

Why things need to change

Building neuroaffirming autism classes



A child-led, neuroaffirming classroom

“The children in our classes are perfect, whole human beings.”

In this talk



Shifting the mindset

How autism education used to look, and why it is changing.



Pathologising

Making a problem out of natural Autistic ways of being.



Ableism

The quiet beliefs and school practices that hold children back.



A new approach

Learning from Autistic people, and the role of the child-led teacher.

MEET YOUR SPEAKER

Jane O'Neill

Director of Thrive Hub, Neurodiversity Ireland

Mum of three, autism class teacher, and neurodivergent advocate with a passionate interest in neurodiversity affirming and child-led learning.

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autism class in a mainstream school

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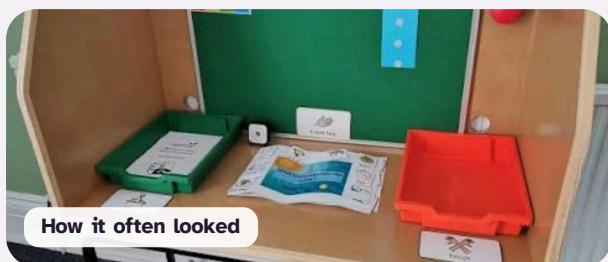
students

3

staff

Why things need to change

Shifting the mindset



How it often looked

THE OLD VIEW

- ✗ Autism seen as a disorder or deficit, something to be "fixed"
- ✗ One way for everyone
- ✗ Highly structured, highly managed and controlled
- ✗ Adult-led and timetabled



How it can look

A NEUROAFFIRMING VIEW

- ✓ Autistic children are whole, not broken
- ✓ Child-led, with support tailored to each child
- ✓ Regulation and connection come first
- ✓ Learning about Autistic people from Autistic people

SO WHAT'S CHANGED?



The Irish Joint Committee on Disability Matters concluded that ABA and related behaviourism-based therapies, including PBS, do not align with the human rights standards of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD).

ABA: Applied Behaviour Analysis. PBS: Positive Behavioural Support.



We never stop learning

When things change, it can feel heavy, like personal criticism. It's really not. This is when we pause, reflect, listen and get curious.



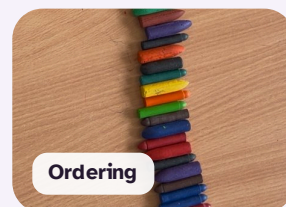
Something didn't sit right

Preparing for her own journey in an autism class, Jane noticed what jarred in the standard training:

“We were pathologising Autistic children's natural way of being, and even playing!”



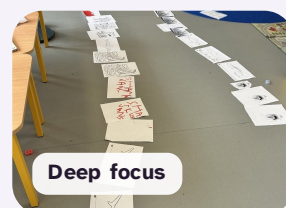
Lining up



Ordering



Patterns



Deep focus

What is pathologising?

Pathologising is when we treat a normal human behaviour, emotion or physical state as a medical or psychological disease, disorder or problem.

It can look like:

Stimming	→	"deviant"
Deep interests	→	"obsessions"
Inaction	→	"refusal"
Direct communication	→	"defiance"
Distress or meltdown	→	"misbehaviour"
How a child plays	→	dismissed

“ Making a problem out of a perfectly normal Autistic behaviour.

Ableism

Treating Autistic people unfairly because their brains work differently from what society calls "normal". Many of us carry a quiet belief that being neuronormative is a "better" way to be.

“ Some of the kindest people can hold this belief.

Common examples in schools:

- Attendance awards
- Reward systems
- Uniform policies
- Healthy eating policies
- Behaviour policies
- Pen licences

These practices hit neurodivergent and disabled children, and children from marginalised groups, hardest. They also encourage masking.

The role of the child-led teacher

- Environment designer
- Facilitator
- Co-regulator
- Collaborator
- Strewer
- Researcher
- Observer
- Scaffolder
- Advocate
- GLP interpreter

Source: Siobhán Uí Dhálaigh, @Neuronurturing_. GLP: Gestalt Language Processing.



Following the child

Our philosophy

The children in our classes are perfect, whole human beings.

It is not our job to "fix" anyone.

It is not our job to make a child "easier to manage".

It is not our job to fit a child into our system.

▶ Next: Part 2, Our non-negotiables, and understanding PDA