

**Embracing Neurodiversity in Education: Promoting the Inclusion of Autistic
Students in Education Through Podcasts**

by

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Portfolio

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I began the pursuit of a Master of Education degree after 16 years of teaching secondary music and drama and 15 years as a mother of two boys (one with an autism diagnosis). Even though my son has this diagnosis and is offered some support at school, I felt compelled to learn how to better advocate for children like him, and others who are neurologically different and struggle in the education system. I've seen my son and students like him struggle to be understood and socially included in school. On a personal level, I have been frustrated by the lack of knowledge that educators, students, and administrators demonstrate about autism and inclusive practices. Year after year I have had to educate my son's teachers about things like helping him build relationships, why he struggles to engage, and why he might struggle with anxiety or sensory overload, along with having an autism diagnosis and an Individual Education Plan (IEP). I found myself having the same conversations with different teachers. I came to realize that more needed to be done to create acceptance, inclusion and especially understanding about autism and students who look or act in different ways. Consequently, I went back to school myself to figure out how I could create more awareness and make some kind of difference.

Throughout my master's program, I focused on stories written by those with an autism diagnosis and read research that included their perspectives. The neurodiversity movement became central to my work and learning. I saw value in helping educators, school administrators, and students understand neurodiversity to improve outcomes for students with an autism diagnosis and who are neurologically different (Garcia, 2021). These students are often excluded and misunderstood for falling outside of society's definition of normal (Garcia, 2021). My son found it challenging to gain understanding from peers, and this became more difficult as he got older.

Purpose of Portfolio

The purpose of this portfolio is to share how students with an autism diagnosis can benefit when their teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and peers learn about neurodiversity. In my project, I asked the following questions to explore ways educators can create an inclusive school community for Autistic students.

1. What are the experiences of Autistic youth in secondary schools? (Exploring behavior, anxiety, sensory differences, gender, and special interests).
2. How does promoting the neurodiversity mindset among students and educators promote the inclusion of Autistic students in secondary schools? I also sought to explore strategies that support inclusion in the classroom and school community.

The findings provide insight into the strategies and approaches that educators and parents can use to foster social development, inclusion, and acceptance of students with an autism diagnosis.

In my literature review, I noted many Autistic authors and share their insights as well as ideas for incorporating strategies for inclusion and also explored how the neurodiversity perspective benefits all students (Armstrong, 2012; Garcia, 2021; Honeybourne, 2018; Kapp et al., 2019; Loud Hands, 2012; Majoko & Majoko, 2016; Nerengerg, 2020; Price, 2022; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2021).

The objective of this portfolio was to develop a space where I could share and amplify Autistic people's work, share strategies to better support Autistic people for inclusion, and explore the concept of neurodiversity in education in the form of podcasts. I also had the idea that these podcasts could potentially carry on after this portfolio work. In the end, I hope to share my work with colleagues, friends, and family to encourage inclusion of Autistic people in terms of what Autistic people are saying about inclusion.

Rationale for Research Project

Neurodiversity is closely aligned with the *social model of disability* (Singer, 1999). It is opposed to viewing and relating to students through the medical model where students are treated as having deficits (Honeybourne, 2018; Singer, 1999). Through my literature review, which is presented in the next section, I explored the importance of educating teachers, administrators, and students about neurodiversity to promote inclusion of students with differences, focusing specifically on how this approach might benefit students with an autism diagnosis. I examined literature written by those who have an autism diagnosis and current research that includes the voices of students and professionals with an autism diagnosis. I examined their experiences in the education system and the importance of teaching others about neurodiversity. My rationale for this project in the form of podcasts is to promote inclusion and encourage educators to learn from parents of those with an autism diagnosis and from Autistics. By doing this, educators can gain important insights and strategies for creating inclusive schools for all (Moore, 2016). The literature review that follows was adapted from the one I created for my directed study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Embracing Neurodiversity in Education to Promote Inclusion of Autistic Students in Schools

There is a lack of inclusion of students with autism and people struggle accepting their core and unique differences in terms of movement, conversation, and behaviour (Honeybourne, 2018). As a high school teacher, I have observed the exclusion of students with an autism diagnosis. I continue to witness a lack of knowledge and awareness among my colleagues and students about their neurological differences and acceptance of their perceived differences.

More students than ever are diagnosed with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, and many more go undiagnosed (Nerenberg, 2020; Silberman, 2015). Currently 1 in 44 children are identified with autism spectrum disorder (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). Special education in schools is currently linked to a medical model of disability that pathologizes students who have differences (Hodkinson, 2016; Honeybourne, 2018; Skidmore, 1996). “The medical model suggests that the individual can be fixed, treated, cured or ameliorated through medication, therapies, or intervention” (Honeybourne, 2018, p.15). Creating awareness about neurodiversity can lead to pride in identity and differences and inclusion for all students (Armstrong, 2012; Moore, 2016; Nerenberg, 2020). I want my son and children like him to be supported academically and socially by educators and peers by understanding their verbal, behavioural, and social differences (Garcia, 2021; Nerenberg, 2021; Price, 2022).

It is standard practice for educators to use person-first language when discussing students with an autism diagnosis. However, there are self-advocates in the autistic community who prefer to use identity-first language when it comes to their differences (Kenny et al, 2016). Kenny et al, (2016) conducted a study with 7,000 Autistic individuals which showed that 90%

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preferred the identity-first language (Kenny et al., 2016). Specifically, many with an autism diagnosis ask to be called Autistic or an Autistic person, because they believe their brain wiring is an integral part of who they are (Garcia, 2021; Jaarsma & Welin, 2011; Loud Hands, 2012; McGuire, 2016; Price, 2022; Walker, 2021). This proposal will refer to those who have an autism diagnosis as Autistic. Jim Sinclair's 1993 essay, "Don't Mourn for Us" in "Loud Hands: Autistic People Speaking" (2012) articulates the danger in separating a person from autism as the current medical model of disability does. Sinclair states:

Autism isn't something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person-and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with (p.16).

My son would not be the same child as I know him today if his ways of being (ways that he thinks, moves, feels, and talks) were extinguished and manipulated. The ways he experiences life and connects to his family and the world are uniquely his.

Why Educate About Neurodiversity to Promote Inclusion?

Neurodiversity (neurological diversity) is an idea that was created by Judy Singer, who advocated that autism has always been a part of human diversity (Singer, 1999). Neurodiversity recognizes and celebrates brain diversity by acknowledging that there are many different types of ways that brain's function, communicate, and learn (Armstrong, 2012; Honeybourne, 2018; Nerenberg, 2021). "The neurodiversity approach is primarily a call to include and respect people whose brains work in atypical ways, regardless of their level of disability and it requires

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challenging assumptions of what's normal” (Garcia, 2021, p. 112). Viewing difference through a neurodiversity lens offers the perspective that being neurodiverse is a natural form of human difference and a natural part of human variance (Honeybourne, 2018).

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability aligns with the neurodiversity lens as it distinguishes between disability (exclusion, restriction from activities and places) and impairment (having a missing or defective part of the body) and acknowledges that how they are viewed are created socially (Garcia, 2021; Molly & Vasil, 2002). From this viewpoint, Honeybourne (2018) discusses how the attitudes and beliefs in society create barriers for people with impairments, and that it is society that must be treated and not those who have a disability. Viewing students through a neurodiversity lens does not mean that students who are Autistic do not have disabilities that require support in education, but that the neurological difference itself isn't viewed as requiring a cure (Garcia, 2021; Honeybourne, 2015; Price, 2022; Silberman, 2015; Walker; 2021). Autism viewed as neurodiversity means that autism is conceptualized as a neurological, genetic, and developmental disability where every person exhibits unique brain connectivity from hyper-connection to under-connection, and each Autistic brain responds differently to their environment (Price, 2022). Molly and Vasil (2002) have argued that the neurodiversity movement creates a lens to celebrate all differences in the same way that culture, race, and gender are celebrated and accepted within schools (Walker, 2021).

Medical Model of Disability

The medical model looks at disability as “an illness that could be eradicated if we could develop treatments for illnesses and impairments” (Molly & Vasil, 2002, p. 662). Autistic authors are writing about their experiences as students in the education system and how they

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experienced discrimination and oppression by teachers, peers, administrators, and parents viewing them through a medical lens that views them as not “normal” (Honeybourne, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Kapp et al., 2013; Price, 2021). Price (2021) states:

Where the medical model of disability fails is in the making sense of disabilities that come from social exclusion or oppression. Sometimes what society (and the psychiatric establishment) considers to be an individual defect is in fact a perfectly benign difference that needs accommodation and acceptance instead. Though being gay was once classed as a mental illness, it never actually was one. Trying to “cure” gayness never worked, and only caused more psychological damage. (p. 230)

Autism, also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and sometimes Asperger’s Syndrome, is one of the most common neurological diagnoses in children in the world (Dillon et al., 2016; Ghali et al., 2014; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021; Price, 2022). There are 52 million diagnosed cases of ASD around the world (Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). Orgega (2009) points out that “it is important to recall that no consensus has been reached concerning the ontology of autism” (p. 435). Focusing on Autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder through the medical lens and considering markers such as social and verbal impairment, restrictive movement, behavior, and hyper-focused interests is harmful to Autistic students (and their caregivers) because these are identified as deficits (Dillon et al., 2016; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). Consequently, medical experts working with Autistic children try to control aggression or stereotypical movements and behavior through therapy and medications (Nistor & Dimitru, 2021).

Society’s View of Autism Impacts Autistics in Schools

Students who are perceived as *weird* or *different* suffer from negative views from others around their weirdness due to society’s dominant medical messaging around normalcy and the

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need to find a cure for Autism (Garcia, 2021; Kapp et al., 2013; Price, 2021; Walker, 2021).

Autistic author Devon Price (2021) states “kids and adults alike chided me for being too *weird*” (p. 4). There are many “Red Flags for Autism” posters that can be found online that were created for advocates around what is the “developmental norm” and what is “pathological deviance” (AutismOntario, 2013; McGuire, 2016). McGuire (2016) explores how posters such as these educate others around abnormality and “in the rules of normalcy” (p.84). Posters and information rooted in the medical model impact attitudes towards Autistics that become barriers to acceptance for them and other neurodivergent students in schools (De Boer & Pijl, 2016; McGuire, 2016). These posters often contain stick-like figures where the illustrator offers a few of the possible scenarios that could “show” autism. Common images on these posters state things like: “displaying indifference”, “joins in only if adult insists and assists”, “one-sided interaction”, “echolalic-copies words like parrot”, indicated needs by using an adult’s hand”, “does not play with other children”, “talks incessantly about only one topic”, “bizarre behaviour”, “variety is not the spice of life”, inappropriate laughing or giggling”, “handless or spins objects”, “no eye contact”, lack of creative pretend play”, and “but some can do some things very well very quickly but not tasks involving social understanding” (The National Autistic Society, 2008). McGuire states, “The poster that lists signs of autism offers the viewer cues that belong to a visual culture where any sign of autism is implicitly narrated as a warning sign” (p.87). A PDF of McGuire’s work “War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence” can be found online where McGuire examines these posters and their harmful messaging. One can download McGuire’s work for free here:

https://www.academia.edu/19895932/War_on_Autism_On_the_Cultural_Logic_of_Normative_Violence.

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Bitsika et al., (2022) explored Autistic boys' disinterest in socializing and school refusal and discovered the school refusal "is a consequence of negative social experiences" (p. 198). My own son experienced school refusal due to lack of understanding of his need for social support. Once I took the time to talk to his educators about ways they could support him socially in the classroom, school became a place he felt safe and understood and he enjoyed attending school.

Some specific strategies I suggested to support my son socially included: assigning groups for group work and placing him with at least one familiar student. I suggested applying strategies to the entire class as they would benefit all students and it would normalize differences. For example, I requested supplying a set of noise cancelling headphones for the classroom and discussing with students that they are available for anyone. I asked them to discuss learning differences in a positive way saying things like "some people enjoy more quiet to focus". I emphasized the importance of inclusion being for all and that my son not be singled out so he would feel more comfortable using them.

McGuire (2016) explores true stories of violence that have occurred in Canada with caregivers towards Autistic children and the narratives that have been used to normalize this violence in society. For example, the narrative used by the Autism Research Institute states "caring for a child with autism can stress parents beyond their limits" (Johnson, 2021, para 1). A common implicit narrative in the media, by organizations, and in society says that if parents or caregivers are not given support, acts of violence will happen (McGuire, 2016). Additionally, McGuire (2016) states that when organizations frame disability this way, acts of violence become normalized towards Autistic people. Stories about Autistic youth being put into restraints or isolation rooms for extended periods of time by their educators in Canada are still in the news today (Bitsika et al., 2022; Boothby, 2020; Hong & Pagel, 2022).

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Treatments Aimed to Control Autistic “Traits” in Autistic Students

Education policy is also informed by dominant advocacy groups promoting cures and treatments that imply autism is undesirable and a negative thing (Garcia, 2021; McGuire, 2016; Price, 2022; Walker, 2022). For example, in 2009, Autism Speaks (a non-profit organization that seeks to support families by offering therapies for Autistic individuals and conducting research with the goal of curing autism) posted a video on their platform that compared Autism to Aids and Cancer (Diament, 2009). McGuire’s book *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence* confronts narratives of organizations such as Autism Ontario and the media which promote a storyline around autism being a crisis or something that needs fixing (McGuire, 2016). McGuire examines how pathology and the medicalization of racialized bodies, gendered bodies, classed bodies, disabled bodies have all been oppressed in society through medicalization of their differences. With these negative views of autism and children who are seen as weird or different, Autistic students will continue to be victims of violence, pain, and exclusion everywhere, including school (McGuire, 2016).

Autistic author Dr. Nick Walker (2021) discusses social inequality that happens when a group is established as “normal”, “default” or “healthy” implying that members not in this group are “deviations” (Walker, 2021, p. 23). Autistic people are and have been subjected to many treatments to try and “cure” or manage Autism over the course of history including: psychotropic drugs, electroconvulsive therapy, sub coma insulin shocks, the drug Metrazol, industries offering ideas around cures, various diets promising cures, drinking chlorine dioxide (bleach that was sold to cure autism), hyperbaric chambers, chelation therapy (based on the myth that mercury in vaccines make children Autistic), and applied behavioral analysis known as ABA therapy (a popular therapy used where some of its practices are aimed to eradicate or control specific

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Autistic behaviors or movements) which are still used in education today (Garcia, 2021; Price, 2022). There are Autistic adults speaking out about the negative effects ABA therapy has had on them (Price, 2022; Loud Hands, 2012; McGuire, 2016; Walker, 2021). Garcia (2021) states, “the parameters of what is considered a ‘normal life’ are often defined by people who are not Autistic” (p. 18). Autistic people want to be included in the conversation and decision making around how they are treated and supported (Honeybourne, 2018).

Changing the Discourse

Autism advocates who have an autism diagnosis are changing societal discourse by challenging the power structures that govern them through policy and the dominant medical lens where autism must be fixed or fought against in schools (Garcia, 2021; Jurecic, 2007; Price, 2022; McGuire, 2016; Parks, 2011; Walker, 2021). McGuire (2016) explores how education policy that is created from a medical lens oppresses students with an autism diagnosis due to how they are treated as different, “less than”, or flawed by students, teachers, and administrators. Walker (2021) discusses how autism framed as a deficit promotes a dichotomy of “normal” and “not normal”. He explains that non-harmful Autistic ways of expressing, communicating, or behaving such as: hand flapping, galloping or spinning around a room when excited, and passionately discussing a special interest without picking up on a social cue, are all viewed as symptoms rather than ways of being that ought to be accommodated and accepted (Walker, 2021). Ideas around what is considered “normal” and “abnormal” cause discrimination towards those with an autism diagnosis in society, their school, and in their homes (McGuire, 2016; Price, 2022; Walker, 2021).

Autistic adults in the autistic community are speaking out against medical views of autism and therapies that try to change their behaviors. There are some Autistic people and their

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families who say therapy practice can be beneficial depending on who administers it, and there are still some with an autism diagnosis that want to be “cured” (Garcia, 2021). However, it is important to note that viewing differences through a neurodiversity lens in education does not mean Autistic people think all their conditions are good or that their challenges should be ignored (Garcia, 2021; McGuire, 2016; Price, 2022; Walker, 2021). It does mean that Autistic people deserve the same civil rights and treatment as neurotypical people (Garcia, 2021; McGuire, 2016; Price, 2022; Walker, 2021). Embracing Autistics for who they are and supporting and acknowledging their needs are complementary to one another (Garcia, 2021; Honeybourne, 2015; Price, 2022). Every Autistic child has different needs, some requiring more support than others in and out of the inclusive classroom. Educators and care givers should look to the Autistic community, parents, and other neurodivergent adults with lived experience for advice and support for Autistic individuals who do not have the ability to speak (Green, 2014). It is also important to keep in mind that there are many ways people can communicate other than using the voice. It is up to the caregivers and education system to learn how the child can communicate best, or to interpret and investigate the child’s behaviour as a valid form of communication (Green, 2014).

Autistic voices create important challenges to the dominant narrative and beliefs where autism is founded in the medical model of disability that marginalizes, excludes, and silences Autistic voices (Garcia, 2021; McGuire, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2021;). If people want to listen to actual autistic voices that are challenging the dominant medical lens, then “one must generally look outside the well-guarded walls of mainstream academic literature” (Walker, 2021, p. 149). Autistic lead organizations also include non-verbal Autistics who write and use other forms of communication to share their voice (Loud Hands, 2012). McGuire (2016) states, “as

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autistic narratives are naturalized as nothing other than symptomatic of an underlying pathology, they are politically neutralized and, ultimately, rendered dismissible” (p. 13). The Autistic Self Advocacy Network is run by Autistic individuals. Their website and Facebook page are a great place for educators and caregivers to find resources by Autistics.

Experiences of Autistic Students in Secondary Schools

Bullying

Autistic students experience more behavioral and emotional struggles compared to their neurotypical peers (Ashburner et al., 2010). Due to differences in behavior, emotional regulation, sensory challenges, and lack of understanding social cues, Autistic students struggle to connect socially (Ashburner et al., 2010; Dillon et al., 2016; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Laugeson et al., 2015; Maioko & Maioko, 2016). “People diagnosed with mental disorders are discriminated against, are stigmatized, and can be victims of violence, aggression, and bullying” (Nistor & Dimitru, 2021, p. 3). Dillon et al., (2016) report that because Autistic students struggle to socialize, “they become targets of bullying” (p. 222). The literature demonstrates that students with a diagnosis of autism are at a higher risk of victimization, bullying, social rejection, and being misunderstood (Ashburner et al., 2010; Dillon et al., 2016; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Laugeson et al., 2015; Maioko & Maioko, 2016; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). In a study exploring high school experiences of Autistic students, their diaries reported regular bullying, and the authors concluded that “bullying and teasing were experienced at different levels of severity and regularity by nearly all of them” (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 34). Even when trying their best to socialize, without social support in education, many Autistic children continue to be rejected and become victims of abuse (Chamberlain et al., 2007). It is also common for their peers to also exploit their naivety (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Bitsika et al., 2022 conducted a study around

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Autistic boys and school refusal. School refusal is when children refuse to leave the house to attend school. There is nothing a parent can do to get their child to school. When my son was young, it looked like kicking and screaming and crying and there was nothing anybody could do to calm him down if I dropped him off at school in that state. I would just be called to come back and pick him up. As my son got older, he would not get out of bed if he didn't want to go to school. He would not be able to explain his reasons. There was nothing I could do get him to agree to go to school. Bitsika et al, 2022 found that school refusal was connected to bullying at school since Autistic students lack the skills for responding to being bullied. When school refusal happens, Autistic students disengage and refuse to go to school. Autistic students are less likely to report when they are being bullied due to lack of confidence and social skills to do so (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The bullying and teasing experienced by Autistic students impact emotional wellbeing and mental health by creating poor self-esteem and depression (Gracia, 2021; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). In my son's case, I was able to create a plan with educators around supporting him socially at school. Once this was in place, the school refusal stopped.

Isolation

Many educators lack understanding about individual Autistic students' needs and lack confidence to provide social and academic support, which results in support staff working with these students (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). Teachers also struggle to support special needs students in the classroom due to lack of: understanding student needs, minimal in class support, and the lack of time to meet the individual needs of each Autistic student (Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). How educators view and treat Autistic students impacts how they are treated by their peers (Nistor & Dimitru, 2021; Moore, 2016). The use of isolation

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rooms and restraints as punishment due to misunderstanding and lack of knowledge continues today in Canada (Boothby, 2020; Hong & Pagel, 2022).

Autistic students experience loneliness due to a lack of friendships (Ashburner et al., 2010; Chamberlain et al., 2007). However, Autistic author Devon Price (2022) states “my social isolation was a way of rejecting other people before they could reject me” (p. 9). Many Autistic students spend their lunch times, breaks, and unstructured portions of class alone because they are not understood (Dillon et al., 2016; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Autistic students struggle to have social interactions, and often withdraw from social situations (Bitskika et al., 2022; Laugeson et al., 2015). Dillon et al., (2016) note that Autistic students also have fewer social interactions compared to their peers to avoid possible conflicts (Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Laugeson et al., 2015). The result in not having quality or meaningful friendships in school which contributes to isolation and loneliness (Laugeson et al., 2015). Laugeson et al. (2015), also found that the loneliness and lack of support experienced by Autistics leads to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. “Peer rejection is one of the strongest predictors of poor mental health outcomes” (Laugeson et al, 2015, p. 397). Nistor and Dimitru (2021) found that “stigma is one of the major sufferings of people with mental disabilities, affecting their quality of life” (p. 3). Autistic people are at a high risk of anxiety and depression due to bullying, isolation, and victimization, and are at a higher risk for suicide because of many or all these things (Garcia, 2021; Hirvikoski et al., 2020; Price, 2022; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021).

Sensory Challenges

It is important for people to understand the sensory challenges of Autistic students. Jenara Nerenberg is Autistic, a Harvard graduate, and offers lectures in neuroscience. Nerenberg (2021) explains that when Autistic people become overwhelmed, their emotions are connected to their

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senses. She explains that sensitivity is both “a strength and a challenge” (p. 56). While adults can avoid places that cause sensory overwhelm, children in school cannot always do this and they become anxious (Nerenberg, 2021). Nistor and Dimitru (2021) state “there is a direct relationship between the architecture of spaces, classrooms or other school activities and the academic motivation, well-being or social relationships of students” (p. 2). Autistic students prefer having a routine, and an environment that is predictable that supports their sensory difficulties such as non-loud and visually chaotic places, as they struggle with inattention and hyperactivity when overstimulated (Ashburner et al., 2010; Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Autistic students describe physical pain when feeling overstimulated visually or by sound (Ashburner et al., 2010; Nerenberg, 2021). When Autistic people become overwhelmed, they can behave or move in ways that are not understood by non-Autistics (Price, 2022).

While group work is beneficial for Autistic students, educators need to ensure that groups are not too big because if Autistic students find a group too big, it could be too loud and can cause disengagement or other unwanted behaviours, due to sensory overwhelm (Dillon et al., 2016). “They feel disabled because of the generally overstimulating environments of dominant neurotypical culture and settings” (Nerenberg, 2021, p. 89). Autistic students can also underperform academically due to their lack of understanding and support in education with regulating their sensory challenges (Ashburner et al, 2010). Sensory challenges lead to academic under-achievement and meltdowns (Ashburner et al, 2021; Nerenberg, 2021). Statistically, 54% of Autistic students (compared to 8% of their neurotypical peers) struggle with academic achievement due to sensory challenges in the classroom (Ashburner et al., 2010). This low achievement level creates low self-esteem and impacts motivation in school (Ashburner et al.,

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2010). More support and understanding are needed for Autistic students dealing with sensory challenges.

Piller & Barimo (2019) discuss strategies used by occupational therapists to help engage or calm students but enforce that every child is different and that it is important to get to know individual students to best find ways to calm or engage each one. Sometimes students need help engaging, so movement that optimizes arousal is best such as exercises involving jumping, swinging arms, and squishing a ball (Piller & Barimo, 2019). Other times, students need help calming down. Piller & Barimo (2019) suggest things like natural lighting, a weighted vest or a fixed focused visual for students to look at.

Masking

Devon Price is Autistic and writes about their personal experiences and struggles in *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity*. Masking is the term used to describe how Autistic people camouflage or try to hide their different traits to blend in with neurotypical people (Price, 2022). Price (2022) writes “being a masked Autistic is eerily similar to being in the closet about being gay or trans. It’s a painful state of self-loathing and denial that warps your inner experience” (p. 252).

Humphrey & Symes (2010) found that when Autistic students are academically successful, their social deficits go unnoticed by educators, as it is assumed they can cope socially, no matter how severe their difficulty to socialize may be. However, this could also be due to the effort Autistic students put into masking during the class (Price, 2022). Masking can also include compensating by trying to appear independent, such as being passive when they truly feel overwhelmed (Price, 2022). Most Autistic people “mask everything from our

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information processing style to our lack of coordination, to our limited food preferences, to the fact that we require more rest than neurotypical people” (Price, 2022, p. 97).

Autistic students experience social judgements about unique behaviors or movements such as stimming (for example, hand flapping or rocking), and many therapies teach Autistics to stop or control movements like these (Kapp & Crane, et al., 2019; Price, 2022). Price (2022) says that encouraging Autistics to stop certain unharmed movements produces shame. In “Loud Hands: Autistic People Speaking”, Autistic author Julia Bascom discusses her pain around being forced to keep her hands from flapping through ABA therapy which encouraged “quiet hands” (Loud Hands, 2012). She states, “our joy should be our shame, our movements not our own, and so we withdraw” (Loud Hands, 2012, p.202). When Autistic students are encouraged to refrain from doing non-harmful movements, they learn to suppress how they would express intense emotions and this leads to high feelings of anxiety and feelings of shame (Garcia, 2021; Price, 2022). Autistics also implicitly learn from peers and educators through looks, comments, and exclusion (Price, 2022; Garcia, 2022). They learn to hide and suppress specific movements or traits unique to them that are not expressed by non-Autistic students, such as hand flapping (Price, 2022; Garcia, 2021).

Acceptance is not a reality for Autistic students as their peers and educators do not understand or value their different ways of being (behaving, speaking, or moving) (Garcia, 2021; McGuire, 2016; Price, 2022; Walker, 2022). “The reclaiming of previously suppressed ways of moving, can be intense and profoundly transformative” (Walker, 2021, p. 186). The neurodiversity movement has created an “Autism Culture” where nonviolent/nonharmful Autistic ways of being (moving, talking, behaving) are accepted, celebrated, and encouraged (Kapp, 2019). If schools embraced all ways of being, moving, and communicating, and teachers,

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administrators, and students were educated about neurodiversity, it would pave a path of acceptance and understanding towards Autistic ways of being (behaving, speaking, and moving) where they are not seen as weird or abnormal. This could include educating about the reasons, the benefits, and the importance of specific non harmful movements and behaviours for Autistic people and create a culture of acceptance, empowerment, and Autistic pride among all students (Garcia, 2021; Honeybourne, 2018; Price, 2022; Kapp, 2019; Nerenberg, 2021; Walker, 2021).

Strategies for Inclusion

Educating the Educators

The way educators view their Autistic students impacts how their non-Autistic students treat those who are perceived as “weird” or “different” in their classrooms and schools (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Price, 2022; Simpson et al., 2003). Nistor and Dimitru (2021) state that “education and raising public awareness of the needs of people with psychosocial disabilities reduces social stigma and discrimination, strengthens cohesion, and creates an environment conducive to personal development and social inclusion” (p. 4). By taking time to train and educate all teachers (not just special education teachers), administrators, students, and other school personnel can foster positive attitudes around perceived weirdness or differences. By teaching educators and students about the idea of neurodiversity, a culture of acceptance is created for Autistic people and others with perceived difference or weirdness (Honeybourne, 2018; Moore, 2016; Price, 2022). Autistics who might be viewed as weird or in a negative way (because they act differently than neurotypical people) can be accepted and celebrated for who they are and for their ways of being (behaving, speaking, and moving) in the world and in schools (Honeybourne, 2018; Nistor & Dimitru, 2021). By promoting the concept that there is more than one way of being or existing in sports, literacy, and

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the arts, students can be taught that everybody behaves, speaks, moves, thinks, and learns differently, and this will foster self-esteem in Autistic students and acceptance towards differences for all students (Honeybourne, 2018; Nerenberg, 2021).

Helping Autistic Students Develop Friendships

Educators play an important role in creating inclusive environments for Autistic students (Dillon et al., 2016). There is a lack of awareness among educators when it comes to understanding Autistic students' personal challenges, especially if they do well academically (Ashburner et al., 2010). Autistic students need support in developing friendships, as they do not always have the interpersonal skills, ability to exchange feelings, or ability to always offer companionship (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Humphrey & Lewis, 2013; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Educators can help Autistic students through things like social skills training (Bitsika et al., 2022). Humphrey & Lewis (2008) discuss the importance of facilitating peer relationships between students who are Autistic and their peers. Honeybourne (2018) suggests that schools create opportunities for all students to connect and be in the company of others by offering structured activities and games lead by an adult and by offering spaces for hands on crafts or activities that engage students. Having planned activities for all students helps alleviate anxiety Autistics might have around interacting with others (Honeybourne, 2015).

Humphrey & Symes (2010) suggest that producing appropriate peer support in the classroom is one of the strongest ways to encourage positive relationships. Educators can plan group work during class strategically, ensuring groups are smaller, and that there is at least one person in the group that their Autistic students are comfortable with (Dillon et al., 2016). Educators can access programs that are available for helping to foster relationships between

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Autistic students and their peers. Laugenson et al., (2015) conducted a study on the effectiveness of the PEERS program, where Autistic students are taught strategies for social interaction. They found it to significantly improve the social skills of the youth in the study, especially if family members or caregivers were part of the training, enabling it to continue after the program finished. Teachers can also use social stories to help Autistic students communicate and consistently challenge attitudes and stereotypes that neurotypical students have towards Autistic students and other students with perceived differences (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Honeybourne, 2018; Moore, 2016).

Promoting Mental and Emotional Well-being

Educators need to be in continuous communication with parents to support and plan for inclusion of their Autistic students in schools (Chamberlain et al., 2007). Continually connecting to Autistic students' parents, other teachers, therapists, and networking with other parents of Autistic students, sets all students up for emotional success (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Developing a relationship with each Autistic student is crucial to supporting their unique challenges and strengths (Armstrong, 2012; Garcia, 2016; Honeybourne, 2018). Considering the school physical environment, educators are encouraged to keep it clean, free of excess clutter, visually less busy on the walls, and controlling the level of noise for their Autistic students, where quiet zones are accessible (Armstrong, 2012; Ashburner et al., 2010; Honeybourne, 2018). Inclusive environments that have a calming effect and help with focus are “predictable, consistent, and orderly” (Armstrong, 2012, p. 126). Honeybourne (2018) suggests using as much natural light as possible and turning fluorescent lights off when not needed as many students find them bothersome. Students should also be allowed to take breaks in a pre-

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decided designated (non-punitive) place as a retreat from noise and overstimulation when needed (Armstrong, 2012).

Future Implications

Approximately 20% of the human population is neurodivergent and many people go undiagnosed (Nerenberg, 2021). This has huge implications for educators because if educators create accepting and inclusive spaces where they are educating students about neurodiversity, then even students without a diagnosis will benefit because there will be less negative stigma around difference (Honeybourne, 2018; Moore, 2016; Nerenberg, 2021). The neurodiversity movement continues to gain acknowledgment and validity as Autistic professors such as Dr. Nick Walker continue to share their work and research. As the concepts of neurodiversity are explored and become part of academia, instructors will have to discuss how gatekeeping and the history around resistance towards marginalized voices such as Indigenous and LGBTQ+ voices take time to fight their way into academia (Walker, 2021). After reading about the experiences of Autistic individuals written by Autistic individuals, one can see that there is a need for change in how Autistic students are viewed and treated in society and education. “The writings and perspectives of actual Autistic persons must be central, not peripheral, to the curriculum” (Walker, 2021, p. 149).

There needs to be more education for teachers, administrators, and students on how to support Autistic students in schools. Future research should explore teacher training around empowering Autistic students in schools (Honeybourne, 2018). Further research could also explore the “why” behind the behavior and the need for Autistic empowerment, with a focus on Autistic voices (Prizant, 2015). Research could examine how the concept of neurodiversity in education can change how students with differences are perceived, treated, and included by peers

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and educators (Honeybourne, 2018). Research could also focus on the talents and gifts of Autistics and other students with disabilities (Armstrong, 2012).

Summary

Autistic students will continue to feel excluded and oppressed in education if the dominant medical model is accepted as the “normal” way of being. Promoting a neurodiversity mindset in education offers exciting avenues for acceptance and celebration of different ways of being (moving, speaking, and behaving) in education (Nerenberg, 2015). By learning about neurodiversity, educators can help to create pride in identity for those who are perceived as weird, different, or abnormal in schools, just as those who are different genders or race are celebrated and normalized (Garcia, 2021; Honeybourne, 2015; Moore, 2016; Nerenberg, 2021; Price, 2022; Walker, 2022). Normalizing different ways of moving, speaking, and behaving is inclusive and promotes inclusion for Autistic people (Garcia; 2021). Nerenberg (2021) suggests that a neurodiversity approach is about “reframing the experience of humanity” (Nerenberg, 2021, p. 120). Armstrong (2012) states that “the concept of neurodiversity suggests that we shift paradigms from one based on deficits and ‘remediation’ (literally, the reconnecting of what has been damaged) to one based on the cultivation of strengths” (p. 25). Schools should make opportunities to educate about neurodiversity to promote inclusion for all (Armstrong, 2012; Moore, 2016; Nerenberg, 2021).

Chapter 3: Methodology for Podcast Creation

Throughout my master's degree, I was drawn to qualitative research as well as arts integrated research. I felt I could use these methods to create something tangible for educators. I wanted to create something that could inspire change, challenge perceptions, and create understanding for children like my son. I decided to conduct my research through interviewing participants to investigate perspectives and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The aim of the interviews was specifically to explore and share ways to support the inclusion of Autistic youth in education by exploring and sharing parent and teacher perspectives with the public. The end goal of my work was inspired by arts integrated research where I would share the interviews through publishable podcasts to a target audience of educators, administrators, and those working with Autistic youth in schools to build empathy and understanding and to create something to “provoke thinking and generate discussion” (Sameshima et al., 2019, p.7).

To begin my inquiry, I combined my own experience as the researcher in the creation of structured predetermined interview questions to be used in the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The questions I created related to me personally, as a mother of a child with an autism diagnosis, and as an educator. This form of narrative inquiry offered a valid perspective where I (the researcher) integrated personal experience to explore and make connections with the participant during the interview, analysis, and published work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For the interviews, I used purposeful sampling where I reached out to friends with Autistic children and teachers with Autistic students to see if any were willing to participate. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss gaining insight through selected samples. I used convenience sampling because I selected “a sample based on time, money, location, and availability” (p.98).

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This was due to the difficulty in finding people who had the time, willingness, and ability to participate. Two of the original fathers I thought would participate declined after reading the email and participant letter. I then emailed 2 mothers who I knew also had Autistic children and received a willingness to participate from one of them. For the teacher interview, it took longer to find someone willing to participate, but I was very pleased that a special needs educator showed interest.

After collecting consent forms, as part of my inquiry, I emailed interview questions (as part of my narrative inquiry) to my participants with the option to prepare their answers before the interview if they choose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To collect data, I scheduled a follow-up interview with each candidate for a recorded Zoom interview. During my interviews, I asked participants the questions they received by email (see Appendix 3).

At the beginning of the zoom meetings, I chatted with the participants without recording them to make them feel comfortable before recording the actual interview with the specific questions and ensured I still had their consent to record the interview. After the interviews were completed, I stopped the recording and explained that I would send them the recording for review to ensure they were comfortable with me publishing the recording as a podcast on Spotify. Once given permission to publish the zoom audio recording, I used the Anchor app on my cell phone associated with Spotify to record the zoom audio recording from my computer.

Through podcasts, I was also able to create a space where I could share and publish my learning as well as promote works by Autistic authors who offer suggestions for those working with Autistic individuals around better supporting them for inclusion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the creation of my first podcast, I developed an artefact that offered a snapshot into the key takeaways of my learning about what Autistic people have been saying about their right to exist

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the way they want to exist, and how that relates to inclusion in education (Sameshima et al., 2019; Price, 2022). I shared and discussed common themes and ideas written by Autistic individuals, linking them to the importance of neurodiversity.

For my second podcast, I interviewed a parent to gain perspective and to give educators a glimpse into what some parents of Autistic children experience in the education system with the hopes that it might offer insight, invoke empathy, and improve understanding. Through the interview I collected insights to share with educators from a parent perspective and drew personal connections in the analysis process.

For my third podcast, I interviewed a special education teacher who supports Autistic youth in high schools. I wanted to find out what specific things this teacher was doing to support Autistic youth in school, and I wanted to share it as a podcast so other educators could learn from this resource. As educators, we can grow and learn from one another to improve inclusion for Autistic youth in schools from those who are already incorporating inclusive and neuro-affirmative practices in their classrooms.

Chapter 4: The Podcasts

Podcast 1: Neurodiversity in Education

Link to the podcast: <https://anchor.fm/sharon-rose-de-leon/episodes/Neurodiversity-in-Education-e24eres>

This podcast dives into my work in the master's education program. I begin with explaining my background as a mother and why I went back to school after 16 years of teaching. I share my journey and struggles as a mother in the school system trying to advocate for my Autistic son.

As a teacher I share what I've experienced around inclusion in schools. In addition, I share my passion for creating change around inclusion for Autistic students and students who are perceived as *different* or *weird* in the education system. I discuss the concepts of neurodiversity and explore how educating others about neurodiversity can inspire inclusive education.

Throughout this podcast, I share Autistic authors who have impacted my parenting and teaching career and specific reasons around why listening to Autistic individuals around their lived experience and advice for educators is important. I share their perspectives and their insights and suggested strategies to amplify their voices for understanding and inclusion.

Podcast 2: Interview with Mother of Autistic Child

Link to Podcast: <https://anchor.fm/sharon-rose-de-leon/episodes/Interview-with-Mother-of-Autistic-Child-e24qe75>

This podcast interviews a mother of an Autistic child and her experiences with the education system. The mother discusses her challenges and shares examples around why it was difficult to find educators/support staff who were able to support and accommodate her child in the ways he needed in the classroom.

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The mother explores challenges educators face, and how they impact the level of support her son is able to get and describes the education system as a “brick and mortar system” that doesn’t fit all neurotypes.

The mother ends the podcast offering suggestions for inclusion for Autistic students in schools emphasizing the importance for educators to interpret a student’s behaviour and modify what they do to support their sensory needs. Finally, she advises that educators listen to neurodivergent individuals with lived experiences around working with and supporting Autistic children in schools.

Podcast 3: Interview with Teacher

Link to Podcast: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/sharon-rose-de-leon/episodes/Interview-with-Teacher-e24v2ei>

This podcast interviews a high school special education teacher about ways educators can support Autistic youth in schools and the classroom. The teacher begins by discussing some of the resources available to her roster of Autistic students, such as the sensory room that includes different activities students can participate in to calm down. The teacher offers examples of numerous strategies that can be used to support Autistic students such as routines, music, agendas, visuals schedules, “first and then” statements, presenting choice of activities, and “role play” practice for social situations.

In addition to strategies that can be used, the teacher discusses actions that teachers can take to alter the physical environment of the classroom. The teacher mentions how a supportive classroom environment (focusing on the senses) can help manage anxiety of Autistic students. The teacher emphasizes the importance for educators to build a relationship with these students and having conversations with them around what they feel or need.

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The teacher suggests the need for awareness and resources to be shared with educators during PD time as a way to support and advocate for Autistic youth, noting that most educators are probably not going to learn about Autistic youth in their free time do to various reasons like being over worked, and wanting to use personal time with their own families.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Podcast 1

The first podcast is an introduction, summarizing some of the key takeaways from my Master of Education journey, including my literature review. I discussed the importance of neurodiversity perspectives in education to promote inclusion and the importance of amplifying Autistic voices as a way for educators to gain insight, understanding, and encourage social acceptance around difference for inclusion of Autistic individuals. I also amplified Autistic authors' voices such as Devon Price, Nick Walker, Victoria Honeybourne, Eric Garcia, and Julia Bascolm, and offered resources for educators to learn around supporting neurodiversity in the classroom by people such as Jenna Neurenberg. The first podcast set the stage for the next two podcasts that explore inclusion for Autistic children from the perspective of a parent and a teacher.

I investigated first person accounts of stories in people's lives and was able to understand, retell, and summarize the information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since narrative inquiry looks at language used in people's stories and examines how stories are told, my research involved taking time to analyze the interviews I had conducted and to then draw personal connections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them with the help of the Zoom transcript maker. Through the process of transcribing, I discovered themes in the language and

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drew personal connections that could inform educators. Narrative inquiry carries meanings that are not just a theory, but that can be understood socially as they contain more than one component such as emotions, mental states, accounts of events, expression of identity, recounts of the past, and definitions that can overlap (Squire, et al, 2014).

Podcast 2

The second podcast was an interview of a mother of an Autistic boy and their experience with the education system. Interviews can help invoke empathy, compassion, and understanding due to their personal nature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My hope in sharing the podcast of a parent's perspective is that it will give educators insight into the parent's point of view and struggles. This podcast explored specific questions about their Autistic child's experiences around inclusion and advice for educators. A list of sample questions is included in Appendix 3.

I connected to the emotional plea of the mother for educators to learn more about children like theirs. Translating and connecting to the mother's emotions throughout the interview created another way to understand the data (Sameshima, 2019). The response to the first question in the interview was a longer pause. I understood this pause. It was a pause filled with a flood of emotions and there was a sense of overwhelm. One can analyze more than just the words spoken in an interview, but also the voice pitch, timbre, silences, and laughter, as they can convey an "emotional narrative" (Squire, et al, 2014, p.11). I understood the overwhelming emotion through the words spoken, but also the tone in her voice, especially when someone asks you about your child. When I have felt this way, there are just so many things I need to tell them to understand my son's complex needs for support and success in school. I like to think of our emotions through metaphor of an onion. As are the many layers of an onion, so are the various emotions we feel at once when someone inquires about our child. We feel deep love, deep pain,

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deep sorrow, and a deep need to share to make the world a better place for our child. So, when the mother was recalling some difficult situations her son faced, I connected to her emotion and to the pauses. For the published podcast, I tried shortening the long pause that occurred as it was so long that one might think the podcast stopped. In the interview, I broke the silence with an “it’s okay” as a way to say, “I understand the emotion you are feeling right now”. For the published podcast, I shortened the pause, but it is still long enough to feel the struggle and emotion she was feeling.

As the mother discussed her experience with trying to secure adequate support for her son, she used phrases like “brick and mortar system”, “challenging”, and shared that her son experienced trauma from educators who placed her child in segregation. The emotion of despair can be felt in parts of the interview, especially when the mother recalled the negative memories of her son in the school system and how she felt teachers did not actually follow his IEP (Individual Education Plan). This is an important idea for educators to consider. I connected to the frustrations the parent discussed around her perceived lack of teacher-invested care or interest in supporting her child. I also connected to her emotions of yearning and longing for educators to listen and learn about Autistic children. The whole interview was full of emotion, and in the end, a plea for educators to think outside the box when working with and responding to Autistic students to create inclusion in schools.

Podcast 3

The third podcast was an interview with a teacher who works successfully with Autistic youth. In the podcast, she offered inclusive practices and tips for teachers in supporting Autistic youth in school. My hope is to inspire other educators to try some of the different strategies shared that support inclusion for Autistic children.

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In transcribing podcast three of the interview with a teacher, I gained an appreciation for all the strategies and planning that she as a special needs educator has in place for Autistic children. Sameshima (2019) discusses how actively translating recorded data is “a form of analysis and indwelling” (p.8). In this podcast interview, the teacher shared resources available to educators around ways to support Autistic students in their classroom. She offered insight into sensory overload as well as strategies that educators can do to help with this. She also emphasized the importance of communication with the students and their support. It was also interesting to hear her correcting herself from saying “has autism” to “is autistic” a few times in the interview. She shared how a course she is taking includes a panel of actual Autistic individuals every second week where the teachers themselves bring cases to them of Autistic students they are struggling with, and the Autistic adults share their insights with the group around why things might be going the way they are and things they can do to support them. Not only is including actual Autistic people in Autism courses for educators a reflection of the neurodiversity movement, but this shift in language from “has” to “is” comes from the neurodiversity movement (Kapp, 2019; Walker, 2021). In analyzing the language from her interview, I felt excited to see this shift in language and know that Autistic adults are now being included and listened to more than ever before!

Chapter 6: Final Reflection

As a mother and educator, I had many reasons for creating this podcast project. First, I wanted to help create understanding and support for my own son in and out of school. Second, I wanted to help create understanding and support for students in school who are different like my son. I wanted to educate teachers, administrators, and others about things they can do to include

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Autistic students and help them build meaningful connections. Third, I wanted to promote a movement that empowers Autistic youth to embrace what makes them unique and different.

Throughout my journey in the Master of Education program, I have learned about research and how it can transform education. This sparked an interest and an appreciation for research in education. I enjoyed the arts integrated research course since it challenged me to think outside the box in terms of how research can be done. Through all the courses I have taken, I made a point of focusing on exploring works by Autistic authors who wrote about their experiences in society and in the education system. I wanted to help create understanding and change negative perceptions around *weirdness* and *difference* that impact Autistics still today (Price, 2022). I explored ways in which educators can empower and create a community of acceptance towards Autistic students with their ways of being (behaving, moving, and speaking) in schools and shared my findings with the public (Price, 2022).

As an arts educator, I loved the idea of creating a podcast series as a final project to end my master's journey. The act of creating something through this kind of artistic forum brought excitement and also a little bit of fear. Sameshima et al. (2019) state, "Risk is especially heightened in research through the arts because they engage emotion and identity on a deeply personal level" (p.56). However, I felt that even though it was a little bit scary, developing a podcast series would benefit a wide community of educators, students, and families.

Through recorded interviews, emotion is heard and felt, and empathy and understanding are created. "The arts press us into states of reflection on how we make meaning of the world, how we position ourselves in relation, and how we acculturate ourselves in the larger cultural community" (Sameshima et al., 2019, p. 57). Once I completed my interviews, I felt excited for

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people to listen to them. My passions about educating others about embracing neurodiversity in education and how to support Autistic youth in schools were finding their place in the world.

As I conclude this chapter of my life, I feel grateful for the work that is being done by so many actual Autistics. To move forward on this journey, I want to promote a movement that empowers Autistic youth to embrace what makes them unique and different. I want to create a culture that includes Autistic voices and perspectives in schools. I want to continue to listen to Autistic people about ways I can improve their education experiences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Email to Participants

Dear (Teacher/Parent),

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education of Lakehead University whose Masters' portfolio focuses on creating inclusive spaces for students who have an Autism diagnosis. I am also an OCT certified teacher. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview that will explore the experience of Autistic youth in high school. Your participation in my study would entail an interview that will be recorded by me. The interview questions will be sent to you ahead of time. Participants will be given a copy of the recorded interview and will have the opportunity to listen to the interview and request changes or modifications and offer input for edits or trimming. They will also be given the opportunity to review and give a final consent before the podcast is published. They will also be able to ask to not have their recording published publicly (i.e., only to grant permission to the committee members to listen). Participation in my project is entirely voluntary and choosing not to participate or opt out at any time will not affect my personal or professional relationship with you.

The information from the interviews will help me to identify and document various strategies that can be used to improve inclusive practices in high schools for Autistic youth.

I have attached a letter with detailed information about my study and a consent form if you wish to participate. I am also happy to answer any further questions you may have by email to me (srdeboer@lakeheadu.ca) or to my portfolio supervisors, Dr. Meridith Lovell-Johnston (mlovell@lakeheadu.ca) and Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo (smastran@lakeheadu.ca).

If you would like to participate in my study, I ask that you return the consent portion of the letter to me. This study has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board and approved by the SCDSB Research Office.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sharon De Leon



Appendix 2 Letter to Potential Participants

May 16, 2023

Dear potential participant,

I am a student in the Master of Education program at Lakehead University who is interested in amplifying Autistic voices and creating awareness about neurodiversity in schools, with a focus on how to better include, support, and empower students with an autism diagnosis. My work focuses on amplifying self-advocates including those who prefer identity first language. I am currently a high school teacher employed at Lakehead Public Schools in Thunder Bay, Ontario and I have a 15-year-old who is diagnosed with autism, ADHD, and a disability in working memory.

For my final portfolio project as a master's student, I would like to create a few podcasts that include interviews designed for educators to learn how to better support and create inclusive spaces for Autistic students in school. The title of my research project is "**Embracing Neurodiversity in Education to Promote the Inclusion of Autistic Students in Schools**". My first podcast will introduce my learning around inclusion for people with an autism diagnosis and discuss works by self-identifying Autistics. For one of my podcasts, I would like to interview you about your experiences in advocating for and supporting your Autistic child or students at school.

Participation involves answering a few questions that will be provided in advance and participating in a short audio interview in the range of 10 to 15 minutes which will be recorded

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and published on Spotify in a podcast series with your permission. I will create interview questions based on the research and stories I have read about the experiences of students with an autism diagnosis in schools. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions. Though there is no direct benefit to you, your participation in this podcast project will further my understanding and educate those working with Autistic students.

There is no foreseeable harm associated with participating in my portfolio project and participants may choose not to answer all questions. **Confidentiality**, as a participant in the project will be prioritized as far as possible using pseudonyms and/or removing identifiers in the recording such as the name of school you teach at, or any accidental names or identifiers mentioned during the recording in the interviews. You will also be able to request that your recorded interview not be published publicly (i.e., only to grant permission to the committee members to listen).

Your participation in this podcast project for my portfolio is entirely voluntary and choosing not to participate or to opt out at any time will not affect my personal or professional relationship with you. As the participant, your rights include: the right to not participate; to withdraw at any time during the interview phase before publication, to privacy, confidentiality; and to safeguards for security of data. You will be given the option to listen to the recording.

You can choose to opt out any time before publication without penalty and to have any collected data withdrawn before interviews are published. If you choose to opt out before the interview is published, the interviews will be destroyed. All recordings and information collected will be stored on a password accessible computer that is accessible to me and to my supervisors at their request. It will be stored locally on a hard drive and not the cloud. At the end of 7 years, all data will be securely deleted or archived.

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I have completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Tutorial Course on Research Ethics and provided a certificate as evidence of completion to my instructor. If at any time you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, please feel free to contact me by email at srdeboer@lakeheadu.ca, or by telephone at (807)474-7673. You may also email questions to my supervisors: Sonia Mastrangelo at smastran@lakeheadu.ca or Meridith Lovell-Johnston at mlovell@lakeheadu.ca.

This portfolio project has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at 807-343-8283 or research@lakeheadu.ca.

Your support as a participant will be a valued component to my proposed portfolio assignment and will support me in furthering my understanding of and ability to conduct qualitative research. I will send you the journal questions once I have completed them. Until then, please sign and return the form as I must submit all signed forms as part of my assignment.

Sincerely,

Sharon De Leon

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Faculty of Education

Lakehead University Participant Consent Form

Study title: **“Embracing Neurodiversity in Education to Promote the Inclusion of Autistic Students in Schools.”**

I, _____, (participant name) have read and understood the above information, including the potential risks and benefits of the project. I hereby consent to my participation in the interviews and recordings of the podcast portfolio project.

I understand:

- I have read and understand the participant information regarding the interviews and recorded podcast project.
- I am a volunteer and may withdraw from the research at any point during the data collection period.
- I may choose not to answer any questions.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- I will not be identifiable in any written documents, course presentations, or publications resulting from this project, unless I explicitly agree to have my identity revealed.

I also understand that the results of this project will be used only in the following:

- As part of a course assignment for a Master’s of Education degree.
- A recorded interview for a public podcast.
- All data and information by participants will be stored on a password accessible computer that is accessible to me. It will be stored locally on a hard drive, not the cloud until publication and shared with the supervisors of the project as needed. All data will be deleted or archived after 7 years.

Furthermore, I understand that if I request it, I will be provided with a copy of the student assignment and recordings.

 (Print Name)

 (Signature)

 (Date)

If requested by the student researcher, I hereby consent to be audio recorded as indicated by my signature below.

 (Print Name)

 (Signature)

 (Date)

Please sign and return this form to me, the student researcher. A copy of this consent form will be provided to the instructor. For further information concerning the completion of this form, please contact: Sharon De Leon at srdeboer@lakeheadu.ca or (807) 474-7673 and/or the instructors Sonia Mastrangelo at smastran@lakeheadu.ca or Meridith Lovell-Johnston at mlovell@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix 4: Outline of Podcasts and Interview Questions**Podcast 1: “Embracing Neurodiversity in Education to Promote Inclusion of Autistic**

Students in Schools”. Introduction. Discussing my learning and the importance for educators to learn about the concepts of neurodiversity to promote inclusion.

Interview Questions for Podcast 2 and 3**Podcast 2: Questions: Interview with parent of an Autistic Child**

Without saying identifying yourself, tell me about yourself and your Autistic child.

What did teachers do right to support your child?

What are the top 3 struggles your child had in school around inclusion?

What did teachers or staff do that was un-supportive of your child?

As a parent, what was the most frustrating thing you experienced?

What do you feel needs to happen to create inclusion for Autistic children in schools?

What do you want others to know?

Podcast 3-Questions: Interview of a Teacher

Without identifying yourself, what grade do you teach, and what are your subjects?

What are things you do in your school/classroom to support Autistic youth?

How do you assess what you are doing is benefiting the Autistics in the classroom?

What do you find the most challenging working with Autistic youth?

How can educators help to improve inclusion of Autistic students in schools?

Do you have any examples of ways teachers can help students become more inclusive towards those who are perceived as different?

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Appendix 5: Podcast Transcripts

Podcast 1 Transcript: Embracing Neurodiversity in Education to Promote Inclusion of Autistic Students in Schools

Sharon: Hello everybody! My name is Sharon, and I am thrilled to be here talking to you today! To give you a bit of information about myself, I've taught Music and Drama for 17 years in the Secondary school system in Canada, and I'm a mother of 15 years to two boys, one with a diagnosis of autism and ADHD!

I am very passionate about inclusion in schools, when it comes to the perceived quote *weird* and *different* kids in education. I am passionate about spreading awareness about the neurodiversity movement, amplifying autistic voices, and promoting inclusion for all in schools with a focus on students with an autism diagnosis (Moore, 2016).

I begin this series as a contribution toward my portfolio project for my master's in education degree. I felt compelled to go back to school to learn how I could better advocate for my own son and children like him to be better understood and supported at school. Even though it is standard practice for educators to use person-first language when discussing students with an autism diagnosis, there are some self-advocates in the autistic community who prefer to use identity-first language (Autism Ontario, 2023). A study from the UK, mentioned on the Autism Ontario website under the "What is autism?" section, discusses 7,000 Autistic individuals' perspectives around language use, and it showed that 90% preferred identity-first language (Kenny et al., 2016). Amplifying Autistic voices means listening to what they want, and also including them in decisions that impact them.

As I strive to amplify Autistic voices and experiences, you will notice all language that I use in this podcast series uses identity first language. I also seek to educate about neurodiversity

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which celebrates brain diversity and acknowledges that there are many types of brains, “everyone from Autistics to ADHDers, to people with Schizophrenia, to people with brain injuries” (Price, 2022, p.11).

For this podcast, I wanted to share some important words from Autistic authors that have impacted me as an educator and mother in terms of physical movements that some might try to suppress in the classroom. Educators and parents can learn so much from listening to Autistic people and those speaking as part of the neurodiversity movement. Autistic author Eric Garcia states that, “the neurodiversity approach is primarily a call to include and respect people whose brains work in atypical ways, regardless of their level of disability and it requires challenging assumptions of what’s (quote, unquote) normal” (Garcia, 2021, p.112).

I want to mention that I have explicit permission from my own Autistic son to discuss my experience as his mother and advocating for him in the education system. As an advocate, his permission to speak about him is part of truly supporting who he is.

Year after year I found myself having the same conversations with his teachers about how they could better support him socially. I came to understand from having the same conversations over and over each year, that more needed to be done to create acceptance and understanding for autistic students to experience inclusion in their schools when it came to physical movement or verbal sounds that he made. He would be told to be quiet if he was humming to himself or moving his hands in rapid motions during classwork or class activities.

Autistic author Devon Price wrote a book called “Unmasking Autism” which is a groundbreaking read, advocating and calling for neurotypicals to understand and support Autistic ways of being and moving so they may be accepted for their differences and “stop hiding their

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neurodiverse traits” (p.12). Price advocates for those seen by neurotypicals as ‘weird’ or ‘different’ encouraging the literal unmasking or hiding of Autistic non-harmful traits and movements such as hand flapping, spinning, or humming. (Price, 2022). Price states that “refusing to perform neurotypicality is a revolutionary act of disability justice. It’s also a radical act of self-love” (Price, 2022, p.11). So, what does this mean? It means we need to teach educators and students the importance of acceptance towards different ways of moving and being and existing in our educational spaces. By reading works written by Autistic individuals, one can learn about why they behave in ways that are different, understand, have compassion, and support non harmful behaviours (Delahooke, 2019).

Understanding that many neurodivergents have more sensitivities and being aware that sound in an environment or a strong emotion from another all-impact behaviour responses and the need for movement and verbal sounds amongst Autistics (Neurenberg, 2021). When educators learn about the why, they can foster compassionate and supportive responses working with Autistic students (Delahooke, 2019). The book “Loud Hands: autistic people speaking” is an anthology of stories collected by Autistic advocate, Julia Bascom. Every educator should explore this book to gain an inside look at the experiences and personal stories of Autistic people sharing personal stories and, in some cases, explaining their behaviours that are considered abnormal or weird.

In this anthology, Amy Sequenzia, a nonspeaking adult, writes about how she was taught to be sorry about being autistic and how she was forced to keep her hands quiet, even though they were her only way to communicate (Bascom, 2012). She went through many years of feeling ashamed for being Autistic and being told to keep her hands quiet and still; however, as she became aware of Autistic people standing up for their rights and demanding to be heard,

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understood, and respected, she was inspired to do the same for herself and she began communicating through typing and using her hands to express herself as needed (Bascom, 2012). She began writing and challenging others' perceptions of her and other Autistics like her who could not speak: about ideas such as being "low functioning" or unable to understand just because they can't use their voice (Bascom, 2012). She fought against the quiet hands that educators wanted. Her article states, "We want to be respected for who we are, autistics that flap, spin, twirl, fidget; autistics that communicate not only by talking but by any other way; we want to be included for the things we can do, the way we can do these things; we want to be supported so we can be ourselves and reach our potential, at our own time and in our own terms." (Bascom, 2012, pp.350-351).

Autistic author Nick Walker wrote about how the word "normal" is often "used to privilege one sort of human over others" (p.24). Walker advocates for "words as tools" and discusses Autistics and people with brain differences as the "neurominority" (p.25). Walker explores the oppression of Autistics due to their (quote, unquote) "abnormal" behaviors and how many in society have been forced to suppress things like specific hand movements that are part of how they express themselves (Walker, 2021).

In closing this first podcast, I want to end with one other resource recommendation for educators. Autistic author Victoria Honeybourne wrote a book called "The Neurodiverse Classroom" and it discusses the importance of the concept of neurodiversity in education because neurodiversity promotes that there is not one (quote, unquote) 'right' type of brain, and that diversity and variation of brain difference is normal (Honeybourne, 2018). She offers explanations and ideas around how to normalize different ways of being, responding, communicating, and moving within a classroom and around the importance of teaching

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acceptance towards these differences within the classroom to create inclusive spaces for Autistics.

Divergent author Jenara Nerenberg (2021) says that the concept of neurodiversity is a paradigm shift where people can claim their identities proudly and they are not ashamed. When Autistics are not shamed for their movements, and they do not feel the need to mask specific non-harmful behaviors, inclusion becomes possible. Nerenberg states, “Given that so many neurodivergent people go undiagnosed, we may be looking at an entirely different concept of what it means to be human” (p.11). The way in which we view, talk about, and deal with differences in the classroom needs to empower all students (Nerenberg, 2021).

Thanks for listening!

Podcast 2 Transcript: Interview with Parent

(Excerpt from interview with parent on Sunday, May 21st, 2023)

Sharon: Oh, well hi, thank you for meeting with me (short laugh).

Parent: Nice to be here.

Sharon: Without identifying yourself or your child by name, tell me about yourself and your autistic child.

Parent: Okay. Well, that's a big question. Um... I'm a mother with an autistic child. I myself have ADHD, my kid is autistic, and we didn't know for sure that they were until they were about 5 or 6 years old. Um... But....um... (long pause).

Sharon: That's okay.

Parent: Yeah, he has many different strengths and challenges and um... as a service provider, also working with families like my own. It's just, it's hard to narrow down that question for myself. So, maybe I, maybe I can do it a little bit differently in saying, you know, my whole family is neurodiverse in different ways. We all have our differently wired brains, and we um... are constantly learning about what that means and accommodating one another and trying to find how we can fit um... together and work optimally.

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Sharon: Awesome. Well, I'm doing, um... kind of advocacy for students who are autistic and in the education system in terms of inclusion, and so, I want to ask a question about education, a couple questions about education. One in terms of um... in your child's educational career, was there a teacher who was instrumental in supporting your child? And if yes, what was unique about this individual?

Parent: Well. As you know, each year you have different or different teachers, educational assistants, um... child & youth workers, principals, staff in the school and, you know, in the education system and each year is different. Um... I've always tried to approach my child's you know, support workers within the school system (which would include their teachers) um... from a lens of gratitude and respect and just recognizing that they're always, you know, all of them are there for a reason. They all value uh, education and care about children or they wouldn't be there to start, uh... in the first place, and so I've always kind of tried to go with that um... perspective. Um...however, in having a very differently wired child who needs significant accommodations, um... based on his neurotype to fit within the kind of brick-and-mortar system. It was really challenging to find people who were...um...able and willing within the confines of the education system to um... meet him where he was at to make those accommodations and to be instrumental in helping him. That being said, um... you know, if I can remember way back in uh... Kindergarten, you know, pre-diagnosis, uh...he had an EA who was quite open to feedback and open to you know, hearing what I had to say about my child, whereas. And trying, you know, strategies that I would suggest, whereas, you know, a lot of a lot of teachers in his younger years I found, um...kind of saw me as you know quote unquote "that parent" who would you know, might be described as a *helicopter mom* or someone who couldn't just let go, or someone who couldn't just let go. And so, you know, instead of pushing me out the door and trying to get my kid into the classroom, um...there was one EA (educational assistant) in particular who's always kind of stuck out to me, who really took the time to help him have a soft start regardless of whether or not he, you know, he didn't have the diagnosis at that time, and I really appreciated that because we didn't know what was going on, and I also didn't feel safe leaving my child there in distress.

Sharon: Hmm.

Parent: So, um... you know that's a ways back but since that time we have had you know since diagnosis we have had some significant workers who have been, uh... more able to meet him where he's at and what he needs on a day-to-day basis, which changes. Uh...and um... the flexibility and the openness to feedback have been huge in those individuals.

Sharon: Okay, so what are some specific actions that teachers took to support your child that you could think of?

Parent: Uh...I've really appreciated. Teachers that have been able, and I say able because I know within the education system you know; teachers are overburdened and have a lot on their plate, and have many students with high needs who are in necessarily adequately supported. So, uh...I do always try to keep in mind that they're all doing the best that they can with what they know, um... but when I have had teachers who have been willing and able to go above and beyond (in terms of daily communication with what they've perceived as my son's highs and lows),

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um...and, you know, have worked actively with me to problem solve how to help him maybe do better than next time or help them maybe do better for him the next time. Uh...I've really appreciated that in some of his teachers.

Sharon: Awesome. I guess I'll add (without identifying them by name), were there teachers that were not effective working with your child and if so, how, why, or how?

Parent: Absolutely. (laughs) I have had various educators uh... either flat out reject the idea that my son's autistic, um... or, you know, provide lip service with the IEPs or the behavior plans, and then continue on without applying those strategies, and my son has been the one who's had to pay for it in the end in terms of being excluded from school or from the class or put in uh... you know, a segregated space, which was quite traumatic for him at different ages throughout his educational career here. I've had, you know, teachers who have been unwilling or unable to change their lenses to, um...seeing, you know, a child who's in distress or having difficulty as opposed to outright calling him defiant to my face or um...I had one child youth worker in the school system tell me to allow him to put my son in (pause) "a calm down room" that's in quotes because it was an empty room and my son called it the "mad up room" because it made him make him even angrier, alone, uh... with the door cracked open so that they weren't, you know, saying that they weren't putting it in seclusion so to speak.

Sharon: Hmm.

Parent: Uh, in their opinion, but then that person told me if I let them do that for you know, maybe 6 weeks for as long as it took, he would eventually come around and "behave better" in the classroom. Um...we had an EA once tell him not to bother coming to class if he was going to have "his attitude", which was essentially a child in distress and in dysregulation So. Yeah, we've had a lot of difficult um...school/staff interactions between myself and my son... over the years.

Sharon: I guess, um... this next question is a little bit more specific. What is your perspective around inclusion? Like inclusion in school for your son. Yeah.

Parent: I think it's.... okay, I think it's a lofty ideal. I think it is, you know, kind of a utopian concept that as a society obviously uh... sounds beautiful in theory. Um... I have yet to see it work for all children or be beneficial for all children and, um...and I think it's going to look differently in every single school setting as well. You know what...what we think of inclusion, um... is to kind of have everybody assimilate and be in the same space and uh, you know, sometimes there are little token accommodations like headphones or maybe not moving your desk or something like that, ah, but, uh... kids like my son who are highly complex need much higher "out of the box" sorts of accommodations that would really represent what true inclusion could be, and um... that being said, there's also major sensory differences that I think also get in the way of allowing true inclusion to happen in a system like we have. I think there would need to be a major overhaul in terms of what we uh... do in turn in schools in educating kids like mine.

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Sharon: Ah, so that kind of is a good segue to my next question. In your opinion, what needs to happen to create inclusion for autistic youth?

Parent: I think educating educators is the first thing, and when I say that. It's beyond, you know, a course semester on "special needs" or "learning services" that's required. Uh... I think it will be important um...for...um...for educators to be kind of schooled in a neurodiversity affirmative lens and so you know, when I'm using that term, I'm talking about seeing uh... differently wired brains, people with, uh...diverse wiring, so to speak as just as valid a way of being human as you know someone with a different sexual orientation or ethnicity. Um, so, it requires a major paradigm shift from seeing a child's behavior and interpreting that and modifying and shifting that. To interpreting and... and seeing what's beneath that in terms of sensory needs and accommodations and (pause)...yeah, I don't even fully remember the question. (Both laugh). What needs to happen? I think you said.

Sharon: Yeah, to create inclusion for autistic youth.

Parent: Yeah, I think part of, part of that educating the educators. It's an important piece is that it's gonna need to come from neurodivergent individuals themselves. With the lived experience.

Sharon: Hmm.

Parent: ...where they can speak to and from their own experiences. Um...And needs.

Sharon: Well, I have one last question for you. Um...what do you want teachers to know, specifically about working with autistic youth?

Parent: Um... The first thing that comes to mind is that there are no "bad kids". And to use Dr. Ross Green's words, you know, kids do well if they can, which means, you know, it's the same as every human does well if they can.

Sharon: Hmm.

Parent: If they're set up for success, if they are understood for. Their strengths as well as their challenges. Um...and so, when you have a child who's you know, appears to be "giving you a hard time", uh... I think it's really, really important to recognize that they are HAVING a hard time and there's always something beneath it that we can learn from the child and work with to better support them.

Sharon: That's great. It's cool to hear you talk about Dr. Ross Green. (Laughs) Um... thank you so much for being a part of this interview and, yeah, answering my questions today. I appreciate it.

Parent: Yeah, no problem. Thank you. Thank you. For the work that you're doing.

Podcast 3 Transcript: Interview with Teacher

(Excerpt from interview with a teacher on Thursday, May 25th, 2023)

Sharon: Alright, so we'll officially start our interview. (Laughs) So, it's the same questions I sent you. Without identifying yourself by name. What grade do you teach and what are your subject areas?

Teacher: Um... currently I'm teaching special needs... one special needs class and the rest of my time is spent as a special education facilitator. So, I have kids in the special needs classroom who are autistic and I have kids in the in the regular stream who I support, who are also autistic, among many other things.

Sharon: Yeah, sounds like a big job.

Teacher: Yeah.

Sharon: What are things you do in your school or classroom to support autistic youth?

Teacher: Um... so in the special needs classroom specifically, maybe I'll kind of go back between the 2 of them because it's a little bit different for both of them, the special needs classroom, um, I'm in, I'm in one of the higher need's classrooms where a lot of the students are non-verbal. Um... so, some of the things that they have um, access to, for example, is like a sensory room. So, one of the things I've learned in my, while educating myself about people who have autism or autistic people is that um... sensory overload is really huge.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: So, we're fortunate that we have a really nice um... sensory room for our kids so we actually do schedule sensory time for the kids where they go into the sensory room and there's a variety of different activities where they can participate in to just calm them down and give them some quiet time.

Sharon: mmm.

Teacher: So, um... the other thing that we're adamant about doing in the special needs classroom specifically, is relaxing music between transition times. So, when there's a change of teachers, um... the quiet music will go on um... to just kind of give them a cue that, OK, we're going to get ready for the next teacher, but it also helps them.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: I said tell them "Settle your minds and your bodies and get ready for the next teacher". Um... we do visual schedules, lots of it is in pictorial form. Some of them can't, most of them can't read. So, we'll use visual schedules, schedules, and agendas with the kids. Um... and we are always kind of verbally letting them know "first we are going to" do this, "then we are going to do that".

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Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: So, the “first and then” statements are actually really big in the classroom as well. I find that super helpful because they know what they're participating in now and then they know what's going to come. So that helps alleviate some of the issues that um... they might have with transitioning from activity to activity. Um... I like to give them choice. So, and it's generally just a choice between 2 activities.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: So, it's you have the option to go to sensory or you have the option to come with s for a walk or do the, I do the physical activity with the kids.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: So, we're going to practice for Special Olympics or whatever. So I like to give them choice whatever activity is that we're doing.

Sharon: That's powerful.

Teacher: Yeah, yeah, I find that super helpful as well. Um...

Sharon: With my own son, it's the same thing. Um... I've had to kind of give that advice to educators if they're struggling. If you present it as a choice, he'll pick one of those things.

Teacher: Yeah. Yeah.

Sharon: So, it's really, it is a really good strategy.

Teacher: And it gives them a sense of control over their own. You know activities like in their own environment.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: Yeah, so, um... Our kids also often will have tech, they do have tech breaks built in every single day and in the regular classroom with the non-special needs classroom. The students who are participating in the regular stream, I also know that this is a really big strategy is to give them a technology break, a lot of them, because of that whole sensory overload.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: In the regular classroom. Hate to say regular classroom, I'm not sure. Mainstream. “Main stream” is a better choice of words. Um...

Sharon: Yeah. Yeah.

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Teacher: There's so many factors that, come into effect that we don't think about or not didn't think about until I started educating myself more like the fluorescent lights, the ticking of the analog clock.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: You know, just people or kids in the hallway, something, all that kind of noise, different smells of somebody's wearing perfume or fabric softener or something like that and all of that coming together oftentimes is enough to just. You know cause anxiety for a student who has autism. So, Um...

Sharon: That's really awesome. Or do you find most teachers are open to using little tech break? (pause)

Teacher: Um...yes...they are okay to try it, but I also know that it is a little bit of an issue sometimes to get the kids back on track.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: Um...so generally they're pretty good about accepting some recommendations. Yeah, and yeah. So, a lot of them will do tech breaks. A lot of them have the air...um the ear counseling, sorry, the noise canceling earphones That is something that I try to advocate for, for the kids as well. Uh, just to try to get the distraction of the risk, people talking and again, all the kind of annoyances that we can tune out, they oftentimes struggle to do so, and it can just pile up the cause anxiety. So, a tech break is often times good for them and it just allows them to focus on that, while drowning out everything else that's around them.

Sharon: Mhmm.

Teacher, um... we use in the, especially use classroom, we use, social stories and role plays. Um... so, you know, whatever we're trying to teach them, we'll do a social story about it. Um...we'll do, watch a YouTube video on it and then sometimes it fits something to do with social stuff situations. Uh, we just do a *role play* and we'll practice those things. So, "if you're in this situation/says this to you, what would you do?". You know, "what are you going to say?". And we kind of practice those kinds of skills. So, you know, and it is really as simple in the special needs classroom as saying, "okay, when we go down the hallway, and if somebody says, 'how are you?' You know, "here's how you need to respond", 'I'm good'".

Sharon: Yeah. Hmm.

Teacher: Ya, so, those are some of the things that we would do. Those are more specific to the special needs classroom. And again, I'm high school, so lots of the autistic kids have these kinds of skills by the time they get to us.

Sharon: Yeah.

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Teacher: Um...you know, in the mainstream, but in the mainstream I would encourage, teachers too, I mean, this is what I would kind of recommend is that they make sure that there are schedules for the, for the students every single day, a daily agenda, and even um... in addition to that kind of a monthly calendar where they will have due dates and all that kind of stuff where the kids have a visual idea of what's coming up so that they can, you know, plan for accordingly and all that kind of stuff. And honestly, a lot of the strategies that I would recommend are um... good for all students, not just specifically...

Sharon: Especially cause I don't know if you found this, but knowing now what I know, there's kids that aren't diagnosed that might need those same strategies, right.

Teacher: Yeah, yeah, and I don't think. Maybe it's like necessary for some, but, it's useful for all. There's there nobody is going to be hurt by any of these strategies, right? Everybody can benefit from them. So, to me it's pretty easy. To implement these kinds of things. Um... and I think the constant um... communication with the student themselves and with home is always really good because there's often times where some/a student is having some kind of anxiety experience, some kind of anxiety or whatever, and we have difficulties calming them down. So, letting parents know that A: this is happening, and sometimes they'll say, "yep". You know, and sometimes parents will say, "Hey, this is coming up and they're feeling anxious about it" and give strategies like "when this is happening at home, what do you do?" "What do you recommend we try because we've tried these things and it's just not working?" You know, communicating with home is super-duper important.

Sharon: Yeah, so important. Um...do you have any examples of ways teachers can create conditions for inclusive environments? Let's talk about the mainstream classroom.

Teacher: Yeah, the in the mainstream classroom, I think all of the things that I mentioned, like first of all, just the environment itself needing to be a calmer environment.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: I talked about kind of the sensory stuff. So honestly, I would suggest, when if possible, speaking to custodians to get the lights dimmed. I know we can't get fluorescent lights taken out, but you could maybe take every other one out to create a dimmer, a dimmer environment, I actually, oftentimes will just shut the lights right off.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: Um...you know, maybe do some calming music in the background when it's work time or something and that kind of drought so drones out some of the other irritating noises that might go on.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: Um...but other things like, you know, just having an agenda up for them and having a calendar up with due dates and all that kind of stuff and giving a heads up like if you're going to

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be absent for example giving a heads up. When you know, we can't always know. Sometimes we're sick and we don't know ahead of time, but when we do, you let them know. And if you even know the teacher's name, you give them a heads up on the teacher's going to be, might give them options if you're not comfortable with that, then maybe you can go to the resource room. So, a quieter space in our school for the kids to go hang out if the classroom is a little bit overwhelming is that resource room.

Sharon: Yeah

Teacher: For... bring kids so that you're counseling, you know, headphones are super effective. I find for them and allowing....

Sharon: What about? What about social like social inclusion? Is there anything teachers can do for that?

Teacher: Um... to so that they can make connections with kids in the classroom?

Sharon: Mhmm. Yeah.

Teacher: Yeah. Yeah. I think, I think paying attention to probably you may have students who maybe you can identify as being natural helper type, kids, maybe empathetic and maybe more willing to, if there is, again, it's a spectrum, there's kids who you would not know that have autism and then there's kids who um... clearly do have they demonstrate more of them. You know, like traits. So, I think sometimes perhaps with the permission of the parents and the kids asking permission, can I reveal that depending on where they are and what their needs are, can I reveal that they are autistic and have a conversation, even with certain students or with the class? And say here's what this is all about. I've heard of that happening more in the elementary school.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: But you know, maybe being able to identify certain students who would be open to taking them on and supporting them and having that sense of empathy and understanding to be encouraging and supportive of the student with autism and um... And again, trying to, I think the biggest thing with any students is having a relationship with the students. So, if you can create that relationship with the students.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: And I love having conversations and asking "what do you think you need?" or "how are you feeling?"

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: And sometimes they can't identify their feelings. You might use third person and say, "If somebody was undergoing this, how do you think they might feel?" and through them identifying that you can get an indication of how they are feeling.

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Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: Setting them up, you know, with groups that you think might be successful or seating plans next to students who would be success, you know. Maybe support those.

Sharon: Mhmm. Yeah. I love that. I guess, do you self-reflect on strategies that you're using with autistic students in your classroom? And there is a kind of a part 2 to that question, but I'll let you answer that first. (Teacher under my voice: All the time)

Teacher: Yeah. No, all the time, all the time, you know, and as you would know, students who are autistic, people who are autistic, you don't even know what sometimes is going to cause them to react in a in a way that might not be as favorable or they might one day they're totally OK with something and then the next day they're not, but you don't know what happened leading up to that.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: And so. I'm yes, I'm always reflecting on "what happened in this situation?", "What happened prior to that?" So, "what happened leading up to it?" And sometimes it starts at home. Sometimes something went wrong at home, there was, do you know what I mean? So

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: Yeah. And if it is a pattern of, okay, this doesn't work, then yeah, we need to try something different because this is not working.

Sharon: I like that. What are some of the challenges you experience working with autistic youth?

Teacher: Um... I think. Like I said, it's, it's, the unpredictability sometimes.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: One day in a certain situation they might be certain like, they might be totally fine, and another day something happens where, ya know, sometimes they're, they're going to act out um... and you don't always know what it is that caused it.

Sharon: Mhmm.

Teacher: So, um... I would say that's probably the biggest one is sometimes, and learning how to um... help them to calm down after perhaps they've had an incident where they've lost maybe a little bit of the emotional control or something like that.

Sharon: Yeah, yeah.

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Teacher: You know, how, can we put them, you know, it's easy to say, let's put them in a quiet room so they can de-escalate, but trying to get them to that room sometimes is a little bit of an issue as, ya know, they're not in the moment. Not always willing to go. Um so...

Sharon: Yeah, how can educators improve inclusive practices of autistic students in schools?

Teacher: I think the biggest thing is education.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: And there's many different ways to educate. So, I took, um, um a university course through Lakehead University and I was super fortunate that our board offered it. Um... you know, if we got a certain mark, then we would be reimbursed for it. So, I actually did take it. And it's the "Teaching students with communication needs, autism spectrum disorder". So, I took that one which kind of sparked even more of an interest and so there is another one. I think it was just a pilot program called echo, ECHO, and that one was super awesome as well.

Sharon: Hmm...Okay.

Teacher: And it did take it in my own time. It was from 3:30 to 5 every second week. But it was super amazing because we talked to other educators or other people in the field like there were occupational theorists and behaviorists and um... all kinds of different people, people who have like adult adults who have autism. There was a girl in her twenties who was autistic and so we got kind of the whole spectrum of. You know, we would look at a case somebody would bring about a case of: "Here is a student I have in my classroom", "Here are the behaviors", "Here's some history", "Hear some dynamics of relationships", "Can you help me out? - because here's what I'm struggling with". And so, we got kind of a whole spectrum of different people's perspectives and um... it was pretty cool. So that takes a little bit of your time. I know lots of people, teachers are busy, they have their own families, all that kind of stuff, they don't always have the time to take extra courses. Um... however...

Sharon: I think it's amazing that they brought in autistic people into that course to speak that's pretty incredible.

Teacher: Yeah, it, it was great, and they were on the panel so it was a panel of people and they were on the panel, so they were there every second week. To give their input. Yeah, it was really cool. Really, really cool. So...

Sharon: I think we'll start seeing more of that.

Teacher: I think so. I think so. Yeah, I was reading, I ordered a textbook, I borrowed a textbook from the Ontario College of Teachers Library, I ordered a textbook from the Ontario College of Teachers Library, the first time I'd ever done it and it was about "Inclusive Education". First time I'd ever done it, and it was about inclusive education. So, when I was looking through the autistic section, um... it was talking about how autism diagnosis is on the rise. So, I think this is super

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awesome what you're doing, you know, bringing awareness and some resources for teachers because I don't know how many people have been educated on it and it's, do you know what I mean? And it's not for any fault of anybody else's.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: You know, it's not anybody else's. You know, it's not anybody's fault.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: It was just when I went to university it wasn't something that was required or, you know, everything I've done is kind of been on my own. So, yeah, but I think, I mean, it's easy enough. There's lots of really good YouTube videos. There's lots of really good podcasts. I'm all about putting it on and going for a walk or listening to it on my drive to work if teachers could do that or would be willing to do that, that would be super, but...

Sharon: Yes.

Teacher: Yeah, I understand. You know, lots are busy with. With other things outside of school, so, it becomes a little bit difficult, but maybe some PD would be nice in our schools, you know, little presentations at PD, that would be super nice.

Sharon: Yes! Absolutely! (Laughs)

Teacher: Yeah. Yeah. And the biggest thing again is listening to the parents and listening to the children and I'm a total advocate for giving the children a voice and so having conversations with them, you'll be amazed at how much they can um... you know, articulate for themselves and what they need and what doesn't. Yeah.

Sharon: Well, I have one last question. "Only." (Laughter from both.) So, I guess what, are there any resources teachers need to help support autistic students in their classroom or school community? Or what resources do they need?

Teacher: I think. Yeah, like I think all the ones I mentioned if they're willing to do that, the AQ course.

Sharon: Yeah. Mhmm.

Teacher: You know, but I mean, ones that are probably a little bit more realistic, you know people who have their own families, young families, and stuff like that might be like simply reaching out to a facilitator like myself, for example, sitting down and having a conversation. We have lots of conversations with the kids and the families themselves. So, we do hold a lot of knowledge and I try really hard to develop good relationships with the students so that I can bring recommendations to the teachers um... about specific kids and "here's what you can try" and "here's what..."/ "please don't do this".

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Sharon: Yeah. (laughs)

Teacher: You know, that kind of stuff. And we also have a board. We're lucky. I don't know if all boards do, but we do have a board autism resource teacher that I think is super accessible.

Sharon: Hmm.

Teacher: You know, within the workday, um...for teachers to be able to access and ask questions and email and that kind of stuff. So, there's lots out there it's just, you know. It's, I think oftentimes the issue is trying to fit it into your regular duties of planning and marking and phone calls home and all that kind of stuff is the extra time to do some extra PD. So, I would love to see this incorporated into our PD days. Do you know what I mean? Yes, yes.

Sharon: Yeah, even just give us like 30 min like to talk. Or give a short presentation.

Teacher: Yep.

Sharon: Yeah, even the strategy like that you mentioned earlier that I was like, yes, yes, like the about a choice. Like if more teachers did that.

Teacher: Yep.

Sharon: It's so part like it just gives the kids a sense of power and the willingness to engage in your class will...multiply.

Teacher: Yeah. Yeah. And I think there really needs to be an understanding brought because it seems you know, it, it seems really easy, like, well, they just need to do this, but for them, depending on what has happened prior to getting to this point, it's not always that easy.

Sharon: No.

Teacher: It's not just, as, there's a whole bunch of things that perhaps didn't go as planned prior to that. Perhaps didn't go as planned prior to that that led up to, yeah, I can't do as planned prior to that that led up to, yeah, I can't do this today.

Sharon: Yeah.

Teacher: Yeah. Yeah. And just having that understanding piece.

Sharon: Yes. Well thank you for meeting with me, I really appreciate it.

Teacher: You're welcome. I hope that's helpful.

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Sharon: Yes. Thank you. Okay. So, I'm going to stop the recording. Stop recording (talking to myself).