Supporting neurodivergent students at school

This document offers some ideas of relatively low-cost modifications that can make an enormous difference to students with ADHD or autism, or even those undiagnosed but with traits – it is important to note that even if students only have a few traits, these traits unsupported or supported inappropriately can still lead to overload.

Many of these are considered best practice among educators and therapists, and some modifications are regularly provided in some schools without diagnoses, for students that are seen to be struggling or where parents report extreme difficulties at home (i.e. children are masking in school). More and more UK and US schools are doing this, and every Swedish school is required to do this by law. Schools are required to do this under disability discrimination laws where a child has a diagnosis, and it would be ethically and morally appropriate where a diagnosis is likely, or a child is in the process of assessment.

Classroom modifications

- For students who struggle to sit still:
  - wobble cushions
  - fidget toys (there are silent ones available if more appropriate)
  - opportunities for extra movement e.g. consciously selecting such students to take items to the office or other teachers where such a task is required, stepping outside the classroom to run around or stretch
  - ensure they are allowed outside during breaks, if they want to, even on rainy or snowy days
  - allow exams to be taken in a different room

- Students who struggle to concentrate:
  - screens on either side of their desk
  - movement (as above) can help
  - instructions provided in written form as well as verbal (can also help students with dyslexia who may struggle to retain large amounts of the spoken word/long lists)
  - handouts or notes that the teacher uses for their lesson to be written in a shareable format and shared with the students in advance of the class
  - ear defenders or noise cancelling headphones made available to all students
  - able to listen to music (with headphones) or other sounds (e.g. white noise, café sounds, rain, podcasts), to help with focus while working
  - allow exams to be taken in a different room

- Students who need routine:
  - provide clear written information about each day
  - notify immediately of any unexpected changes and allow them absence if it feels too much
  - always notify such students of fire drills or allow them to be absent – they can walk the emergency route to learn it, without the stress of the practice alarm

- Students who struggle with sensory overload
    - see if sounds can be minimised – e.g. ticking clocks, humming lights (fluorescent lights are notoriously stressful), buzzing machines
    - see if lights can be minimised – e.g. bright lights above student to be removed, allow them to wear baseball caps, sunglasses or hoodies with hoods up (could require in school colours if uniform is worn) – check out Pooky Knightsmith's talk on use of hoodies on YouTube
    - allow students opportunity to leave the classroom for short 'silence' or downtime periods – maybe even a quick nap – 15 minutes in a silent, low lighting room
    - always notify such students of fire drills or allow them to be absent – they can walk the emergency route to practice it and learn it, without the stress of the practice alarm
    - remove requirement for showers after PE or allow a 'cloth wash'
    - allow modifications in uniform, if uniform is worn
    - allow exams to be taken in a different room

If a student is known to make sounds or speak phrases at inappropriate times, including inappropriate/rude words or sentences, especially if repetitive or random, please consider this may be compulsive. In these cases, requiring a student to suppress this will likely lead to anxiety, overload and stress.

Reducing the overload on a student and trying to ensure a more appropriate environment is likely to lead to a reduction in compulsive sounds. For some students, an increase in sounds can mean they are feeling anxious or stressed, and a teacher responding to the sounds as a sign of stress, rather than as intentional or as bad behaviour, is a more appropriate response.

Always check with students if they are aware what such sounds means for them – for some it is not a sign of stress, just part of who they are.

Outside the classroom/downtime

Could a room in the school be designated for any student to visit, if they're struggling with overload? This would be somewhere they can go to work, once work has been handed out in class. It could also be a quiet zone where such students can just take a breather, if they are otherwise okay being in their classroom. It may be a temporary 'break out' room, or for some students may be a solution for a longer period of time (e.g. a few months or a year, if recovering from burnout).

It would need to be quiet (no ticking clocks, not somewhere near annoying sounds such as machines etc), relatively low lighting (no fluorescent lights, dimmable options so that students can make it low, but room can be brighter when in use at other times), options for temperature control (e.g. turn up and down heating and/or Aircon, or use of fans and opening windows, working blinds/curtains), sound control such as using a fan as white noise can help also. If students are not able to work independently, the door may need to be kept open, or a member of staff pop in from time to time.

Food and eating

Is there is a small room that students can sit in if the main food hall is too loud, or they experience overload due to visual or olfactory input? Can they bring their own food if the school food is not okay for them?

Students that struggle with overload of social contact or sensory overload may also benefit from this.

Social group situations

Think about social group situations and what can be done to support difference – in essence, having a system and policies for providing for the social needs of introverted students or those that experience sensory overload.

- can students sit anywhere quiet during 'loud' social sections of the day e.g. breaks and lunch?
- can they eat in a separate room to the main food hall?
- are there indoor/quiet options for students who can't cope with the noise of outdoor play during breaks, or who react with extreme discomfort to certain weather or climate conditions e.g. heavy rain, snow, wind, high temperatures, high humidity?

Is there any facility for other students to know that designated quiet spaces are available and be able to join them e.g. introverted students, undiagnosed neurodivergent students, not just students with 'labels'?

Residential or day trips

What happens on day trips or other events away? Are there opportunities for students to take breaks and have valuable downtime when they need it? Can all the above be available to a greater or lesser extent when off school grounds? What considerations can be made for students in these situations?

Just as, for example, if a wheelchair user attended the school, residential trips would need to consider wheelchair access and support throughout the entire trip, so too, there needs to be consideration of needs relating to neurological and social differences of some students.

In cases of burnout

If a student's needs have been identified too late, or they have hit burnout, and can no longer attend school, the return to school needs to be carefully managed, ideally in communication with the student's psychologist/psychiatrist/therapist – whoever is best suited to this role.

For example:

1. between one and six months at home entirely, with minimal or no work (depending on the severity of the burnout and dictated by student's needs)
2. next stage, move to half an hour a day at school until this feels manageable – this may be with or without work, led by the student's needs – which subjects feel easiest to take on first – are they open to the most important subjects (as judged by the school)?
3. move to an hour a day, starting with only one or two subjects, led by the student's needs – which subjects feel easiest to take on first – are they open to the most important subjects (as judged by the school)?
4. move up to 2-3 hours a day, and so on, slowly working up to full time if possible, and slowly adding in more subjects/school work

Different students may prefer one or two full days in school, instead of five short days, and this needs to be discussed and agreed with the student and their family.

There may also need to be a permanent arrangement of one day a week at home e.g. Wednesday, or half day Wednesdays, or off on Fridays. It may be trial and error to find what works.

Obviously best-case scenario is an education system and school environment that works for all students, but we are a long way from this being a reality in the vast majority of schools. In the meantime, such students need to be supported where they are, and supported to achieve their potential, because the sad reality is that currently many highly intelligent and capable students are being failed at the present time.

Extra notes

There are other possible sources of support for parents, which will vary by country. Schools can support parents in accessing these, with the knowledge that parents in ND families are likely overwhelmed and may be near burnout, so accessing these supports may feel too much for them to navigate alone. Depending on which country you're in, these might include:

- Funding for time off work for caring responsibilities with children diagnosed with autism etc, intended to pay for or towards:
    - reduced hours at work/not being able to work because of caring responsibilities, and
    - other costs e.g. weighted blankets, wobble cushions at home.
- Sleep nurse.
- Regular Occupational Therapy support for issues arising from sensory overload, dyspraxia etc. for both home and school.
- CBT if needed or helpful.

Parents in Sweden can access financial support from Försäkringskassan (omvårdnadsbidrag), and community support from the LSS department of their kommun. Support for children with autism, including therapy, is available from Habilitering (who can also liaise with schools to develop school support plans for children), and there is also support available for children with ADHD.

This is not an exhaustive list. While working with your students and their support network, I am sure you will come up with many other ideas and options that you feel are important to implement, perhaps more important than those listed here.

- The way to start with all this is to identify what the students' needs are, list them out, and then try to identify support or modifications for each identified need.
- You will certainly need to speak with the student themselves – many neurodivergent children, young people and adults have a very high level of awareness of what they struggle with – the issue is that many will have been masking a long time, and may feel they are not allowed to ask for their needs to be met.
- You will also need to speak with parents, carers or other adults in their lives, including any doctors, psychologists or therapists involved in their support, and any teachers they feel particularly close to.

I would highlight that I absolutely don't place blame on any school or teacher, this is all a very steep learning curve, and one that we are unfortunately fairly close to the bottom of at present. It is my desire to see such modifications/improvements become standard in all schools at some point, just as, for example, access for wheelchair users is now mandatory in many public spaces. Relatively minor tweaks to the way things are done can help enormously.

For more tips, please feel free to check out my YouTube channel, The Rambling Counsellor. For example, there are videos around revision and exam time, healthy or necessary differences in socialising, and how to respond to triggering, manipulative, or difficult students or children. Pooky Knightsmith is also an excellent speaker on all things neurodivergent with an enormous amount of information available for free to educators – really helpful practical tips. I highly recommend her work – she offers both videos and podcasts – she's on YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook at least, and probably other places too.