

## The experiences and perspectives of neurodivergent girls, their peers, and teachers in a mainstream girls' school: What can we learn to support students? (ICGS, 2025)

Milner, V. L., Mohamed, L., & Happ, F. (2025). "Beyond the stereotype": Neurodivergent students' experience and peer and teacher understanding of neurodiversity in a mainstream girls' school. *Neurodiversity*, 3 The impact of an outreach activity on girls' attitude towards STEM: An Irish primary school case study. *Issues in Educational Research*, 35, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251326056>.

Researchers from King's College London have explored the experiences of neurodivergent girls in a mainstream, academically selective girls' school. They raise key themes around student responses and experiences and consider ways to support neurodivergent girls. This is an important study for educators because of the typically lower school satisfaction experienced by neurodivergent students.

This case study is based on a "highly academically competitive and selective private single-sex girls' school for girls aged 11-18 years old in the United Kingdom" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 2). The study specifically focussed on girls with autism and ADHD and included neurodivergent students, neurotypical students and teachers. The project included online surveys developed through a participatory research design that actively involved students and teachers while developing the project methods and survey. The researchers identified a series of key themes that were then used to develop a framework of potential supports for neurodiverse girls in mainstream girls' schools.

The first theme identified by the authors was understandings of neurodivergence and the need to challenge assumptions. Ninety-three percent of girls felt that people do not understand what it means to be neurodiverse, with neurotypical students also indicating they did not feel confident in this regard. The results showed the presence of assumptions and myths regarding neurodivergence, with girls seeking a shift for neurodivergence to be recognised as a "difference" not a "deficit". Girls also want people to understand that neurodivergence is more than autism and ADHD. Students also reported that they find it difficult when others didn't fully understand their experience, with key examples including the being that excelling at one task meant students could excel in all tasks, with their other struggles being ignored. This shows a need for greater understanding of "the nuances and variation of neurodivergence" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 7).

This led to the second theme of stigma and risks of disclosure, with students identifying fear of stigma and being marked as "different" as a key barrier to accessing support. Stigma was present in the project both implicitly and explicitly, and reflected negative perceptions of what it means to be neurodivergent, including an association between neurodivergence and weakness. Students felt that they are seen as outsiders who are different from their peers. This had a direct impact on their ability to feel they could fit in with other students. Girls were also concerned about being viewed only as a "label" once they disclosed their diagnosis, needing to prove their neurodivergence, fears of being vulnerable to bullying from other students, and anxiety that they would be subject to assumptions and perceptions about how neurodivergence "should" function.

Despite these concerns, the majority of students who participated had disclosed their neurodiversity to at least one person at their school. Some felt this was important, but also indicated that they

would like help or support when telling others about their diagnosis. Yet some of the most significant concerns raised by girls' was fear that disclosure could bring risks, but no positive change to their learning or environment. Students did demonstrate awareness of different responses to disclosure from peers and teachers, indicating understanding of the range of nuance present in attitudes and knowledge.

Teachers' and neurotypical students' perspectives on disclosure were also critical to this case study. Many teachers and neurotypical students talked about disclosing a diagnosis as being an "invasion of privacy", which may reflect perceptions surrounding shame (Milner et al., 2025, p. 8). Teachers feel disclosure is vital so they can support students and avoid misinterpreting actions as misbehaviour. Instead, they cite disclosure as an important opportunity to plan and implement adaptations to allow girls to engage effectively. The main concerns cited by educators regarding disclosure were a risk of overcompensating or showing bias. Some also questioned how to address situations where teachers may respond "negatively or in a patronising manner towards the student" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 8). Ultimately, neurodivergent students displayed significant concerns around disclosure, citing fears of prejudice from students and teachers regardless of whether they decide to disclose or not disclose their diagnosis.

Another key theme identified in the project was the belief that challenges faced by neurodivergent students are often a result of living in a world not designed for neurodivergence. This includes difficulty engaging in group environments, and understanding verbal and non-verbal cues or "rules", such as when to use eye contact, or how much information is appropriate to share with others. In the school environment, this can impact students in terms of not keeping up with the workload or pace of lessons, feeling a level of pressure to perform well in an academic environment, and awareness that neurodivergent thinking does not work the same way as their peers. Girls in the project talked about making an effort to fit in, and that this becomes a need to "perform", which can create exhaustion, embarrassment and high levels of additional effort to fit in at school (Milner et al., 2025, p. 8). This ultimately leads to high levels of "camouflage" from neurodiverse girls as part of compensatory strategies to fit in to the school environment.

The researchers have considered ways to move toward a neuroaffirmative approach. When neurotypical students had the opportunity to meet and work with neurodiverse students, the study showed that despite their own doubts, they had a good understanding of neurodivergence. This then increased empathy and acceptance, rather than the negative attitudes that students feared. Neurotypical students showed a desire to understand neurodivergence better, and neurodivergent participants wanted others "to understand their genuine differences in thinking style and/or social interactions" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 9). Teachers also had a strong desire to support neurodivergent students' wellbeing and self-esteem.

A range of strategies can support neurodiverse girls in the classroom. Teachers who participated in the study were already using various techniques to support neurodivergent girls, including adjusting and clarifying communications, changing language when giving instructions, and being more patient. Students also sought "better pastoral care", including support groups, safe spaces to go when feeling overwhelmed, and the ability to access a support person to speak to if they felt the need (Milner et al., 2025, p. 9). Girls want open discussions on neurodiversity to better support awareness and understanding, with the belief that this could "reduce misconceptions", help peers understand neurodivergence, promote appropriate language and engagement with others, and potentially reduce the risk of stigma (Milner et al., 2025, p. 9). Yet in order to do this, "it was considered essential to champion the voices of and amplify the perspectives of neurodivergent students themselves" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 9).

This brings together some important findings for girls' schools. The study shows that students and teachers recognise a need for, and have a desire, to increase awareness and understanding of neurodiversity among both teachers and students. This is important because knowledge and understanding are critical to developing "more positive attitude towards neurodivergent students and inclusive practice" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 10). All three groups of participants – neurodiverse girls, neurotypical girls, and educators – are experiencing challenges in this space. Neurodivergent students feel their differences are misunderstood, while teachers and peers feel they may not have a strong enough understanding of the other students' experiences. This forms a "double empathy problem" and recognising this can help minimise stigma as peers and teachers work towards mutual understanding (Milner et al., 2025, p. 10).

The researchers suggest approaching these goals through whole-school education about neurodiversity, with a focus on practical suggestions to provide the tools and understanding necessary to "create an inclusive and supportive environment" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 11). Schools are encouraged to be aware of the impact of camouflaging on student wellbeing for both neurodiverse and neurotypical students "who have high levels of neurodivergent traits but who have not been identified for support" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 10). In an academically selective environment, "neurodivergent differences may be overlooked due to high academic performance and the rigid structure of the education setting" (Milner et al., 2025, p. 11). Offering support regardless of diagnostic status may assist in improving wellbeing for both neurodiverse and neurotypical girls.

The article also provides other strategies that can be implemented to respond to the needs of neurodiverse girls in a mainstream all-girls' learning environment. These include workshops to educate students that can be incorporated into existing lessons or assemblies, adapting resources for neurodiverse students to align with individual school ethos and values, and connecting students with specialist services where needed. Developing safe spaces where students and staff can have conversations about neurodivergence can also be considered. This can be further supported with the use of explicit and clear instructions, quiet spaces for general down time, and ways to manage sensory stimuli. Overall, one of the largest challenges identified in the study was the fear of stigma and disclosure. Regardless of which strategies are implemented, it is important to involve neurodiverse girls in collaborations about the choice and development of strategies so that solutions meet their needs due to the individual variance in experiences that can occur.

## References

- Milner, V. L., Mohamed, L., & Happ, F. (2025). "Beyond the stereotype": Neurodivergent students' experience and peer and teacher understanding of neurodiversity in a mainstream girls' school. *Neurodiversity*, 3 The impact of an outreach activity on girls' attitude towards STEM: An Irish primary school case study. *Issues in Educational Research*, 35, 1-13.  
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