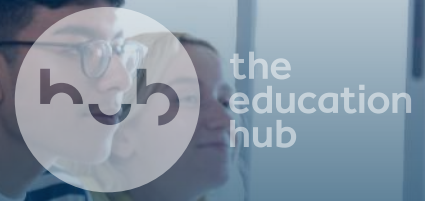


Supporting neurodivergent students in secondary schools



School resources

The curriculum demands on secondary school teachers mean that getting through curriculum content is paramount. Often learning is fast-paced and constant; there is little 'down time' for students at this level. These demands may be particularly challenging for neurodivergent students.

By the time a neurodivergent student gets to secondary school, they may be well behind their peers in terms of academic achievement. Dyslexic students, for example, who may read less fluently or find reading more effortful than their peers, may have missed significant amounts of learning. It is not that the students do not want to learn; it is that they *experience barriers to* learning. There may be other barriers for neurodivergent students such as low self-esteem (a common factor) and a lack of self-efficacy. Regular attendance can also be a barrier; often school is a source of anxiety for neurodivergent students. Thus, neurodivergent students are doubly disadvantaged when they start their secondary school years. In order to support students to be successful, teachers will need to employ strategies that they know will meet the needs of these students. In essence, however, what works for a neurodivergent student is likely to prove effective for *all* students. If students' needs are being met, the challenges that teachers face may be lessened.

The Donald Beasley Institute Report¹ identifies key findings around what works for neurodivergent students. Outlined below are these five key findings, along with practical ideas for the secondary context.

Finding 1: Prioritising and valuing relationships

Curriculum and assessment demands mean that teachers often push through the content of the course before establishing a relationship with the students, both as a group (class) and individually. However, research tells us that the relationship between teacher and student is paramount in order to maximise learning². In addition, neurodivergent students often lack self-efficacy and experience low self-esteem – for these students the relationship with their teacher is paramount if learning is going to take place. From a neuroscientific perspective we also know that a student needs to feel safe in order to establish self-regulation and access their pre-frontal cortex – without this learning will not take place. Part of establishing a positive relationship with a class is to be clear and consistent with class routines and ensure that expectations are explicit.

Practical ideas for developing positive relationships with students:

- Teachers and students write a letter to each other (in confidence): The student's letter details the student's interests, passions, goals, and aspirations, and might share something about their family and whānau. This enables teachers to gain an insight into the student and helps the development of the relationship with the student. The teacher's letter involves sharing something of themselves with students that will help develop a rapport. There may also be connections that the students can find between themselves and the teacher. Students can take the teacher letter home to share with parents.
- Check in with each student during every lesson: this enables the student to feel that they have a genuine connection with the teacher. It doesn't have to be a long conversation. It can be as simple as, 'how did the game go last night' or 'how is that little sister of yours?'

- Develop and maintain the [home-school partnership](#): ensure that an email goes home early on to establish the partnership between the teacher and the student's family. This can be a generic email initially, and become more individualised over time. This shows the student that they are 'seen', that the teacher knows who they are and that they want to share this with their whānau. It is important that neurodivergent students are not stigmatised so doing this for all students is essential. Whilst a full time teacher with 5 classes may find this time-consuming, the benefits of maintaining the home-school partnership cannot be underestimated.

Things to note:

Parents of students in Year 9 and up often feel disconnected from their child's education, compared to the primary school years. Parents go from seeing one teacher every day at drop off and pick up to sometimes never even meeting their child's teachers at the secondary level. The home-school partnership is essential for neurodivergent students' educational success: families and whānau know their child and often have insights about them that can prove beneficial for teachers to know. In addition to this, some neurodivergent students will require extra support from their whānau (even to meet the basic demands of secondary school, such as organising their books for each day). If parents have contact with their child's teachers on a regular basis, it can make their educational journey far smoother.

Finding 2: Developing (student) agency

The phrase 'student agency' is not new. Giving students agency can start from the co-construction of a task's success criteria, and continue through to a student reflection when the task is completed.

The three [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) Principles](#) of 'Engagement', 'Representation', and 'Action and Expression' enable the student to have agency over what the task is, how knowledge is gained, and how this knowledge is shown. It moves away from a 'one size fits all' model to one that takes into account a student's interests and strengths. This interests- and strengths-based approach is often successful with neurodivergent students as it provides them with a context for learning and a sense of potential achievement.

When planning a unit of work, consider how students can have agency at every step:

- Can the student co-construct the success criteria? For example, can students create success criteria for Achieved, Merit, and Excellence, using exemplars? This would support autistic students who often need the 'big picture' first.
- Can the student choose which parts of the success criteria they will work towards?
- Can the topic be connected to their interests?
- Can the student choose if they work on their own, in pairs, or in a group? This will support students who find group work challenging and ensure they experience the optimum learning environment for their needs.
- Can the student create their own method of charting their progress and reflecting on this? For example, some students may want a checklist that can track their progress, whereas others might want to do weekly reflections.
- Can the means of showing their new knowledge be strengths-based? For example, if the student is visually creative, they could show what they have learned visually.

Things to note:

Putting students and their needs at the centre of curriculum design and delivery is at the heart of inclusive practice³. Students have probably encountered an agentic approach in their intermediate and primary school years, so it will not come as a surprise to them to have agency in their learning at secondary school. By the time a neurodivergent student reaches secondary school, they are likely to have a good understanding of themselves as learners. For example, an autistic student may know that listening to music helps them to focus on a task, or a dyslexic student may know that group work enables them to work more effectively. Asking students what works for them is a way to give agency to them and their learning experience.

Finding 3: Supporting students to understand and manage their own behaviour

A teacher who has clear and high expectations of their learners will usually naturally demand – and receive – respect. Most students enjoy being successful and will want to experience this success often; [self-determination theory](#) argues that success, or a sense of competence, is an intrinsic motivator. A teacher who is fair and open, with high expectations around behaviour which are communicated effectively and consistently to their students, is less likely to experience behaviour that they or other students find challenging. Equally a student who has agency over *what* they learn and *how* they learn it is far more likely to be engaged in the learning process.

Practical ideas supporting students to manage their own behaviour:

- Be clear and consistent with class routines and ensure that expectations are explicit.
- Students may have learned about recognising their own emotions and behaviour at primary and intermediate school. Pedagogies such as the [Zones of Regulation](#) encourage students to analyse how they are feeling and find ways that help them to regulate their emotions.
- Check in early on in the lesson with students who you know may have an ‘off day’, behaviour-wise (be proactive rather than reactive).
- Be mindful of sensory overload: if there is a lot of noise in the classroom, some students (particularly neurodivergent ones) may find this challenging.
- Be aware of cognitive overload: many neurodivergent students will struggle to maintain focus for long periods. Consider having mini-breaks in each lesson (just a couple of minutes where a student’s brain can go ‘offline’ and ‘online’ again would suffice).
- Do not leave it to chance that a student who is struggling with their behaviour will ‘come right’; contact home early on and ensure parents and whānau are aware of your concerns.
- Liaise with colleagues who also teach this student: what is working for them? Perhaps it is your subject that is particularly challenging for them.
- Consider that a student who is not engaged in learning could be struggling with the academic demands of learning; focus on the learning process and how to meet the student’s needs, rather than their behaviour.

Things to note:

Most students do not come to school to misbehave. If a student feels noticed, cared for, and listened to, they are more likely to want to learn. When lessons have a clearly communicated structure and routine, and these are adhered to, neurodivergent students are more likely to feel safe in the classroom. Many students (and often those who are neurodivergent) have developed avoidance strategies in their previous

school years, and these patterns of behaviour may have become the 'norm' for the student. Do not take the behaviour personally, but do try to connect with the student, personally.

A secondary school setting is likely to be far more challenging for neurodivergent students: moving between classes with different teachers, different subjects, different students can cause huge anxiety. A student's anxiety may look like 'bad behaviour' when, in reality, they just cannot access the curriculum. Some students – particularly neurodivergent students – cannot access the curriculum without adjustments and support, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide these. Remember that all behaviour is communication.

Finding 4: Creating inclusive environments

An inclusive environment is one that enables each student in the classroom feel safe, valued, and accepted. It is from this foundation that learning can take place. Neurodivergent students have often had negative experiences along their educational journey. It can take longer for them to establish the foundation needed for successful learning and they are likely to need extra support from their teacher. An inclusive environment takes into account what each student needs to be successful and provides this wherever possible. For example, some students may prefer to work using headphones, to enable them to focus on the task, while others may want to work with their desk against the wall because it minimises distractions.

Practical ideas for making learning environments more inclusive:

- Ask the student – what works for them in terms of the learning environment?
- Acknowledge their neurodiversity (if this information has been disclosed and the student is comfortable talking about it) and be open about your level of knowledge.
- Work from a strengths- and interests-based approach wherever possible.
- Learn about [sensory processing](#) and consider your classroom from a sensory processing perspective.
- Consider re-framing what 'success' is for students in your classroom – it may look different for different students.

Things to note:

Students (particularly neurodivergent students) know when a teacher is paying lip-service to them in terms of being valued and respected. Developing a genuine and meaningful relationship with students is the key to feeling safe and providing an environment in which each and every student is valued and respected. Some neurodivergent students will be open about their neurodiversity while others will not, and neurodivergent students are individuals - one dyslexic student is different to another dyslexic student, for example.

Finding 5: Embedding inclusive teaching strategies

Inclusive teaching strategies take into account that learners are unique, have different strengths and challenges, and need a learning programme which meets their needs. Many neurodivergent students will simply not cope with being given a text book and working through it each lesson. Traditional secondary school teaching strategies such as textbooks, group work, and frequent tests are likely to dishearten students who need something different. The 'different' is not necessarily a huge shift in teaching practice, but rather a consideration of the 'what' and the 'how' of learning.

Practical ideas for embedding inclusive teaching strategies:

- Work at a departmental level to consider how inclusive teaching strategies can be embedded into units of work.
- Consider how information can be given to students in a variety of ways (written, verbal, visual).
- Ensure students are not overloaded with information: break it down into manageable chunks and make frequent connections with prior learning.
- Contextualise the learning, for example 'Last lesson we did X; today we are doing Y'.
- Begin lessons by reviewing previous learning, which can be done in a variety of ways (such as short quizzes or students testing each other)
- Check in with students throughout a lesson; do not assume that they actually understand what to do.
- Use learning buddies, who can be a supportive and safe approach for neurodivergent learners: often they will find it hard to approach the teacher but they will ask a peer.

Things to note:

Many neurodivergent students have a [poor working memory](#) and slower processing speed, so verbal instructions and sharing information verbally are unlikely to 'stick' for these students. A multi-modal approach is likely to be effective, such as giving the instruction verbally and in written form. If a student is displaying off-task behaviour, it is likely that they are struggling to access the learning and will need a different approach in order to be successful. Talking to them about what is and is not working, and genuinely listening to their voice, may help determine a more effective approach.

Endnotes

1 Mirfin-Veitch, B., Jalota, N., & Schmidt, L. (2020). Responding to neurodiversity in the education context: An integrative review of the literature. Dunedin: Donald Beasley Institute.

Retrieved from: https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/208503/Responding-to-neurodiversity-in-the-education-context.pdf

2 <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/NZC-Online-blog/Putting-student-relationships-first#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20students%20learn,to%20put%20student%20relationships%20first>

3 Education Review Office. (2017). Teaching approaches and strategies that work: Keeping children engaged and achieving in the upper primary school.



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