Neurodiversity: It's not what we think but how we think!

> "We need all hands on deck as we sail into an uncertain future and need every form of intelligence on the planet to tackle the challenges we face as a society. We can't afford to waste a brain……"
> Steve Silberman

Classroom learning - good for some – a challenge for others

For many learners classrooms are a great place for engaging in learning and although every learner needs some kind of support, successful learners usually 'get it' as they:

❖ Can focus on the content of a lesson;
❖ Can effectively get on task, work through and complete tasks
❖ Can follow instructions and the sequence of instructions;
❖ Have good concentration, focus and organisation skills;
❖ Understand that much of classroom learning is abstract and can create meaning from the abstraction themselves;
❖ Have a good memory and can use it effectively in the classroom;
❖ Have had good positive learning experiences;

There may be lots of reasons why some learners do not have positive learning experiences or may struggle with some of the above and the term **neurodiversity** can help us to understand the challenges that *some* of our learners have with classroom learning.

Understanding neurodiversity and Special Educational Needs (SEN)

People who may be considered as neurodiverse may have been identified as having special educational needs such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit and hyperactive differences, are on an autism spectrum, have emotional, social and behavioural challenges and other learning needs. These learning needs are often co-occurring across the different SEN labels and described often as cognitive differences – which means their brains function differently.

For most of our learners with special educational needs (perhaps about 20-25% of any school population) the challenges they have with classroom learning is nothing to do with intelligence or ability but there is a significant performance gap. The term 'neurodiversity' acknowledges that some learners have different ways of processing and responding to information than the majority – often referred to as the 'neuro typical'. We refer to these as learning *differences* rather than *difficulties*.

Let's focus on what our learners can do

In understanding neuro-diversity we recognize these cognitive differences as part of a natural spectrum of 'ways of thinking' that are unique, equally valid and should be educationally and socially celebrated.

Our neurodiverse learners, while they may struggle with some aspects of classroom learning and, in particular, text based approaches, will all have strengths mainly in imagination, big picture thinking, strong intuition, and creativity. These strengths are important contributions to any learning context.

We often say 'in order to teach them we first need to reach them' and this is so important in understanding our learners. Perhaps it would be better to talk about 'Special Talents' rather than 'Special Needs'. This doesn't mean we're trying to turn our learners into 'super humans' but it is about supporting them in working to their strengths. Redefining our understanding of some of our learners' needs through the concept of neurodiversity can help us understand all our learners' needs.

Ok – so what does this mean in term of classroom teaching and learning?

We don't want to create more labels trying to identify who is and who isn't a 'neurodiverse learner. And it isn't about 'boxing in' our learners to particular so-called learning styles. However, we can notice how our learners react. For example:

➢ Does the work involve a lot of writing and text work?
➢ Are there difficulties with attention and focus?
➢ Is copying from the board difficult?
➢ Does the learner have trouble following instructions?
➢ What kind of remembering difficulties does the child have?
➢ What specific behavioural problems are there?
➢ Is there a difficulty with specific language – expressive and receptive?
➢ Are there difficulties starting, staying on task and with completion of tasks?
➢ Is there a problem with sequencing?
➢ How successful is the learner in standardised tests?

It's relatively easy to be over-focused on problems. While there are no 'magic solutions' a better approach is to start looking at what someone is doing well.

➢ Do they engage more effectively with speaking and listening rather than reading and writing?
➢ Do they like to engage in group work?
➢ Are there particular subjects and interests that engage the learner?
➢ Do they respond better with integrated skills rather than individual skill tasks?
➢ Do they respond well to visual, kinaesthetic/tactile and auditory stimulus?

> ➤ Do they have imaginative and creative ideas?
> ➤ Do they respond well when given options in tasks or tests where they can decide the format in presenting ideas – through text, visually, drawing, role play, designing/modelling something, using music, video or some other chosen approach?

Notice what is working and do more of that. This might help to create an atmosphere for positive learning rather than a 'fear of failure'.

Aren't these approaches good for all learners?

Yes, that is exactly the point. Good practice is likely to be engaging and good for all learners. That would be an example of a good Inclusive Practices Approach. However, ensuring we cater for learners who have a variety of different needs (and for some these alternative approaches will 'teach them in ways they learn') is a route to supporting their learning. In this way we will ensure we meet most of our neurodiverse learners' needs.

All of this links strongly with good practice in professional development. It's important to try out different ideas. Sometimes you need to try things more than once to see what works or what might work in different ways. Other teachers in your school will teach the same group of learners – probably in different subjects. Share your ideas together on what is working well. Above all, ask your learners what is working for them. That will be the key to both understanding their learning needs and how to meet those needs. The main point is recognising that our learners do have different needs and will respond in different ways that make sense to them. When assessing our learners we want to assess and measure their skills, knowledge and understanding – not lock them into a 'one size fits all' way of responding.

__Phil Dexter__ is the English language Teacher Development Adviser for the British Council. Phil is currently responsible for development of the workshop modules for the British Council Teaching for Success CPD framework approach and, in particular, on special educational needs and inclusive learning. Phil is Acting Events Coordinator for IP&SEN SIG.