



Beyond Compliance: Building Neuroaffirming Autism Classes

Part 1 of 4

Why things need to change

Part 1 index

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About Me:

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Mum of 3, Autism Class Teacher, Neurodivergent advocate with a passionate interest in neurodiversity affirming and child-led learning.



Context:
Autism Class
Mainstream
school.
6 students
3 Staff



A child-led,
neuroaffirming
classroom

Shifting the mindset

Traditional view of Autism as a disorder/deficit and something to be 'fixed'.

Autism education looked like this →
One way for everyone,
highly structured,
highly managed, controlled,
adult-led, timetabled and
'predictable'.



The misconception of needs:

For a long time it was believed that autistic kids needed structure in a controlled environment with few distractions, in order to access learning.

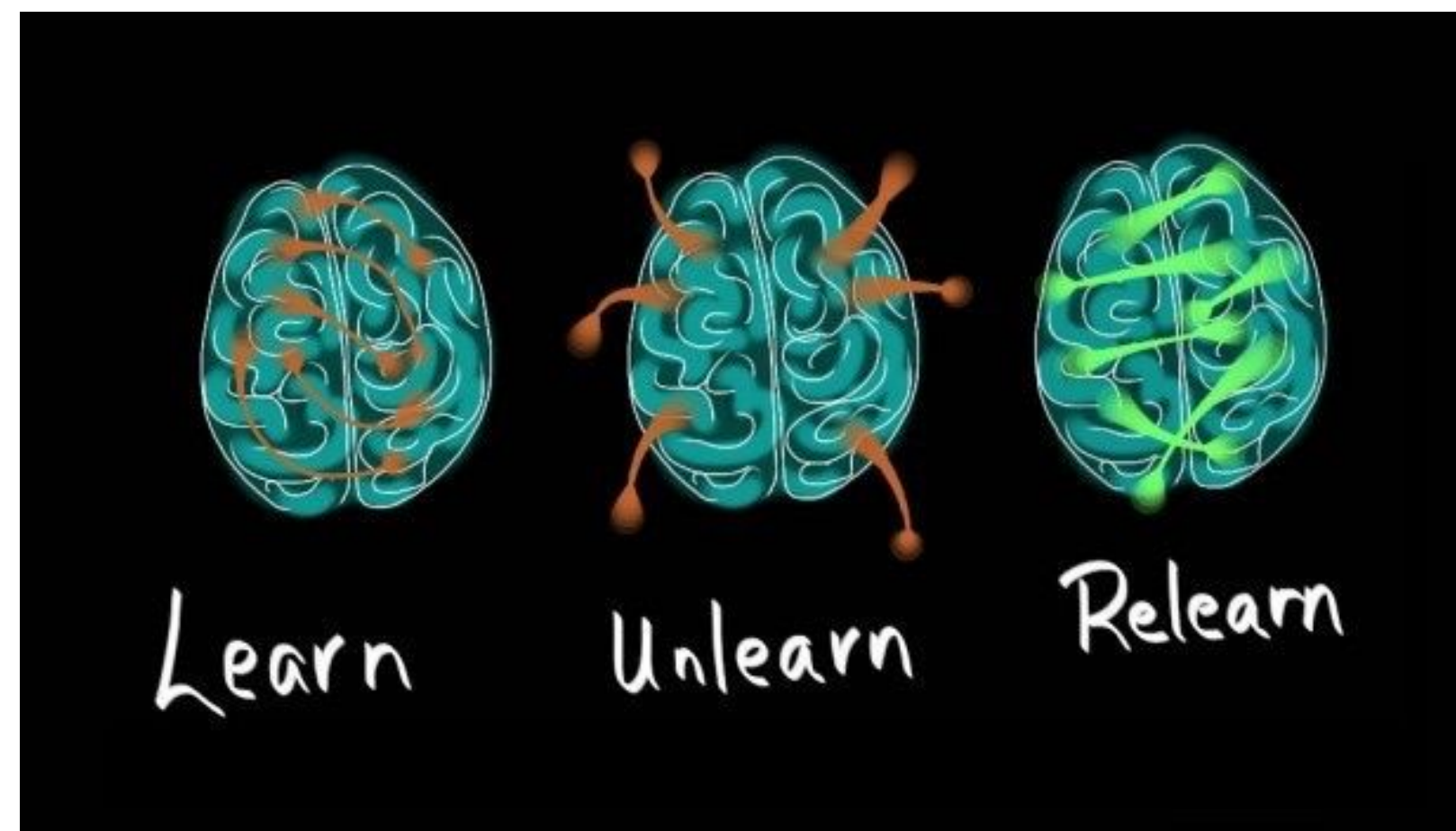
Many systems and programmes have been built on this concept, like Teacch and ABA.



So what's changed?

The Irish Joint Committee on Disability Matters concluded that Applied Behaviour Analysis (**ABA**) and related behaviourism-based therapies, including Positive Behavioural Support (**PBS**), do not align with the human rights standards set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).





We never stop learning

When things change, this 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 with me

When preparing for my own journey in an autism class, what jarred with me about the standard training?

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



What do we mean by pathologising?

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



What do we mean by pathologising?

- Labelling stimming as 'deviant' or 'abnormal.'
- Framing interests as 'obsessions' or 'fixations.'
- Interpreting inaction as refusal.
- Interpreting direct communication as defiance.
- Misinterpreting distress or meltdown as 'misbehaviour'.
- Dismissing the way children play or work.

Essentially, pathologising means making a problem out of a perfectly normal autistic behaviour!





A great visual
from autistic
creator
@NeuroWild
for your
staffroom or
classroom

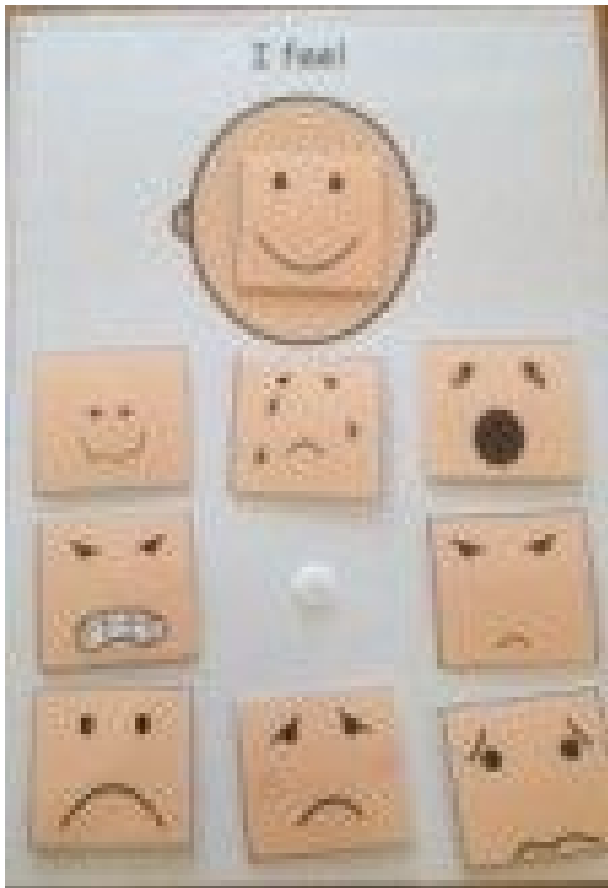
Ableism

Ableism is the discrimination, prejudice, or unfair treatment of autistic people because their brains work differently than what society considers "normal."

This sounds really serious - surely we wouldn't do that?

However, many of us have ableist beliefs that being neuronormative is a 'better way' to be, and that neurodivergent people are somehow broken, lesser, or need to be 'fixed' or 'saved' by us!

Some of the kindest people can hold this belief.



Some common examples of ableism in schools

Attendance awards

Reward systems

Strict uniform policies

Healthy eating policies

Behaviour policies

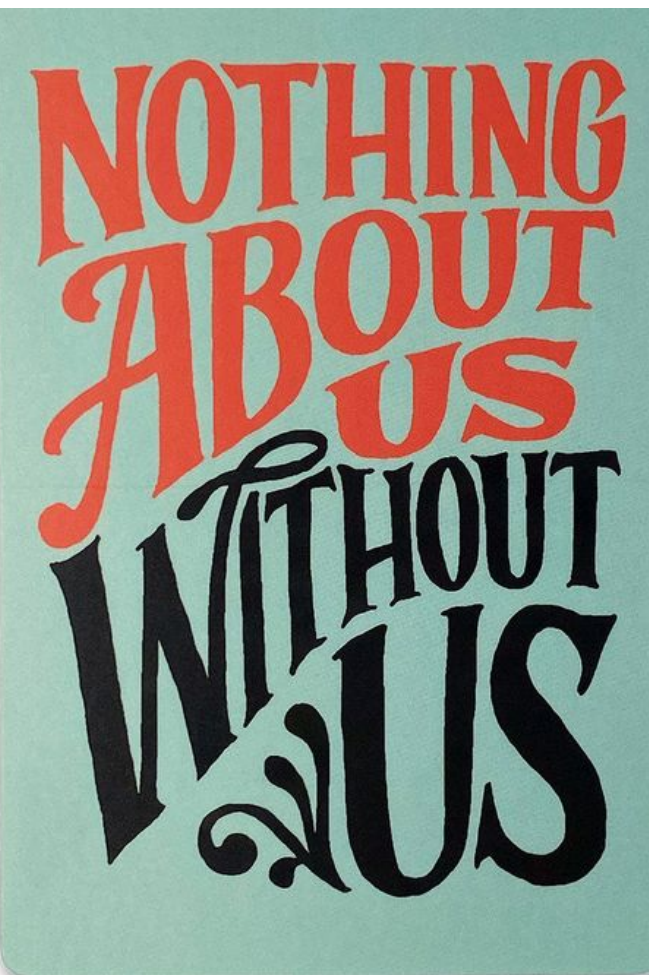
Pen licenses

If you consider it, these practices will disproportionately impact neurodivergent and disabled children and children from marginalised groups and also encourage masking.



**Example of a
publicly shaming
sun and cloud behaviour
management
system**

A change of approach



- For so long, the autistic community has been spoken over by 'experts.'
- I embarked on learning as much as I could about neuroaffirmative practice.
- To learn about autistic people from autistic people and to centre lived experience.
- That's when everything changed for me.

Role of the child-led teacher:

Environment Designer
Facilitator
Co-regulator
Collaborator
Strewer
Researcher

Observer
Researcher
Scaffolder
Advocate
*GLP interpreter



Source: Siobhán Uí Dhálaigh @Neuronurturing_

Our philosophy for our autism classes:

- ✓ 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 control or fit a child into our system.

