

Neurodiversity and Differentiation: How to Become a Neurodiversity-Affirming Teacher

As special educators, we know that our students have unique needs. Each has a different learning style, and it's rare to have two students who are exactly the same level, even when they're in the same grade.

That's how it is in a classroom with neurodivergent students.

Through differentiation, we can meet our students' unique needs, incorporate their interests, and use their strengths to meet them where they are.

Continue reading to find out what a classroom with neurodivergent students is like and how differentiation can help you become an effective neurodiversity-affirming teacher!

Understanding Neurodiversity

Let's cover the basics first! Neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences, such as ADHD, dyslexia, and autism, are natural variations in the human brain.

Instead of looking at these conditions as disabilities, neurodiversity views them as having differences in brain functions and behavioral traits. In neurodiversity, these differences are accepted and celebrated.

Neurodiversity is a movement to reframe what we've traditionally referred to as "learning disabilities" and view them as "learning differences." This shift is important, and it affects the way we teach.

If you want to help your paras and your students learn more about neurodiversity, check out this [Neurodiversity Mini Lesson!](#)

The Challenge in Accepting Neurodiversity

While neurodiversity brings a positive shift in perspective when it comes to special education, we still have a long way to go before it is widely accepted and lived.

Embracing neurodiversity in schools is challenging mainly because of the way our legal and educational systems are set up. These systems often require neurodivergent students to be labeled as “disabled” for them to have access to resources and get the support they need.

For example, to get extra time on standardized tests like the SAT or ACT, the law requires a student to have a diagnosed “disability.” Additionally, schools and medical resources depend on these labels to get funding. Insurance companies require a medical diagnosis to cover therapy or special services.

These examples mean that students need a label to get support. They make it challenging for educators to adopt the neurodiversity mindset that focuses on strengths and differences rather than deficits.

What is Differentiation?

Differentiation is a teaching approach where teachers adjust their lessons to fit the individual needs of each student. Instead of using the same method for everyone, teachers use different techniques and materials to help all students learn.

This method benefits everyone in the classroom, not just students with special learning needs.

The key idea is to tailor teaching methods to match how each student learns best. This might involve using videos, hands-on activities, or group work.

The goal is to ensure that all students can access the same lesson in ways that suit their learning styles.

Why is Differentiation Important?

Differentiation is a way for teachers to help every student learn in the best way for them. Here are three simple reasons why it matters:

- **Inclusivity**

Differentiation makes sure that all students, regardless of their learning style or ability, have access to education that meets their needs.

- **Engagement**

Using different teaching methods like videos, interactive activities, and hands-on projects keeps your students interested.

- **Success for all**

When teachers use differentiation, they help all students do well, making special accommodations less necessary.

The Role of Teachers

Teachers are the heart of a [neurodiversity-affirming classroom](#), playing a big role in making sure every student can learn in a way that works best for them.

For example, some students might learn better in small groups or one-on-one, while others might need to move around to stay focused. The teacher should think creatively about how to present lessons so that all students can understand and enjoy them.

To do this well, they need a lot of support and training. Schools should provide resources, ongoing professional development, and an environment where teachers can share ideas and learn from each other.

Using different teaching methods and adjusting the curriculum allows students to learn at their own pace and in their own way. Assistive technology and a well-organized classroom can also help support all students, especially those who learn differently.

In short, teachers need to think about how they teach and be ready to change their methods to fit the needs of their students. With the right support, they can create a learning environment where every student feels included and can succeed!

How to Practice Differentiation in the Classroom

Tailor your teaching methods to meet your students' different learning styles! How? Below are some practical strategies to help get you started.

Different Teaching Methods

Present your lesson in a variety of ways. This could include:

- Visuals like videos, charts, pictures, and posters
- Audio, such as recordings or storytelling
- Readings or written instructions
- Hands-on tasks, games, and other interactive activities

For example, if you're teaching about the solar system, you can do the following:

- Show a video about the planets.
- Give a reading assignment on space exploration.

- Have students build a model of a solar system.
- Lead a class discussion about what they've learned.

With these different methods, you're catering to visual, auditory, textual, and kinesthetic learners all at once!

Flexible Grouping

In my classroom, the students don't get the same groupmates all year. Change the groups often to keep things dynamic!

Also, group your students based on their strengths and needs. You can have skill-based groups for targeted instruction or a mixed-ability group, so your students can help each other.

Multiple Level Activities

Prepare activities that are adapted into different levels or versions to accommodate a wide range of students who can access the same content but at their own unique levels.

For example, when teaching about different bills and coins, you can have multiple levels that accommodate different reading levels, the need for visuals or pictures, and accompanying text.

Keep this in mind when you're looking for resource materials as well. Look for a ready-made curriculum that comes in multiple levels, rather than one level that you yourself will have to adapt further.

Multiple Formats

Another thing you should consider when looking for (or even creating!) your resources is having different formats. This may seem trivial, but font styles and spacing matter when you are creating lesson materials for Neurodivergent students.

Consider the following:

- **Color**

Try using alternating colors for different sections to make it easier to distinguish between tasks and ensure high contrast between text and background so it's easy to read.

- **Space**

Avoid clutter when creating your materials. Add plenty of white space, and break the text into well-defined sections with clear headings.

- **Images**

When you add images to your materials, make sure they serve a purpose and they're not distracting.

Varied Assessments

Don't just stick to written quizzes and tests! There are lots of ways you can do your learning assessment, like:

- Projects
- Presentations
- Written assignments

This lets the students show their learning in the way they do best.

Differentiation for an Inclusive Classroom

Embracing neurodiversity and differentiation in the classroom is more than just good teaching – it's essential teaching. We as teachers recognize and celebrate the unique ways that each of our students learn.

Our students may have different needs, but when we make an effort in planning our classes to meet those needs, we can be able to provide the support they need to succeed.

Before you go, check out these tips on [how to plan your classes when everyone has different IEP goals](#). They're your starting point in practicing differentiation.

Let's work together to remove the labels and create a learning environment where every student can shine!