning Differences
Tourette Syndrome	Sensory Processing Differences	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)	Dyslexia	Autism
Epilepsy	Giftedness	Speech Delay

## Different Ways of Being, Doing and Learning

- Just another way of being and interacting with the world
- Restaurant etiquette
  - Europe: you ask for service by raising hand
  - Canada: the server checks in with you periodically
- It requires us to question our assumptions and rethink normal



## Autistic and Neurodivergent Culture

- Standing/sitting moving versus sitting still
- Eye contact
- Sharing context and additional details

### Our experience:

- Participants have 3 degrees and cannot get or keep a job.
- Culture of their workplace is not a fit for Autistic culture



## Cultural Isolation

- When alone people try to...
  - Blend in
  - Avoid individual attention
- With a group when people feel comfortable and safe...
  - See cultural elements emerge
  - People will feel comfortable to ask for what they need
- Within your classroom you have the opportunity to create a culture with explicit expectations where people feel valued and safe.



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## Neurodivergent Culture— A Paradigm Shift

### Medical Model

- Neurotypical norms are considered the neutral or universal standard
  - Frames difference as deficit or dysfunction to be treated
- Pathologizes or moralizes variation in human behaviour
- Centres professional or clinical knowledge as truth
- Defines people by their diagnosis
- Expects individuals to adapt to the environment

### Neurodiversity Model

- Treats difference as natural human variation
- Affirms variation in human behaviour
- Values lived experience and community knowledge
- Recognizes individual's dignity and agency
- Expects both people and environments to be flexible



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How we talk about people affects how we treat them, how we think about them, and how they perceive themselves.

## Neurodivergent Culture

### Negative

- “Low functioning”
- “Attention-seeking behaviour”
- “Fixates” or “Hyper-focuses”
- “Immature for their age”
- “Rigid thinking”
- “Emotionally dysregulated”

### Questions to ask yourself

- Compared to what, or who?

What happens if we interpret common differences as deficient, compared to the dominant group?

## Neurodivergent Culture

### Negative

- “They need to learn how to function in the real world.”
- “He has rigid tendencies because of Autism.”
- “She just uses her diagnosis as an excuse.”

### Questions to ask yourself

- Compared to what, or who?

What happens if we interpret common differences as deficient, compared to the dominant group?

How we talk about people affects how we treat them, how we think about them, and how they perceive themselves.

## Think of a culture or group you identify with

- How would I feel if this was written/said about me?
- Does this language suggest that the something about the student needs to be fixed, cured, controlled, or avoided?
- Am I using particular words or phrases solely because it is tradition?
- Does this information provide enough detail to be helpful and supportive to the reader?

## Ableism

“Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or the other.”

- Center for Disability Rights.

“Ableism is perpetuated by **culturally** shared norms and values, as well as ways of speaking and writing about disability and disabled people.”

- Bottema-Beutel, et al. (2021, p. 19).

## Neurodivergent Culture & Neuroaffirming Language

### Negative

- “Low functioning”
- “Attention-seeking behaviour”
- “Fixates” or “Hyper-focuses”
- “Immature for their age”
- “Rigid thinking”
- “Emotionally dysregulated”

### Neuroaffirming

- “High support needs”
- “Seeking to have a need met”
- “A deep, sustained interest”
- [Describe specific behaviour]
- “Prefers predictability and clear expectations”
- “Stress response”

## Neurodivergent Culture

### Negative

- “They need to learn how to function in the real world.”
- “He has rigid tendencies because of Autism.”
- “She just uses her diagnosis as an excuse.”

### Neuroaffirming

- “They benefit from environments, expectations, or supports that better fit how they process and interact with the world.”
- “He prefers structure, predictability, or clear expectations.”
- “She is self-aware of her diagnosis asks for support”

## Neuroaffirming Language



- Describes difference without judgement
- Describes what is observable
- Avoids medicalized language outside of clinical contexts
- Presumes competency

## Neuro-affirming Language

- How would I feel if this was written/said about me?
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How we talk about people affects how we treat them, how we think about them, and how they perceive themselves.

## Individual examples

- [Student] is unable to stay focused in class or complete work during provided class time.
- [Student] should ask for help when needed instead of staring into space.
- [Student] refuses to make friends or attempt to relate to peers.

## Reflection Questions

- How would I feel if this was written/said about me?
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## Neuroaffirming and strength based language

- Deficit & Medicalized
  - Make the person something to be solved
  - Place the responsibility of adaptation on the person
  - Only take about where there is a negative difference in comparison to peers
  - Looks to fix or stop characteristics of Autism
- Neutral & Strength Based
  - Shows how the system and environment are disabling to the person
  - Shared responsibility between all parties
  - Celebrates areas of strength
  - Adds or describes support needs for success



## Comparison of statements

- [Student] gets easily distracted in class and cannot finish work during class time. They refuse to asks for help and instead stare into space.
- [Student] is not making friends or relating to peers.
- [Student] benefits from clear instructions how to start task and given instructions how to ask questions as needed.
- Student is finding peer relationships challenging.



# Break

**Come back in 10 minutes 😊**



## Work through another example together

- [Student] is not interested in peer relationships and is a challenge in group projects. They refuse to engage with peers to work collaboratively.
- They choose to be socially isolated from peers during lunch or recess periods.
- [Student] is encouraged to develop socialization skills as these will be critical for success in and outside of the classroom.

## Comparison of statements

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Student] does not show interest in peers relationships and is a challenge in group projects. They refuse to engage with peers and work collaboratively. They are also not engaging with peers during lunch or recess periods. [Student] is encouraged to develop socialization skills as these will be critical for success in and outside of the classroom.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Student] would benefit from support with peer relationships and clear roles within group projects. [Student] is unsure how to work collaboratively with peers. During lunch they choose to be by themselves. [Student] may benefit from additional support with social skills.</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

## Today's Activity

- 6 Statements on page 2
- Individually go through and try to rewrite to be neuroaffirming

## Today's Activity

- Go through as a group and share how you each rewrote the examples
- Notice all the different ways to rewrite these statements
- As a group work together to make edits and suggestions as needed
- Discuss the reflection questions on the first page

## Your turn!

- Think about statements that you have written about students.
- Write these on the blank chart on the back.
- Reword these statements to be neutral or neuroaffirming.
- Think about the discussion questions as you reword.



## Reflection Questions

- How would I feel if this was written/said about me?
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## Autistic and Neurodivergent Culture

- Just another way of being and interacting with the world
- It requires us to question our assumptions and rethink normal
- Within your classroom you have the opportunity to create a culture with explicit expectations where people feel valued and safe.

How we talk about people affects how we treat them, how we think about them, and how they perceive themselves.

# Guess what?

That student was Jay.... 😊



## Feedback



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