

Neurodivergent Classroom Strategies - A Practical Guide for Educators

Based on interview with Dr. Tony Lloyd ADHD Specialist, Psychologist & Academic

"Our brains are only half formed when we're born. Intelligence and neurogenesis is 50% genetic potential and 50% impact of environment. As educators, we shape that environment." - Dr. Tony Lloyd

1. Introduction

Neurodivergent learners (ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ASD) represent at least 20% of any classroom. Dr. Tony Lloyd emphasizes a strength-based, neuroinclusive approach that celebrates differences, rather than punishing divergence from neurotypical norms.

This guide condenses his insights into actionable strategies for educators, allowing quick implementation to improve student engagement, learning, and well-being.

Quick Statistics to Remember

- **1 in 5 students** in your classroom are neurodivergent
- **1 in 10** have dyslexia
- **1 in 20** have ADHD
- **1 in 10** have dyscalculia
- **1 in 20** have dyspraxia
- **1 in 67** are autistic
- **Nearly 50%** of people with ADHD are also dyslexic

Key Insight: Only 10-15% of people with ADHD ever receive a diagnosis, meaning most neurodivergent learners are "hiding in plain sight" in your classroom.

2. Reframe your Understanding

Reframing your understanding means moving away from focusing on what neurodivergent learners *can't* do and instead recognizing their unique strengths and potential. By adopting a strength-based mindset, educators can create opportunities

that leverage students' natural abilities, foster confidence, and encourage growth rather than highlighting deficits.

Avoid These Labels:

- "Lazy" or "not trying hard enough"
- "Disobedient" or "disruptive"
- "Underachieving" relative to arbitrary standards
- "Disabled" or "disordered"

Instead, Recognise:

- Different learning styles, not deficits
- Fidgeting = self-regulation attempt, not defiance
- Poor test performance may indicate anxiety or working memory challenges, not lack of knowledge
- Executive function differences require support, not punishment

Rethink Intelligence

Intelligence is no longer just about knowledge and memory; it encompasses multiple forms of ability and strengths.

- Verbal-linguistic
- Logical-mathematical
- Visual-spatial
- Bodily-kinaesthetic
- Musical
- Interpersonal
- Intrapersonal
- Naturalistic

Action: Accept that students can be gifted in some areas while struggling in others, this is normal, not a contradiction.

3. Universal Design Principals

Create Neuroinclusive Learning Environments by designing multi-sensory lessons.

Visual:

- Infographics and visual diagrams
- Color-coded materials
- Mind maps and flowcharts
- Video content

- Visual timers and schedules

Auditory:

- Discussions and debates
- Podcasts and audio resources
- Read-aloud options
- Verbal instructions + written backup

Kinaesthetic:

- Movement breaks
- Hands-on activities
- Role-playing exercises
- Learning walks (combining movement with study)
- Manipulatives and physical objects

Provide Multimodal Response Options

Instead of only written essays, allow:

- Video presentations (2-minute style videos)
- Oral presentations
- Infographic creation
- Podcast recordings
- Poster presentations
- Practical demonstrations
- Creative projects

Why it works: Matches assessment to the actual skills needed, not just writing ability.

4. Instructional Strategies

Movement Integration

Why: Movement is integral to effective learning and memory encoding, especially for ADHD learners.

Practical Applications:

- Allow standing desks or wobble cushions
- Incorporate stretch breaks every 20-30 minutes
- Use "walk and talk" discussions
- Create movement-based learning activities
- Don't mistake fidgeting for disengagement... it's often a focus tool

Memory Enhancement Techniques – for working memory challenges:

1. Chunking Information
 - a. Break content into smaller segments
 - b. Teach one concept at a time
 - c. Use the "2020 rule" approach
2. Multi-Sensory Encoding
 - a. Combine reading with note-taking
 - b. Use highlighter pens in different colours
 - c. Create revision posters for classroom walls
 - d. Associate information with physical locations (memory palace technique)
 - e. Associate information with different smells
 - f. Allow for students to fidget with a toy while they learn

3. Visual Cues

Provide infographic summaries

- a. Use bullet points liberally
 - b. Create visual flashcards
 - c. Display key concepts on classroom walls
4. Repetition with Variety
 - a. Review content through different mediums
 - b. Use spaced repetition
 - c. Encourage students to teach others (peer learning)

Emotional Engagement

Key Principle: Emotion is the "software that provides the charge to encode knowledge."

Strategies:

- Connect learning to student's interests and passions
- Share relevant and real-world applications
- Use story-telling and narratives
- Create positive classroom relationships
- Celebrate effort and progress, not just outcomes
- Acknowledge that young people (ages 0 – 18) make decisions primarily driven by emotion

5. Assessment Modifications

Rethink Traditional Exams

Rethinking traditional exams is crucial because they often measure how well a student can recall information under pressure, rather than their true understanding or potential. For neurodivergent learners, this can create unnecessary barriers, misrepresent their abilities, and undermine confidence, making alternative assessment methods essential for equitable evaluation.

Alternative Assessment Methods:

- Continuous Assessment:
- Portfolio development
- Project-based assessments
- Practical demonstrations
- Regular low-stakes quizzes instead of high-stakes exams

Accommodations:

- Extended time
- Quiet testing environments
- Use of assistive technology
- Open-book or note-card options
- Oral examinations
- Take-home assignments
- Sensory toys

Skill-based Assessment:

- Focus on application, not just recall
- Allow demonstration of understanding in preferred format
- Assess process as well as product

6. Classroom Management

Building a relationship-first culture in the classroom is essential for effective learning and behaviour management. When students feel genuinely cared for, they are more engaged, motivated, and willing to participate, which creates a positive environment where neurodivergent learners can thrive.

Action Steps:

1. Learn about each student's cognitive profile
2. Have individual check-ins
3. Show genuine interest in their lives

4. Model the behaviour you want to see
5. Create psychologically safe spaces

Replace Punishment with Support:

Avoid:

- Zero-tolerance behaviour policies
- Public shaming
- Punishment-focused discipline Exclusion from classroom activities

Instead:

- Understand behaviour as communication
- Provide choices in learning and behaviour management
- Teach and model self-regulation skills
- Create calm-down spaces
- Use restorative practices

Structure and Routine

Why it works: Habits require no motivation, they're automatic.

Implementation:

- Consistent daily schedules
- Visual Timetables
- Clear expectations posted visibly
- Predictable transitions
- Warnings before changes to routines

7. Executive Function Support

Teaching executive functioning skills is essential because these skills, such as planning, organisation, time management, prioritisation, and self-regulation are the foundation for academic and life success. Many students, particularly those who are neurodivergent, struggle not with intelligence but with applying their abilities effectively due to gaps in executive functioning. By explicitly teaching these skills, educators empower students to manage their workload, meet deadlines, and approach challenges strategically, reducing stress and increasing confidence. Furthermore, strong executive functioning supports independence, resilience, and long-term success beyond the classroom, making it a critical component of a holistic, inclusive education.

Planning & Organisation:

- Provide planners or digital organisation tools
- Break assignments into manageable steps
- Use checklists and rubrics
- Teach backward planning from deadlines

Time Management:

- Use visual timers
- Teach estimation of time needed
- Build in buffer time
- Practice prioritisation explicitly

Self-Regulation:

- Teach breathing techniques (5 seconds in, 5 seconds out)
- Create calming corners
- Offer movement breaks
- Model emotional regulation

Working Memory:

- Write instructions on board with verbal delivery
- Provide reference materials during tasks
- Allow access to notes and resources
- Use graphic organisers

8. Assistive Technology and Tools**Cognitive Profiling:**

- 'Do-it Yourself' Cognitive Profile Quizzes
- Kumo Study Sensory Profile

Study & Productivity Tools:

- Text-to-Speech Software
- Speech-to-Text Dictation
- Mind-Mapping Software
- Digital Flashcards & Retrieval
- Task Management & To-Do Apps
- Time-Blocking &
- Kumo Visual Planner.
- Kumo Timers & Focus Tools.

Integrating cognitive and sensory profiling with practical tools empowers students to manage workload, reduce stress, and build routines that support both academic performance and overall wellbeing.

9. Student Wellbeing

Essential Elements:

Sleep:

- Emphasise importance of consistent sleep schedule
- Discourage all-nighters
- Teach sleep hygiene

Nutrition:

- Educate about brain-boosting foods
- Allow healthy snacks in class when appropriate
- Discuss impact of vitamins/minerals on cognition

Exercise:

- Incorporate movement into lessons
- Encourage regular physical activity
- Even brisk walking improves cognitive function

Mental Health:

- Normalise seeking support
- Teach stress management techniques
- Connect students with counselling resources

Breathing Exercises:

- Practice 5-in, 5-out breathing
- 5 minutes, 4-5 times daily
- Improves cognitive function and builds neural pathways

10. Teaching About Neurodiversity

Celebrate Differences in Your Classroom Historical Context to Share:

- Leonardo da Vinci: ADHD and dyslexia
- Albert Einstein: Autistic spectrum, speech delay until age 6
- Eleanor Roosevelt: Dyslexic, founded United Nations
- Walt Disney: Dyslexic

- Richard Branson: ADHD and dyslexic
- 40% of millionaires are dyslexic
- 29% of entrepreneurs have ADHD

Classroom Activities:

- Discuss different types of intelligence
- Share success stories of neurodivergent individuals
- Create "neurodiversity celebration" units
- Challenge stereotypes together
- Foster peer understanding and support

Universal Design Benefits Everyone:

When you design for neurodivergent learners, ALL students benefit from:

- Clearer instructions
- Multiple ways to engage
- Varied assessment options
- Movement Opportunities
- Reduced anxiety
- Stronger Relationships

11. Professional Development

Essential Learning Areas:

- Developmental psychology
- Neuroscience of learning
- Neurodiversity basics
- Trauma-informed practices
- Positive behaviour support

Reflect on Your Practice

- Am I training students to take exams or become lifelong learners?
- Do I understand child development beyond curriculum delivery?
- Do all students feel they belong in my classroom?
- Am I enabling or disabling learners through my approach?
- Am I creating intellectual apartheid or inclusive excellence?

12. Quick Reference Checklist

Daily Practice Reminders

Before Each Lesson:

- ⇒ Have I included visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements?
- ⇒ Are instructions both written and verbal?
- ⇒ Have I planned movement opportunities?
- ⇒ Is there choice in how students can respond?
- ⇒ Have I considered emotional engagement?

During Lessons:

- ⇒ Am I modelling the behaviour I want to see? Are all students visible and included?
- ⇒ Am I noticing fidgeting without judgment?
- ⇒ Have I provided wait time for processing?
- ⇒ Am I building relationships through my interactions?

NOTES & MODIFICATIONS FOR MY CLASSROOM

Students I'm currently supporting:

Strategies I want to try first:

- ⇒
- ⇒
- ⇒
- ⇒
- ⇒
- ⇒

Resources I need to gather:

- ⇒
- ⇒
- ⇒
- ⇒

⇒

Questions or challenges to address:

Successes to celebrate:

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Neurodivergence is normal - 1 in 5 students, not an exception
2. Intelligence is multiple - memory ≠ intelligence in modern world
3. Relationship comes first - students learn when they feel they belong
4. Design for diversity - universal design helps everyone
5. Movement matters - integrate it into learning, don't punish it
6. Emotion drives encoding - engagement creates lasting learning
7. Assessment is flexible - match it to real-world skills needed
8. Structure supports success - especially for executive function challenges
9. Celebrate neurodiversity - it's an evolutionary advantage
10. Teachers need training - advocate for professional development

13. **Concluding Comments**

Neurodivergent learners bring unique strengths, perspectives, and creativity to the classroom. By adopting a strength-based, neuroinclusive approach, educators can create environments where all students thrive, academically, socially, and emotionally. Remember: small changes, like providing movement breaks, offering multiple ways to engage, and explicitly teaching executive functioning skills, can have a profound impact on learning outcomes and student wellbeing. The strategies outlined in this guide are designed to be practical, actionable, and adaptable to your classroom context, helping you empower every learner to reach their potential.

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Together, we can make classrooms more inclusive, empowering, and effective for every student.