

We need to talk about the neurodivergent teachers in our schools

There must be plenty of teachers who are neurodivergent, but we never hear about them, says one former head who has ADHD. Are they getting the support they need in schools?

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Chris Benson

In January, MP Chris Bloore asked the minister of state for school standards, Georgia Gould, how the new Ofsted inspection framework considers workforce inclusion for neurodivergent and disabled teachers.

The question was referred to Ofsted, and a response was provided by its chief inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver.

He explained that inspectors consider whether staff feel valued and supported as part of an inspection's leadership and governance judgement, though neurodivergence itself was not addressed specifically in Sir Martyn's response.

What about neurodivergent teachers?

Neurodivergence not being referenced is, sadly, not surprising.

But the fact that the question was even asked and answered did at least shine a light on an issue that has been ignored in education for too long: where are the neurodivergent teachers and school leaders, what are their experiences, and do things need to change?

After all, across England's schools, discussions about inclusion, support and the future of the special educational needs and disabilities system are commonplace - and rightly so, given the level of need that exists and the importance of ensuring that pupils are supported, whatever their needs.

But the frontline reality for teachers with SEND is often entirely overlooked - which is at odds with how the sector talks about the importance of a diverse teaching workforce.

The Department for Education has long emphasised the value of a profession that reflects the communities it serves, and research has consistently highlighted the influence that teachers can have as role models for pupils.

Analysis from the National Foundation for Educational Research has noted that a profession drawing on a wide range of backgrounds and experiences can bring valuable perspectives into schools.

Lack of data

Yet when it comes to neurodevelopmental differences, visibility within the profession remains strikingly limited.

There is no reliable national data on neurodivergent staff working in schools. The DfE's School Workforce Census records disability status but does not capture neurodivergence specifically.

Population prevalence data, though, makes it evident that neurodevelopmental differences will be present across the profession.

England's state schools employ close to 1 million people. Estimates used by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence suggest that 3 per cent to 4 per cent of adults have ADHD, while around 1 per cent are autistic.

Even the most conservative of estimates would imply that tens of thousands of people working in England's state schools have ADHD, are autistic, or both.

In practical terms, this means that an average-sized secondary school will have four or five members of staff with ADHD or who are autistic, while an average-sized primary school will have at least one.

Disclosure dilemma

Of course, some staff will be open about this - but many will choose not to disclose.

For some, this will be simply because they see it as a private matter. But for many others, it may be the case that they have experienced misunderstandings about differences in working style or work in environments where neurodivergence is not well understood.

After all, teaching is a profession that places strong expectations on competence, reliability and authority, and some may worry that disclosure could lead others to question their judgement or capability.

The teacher standards, for example, can look very unforgiving if you are neurodivergent.

But in my experience, the very best schools are made up of individuals whose strengths complement one another. These individuals work in teams, drawing on different strengths, perspectives and professional judgement to meet the needs of the pupils in front of them.

We need a mix of people within the profession if we are to best serve the mix of pupils we teach: the idea of an “ideal teacher” is as misplaced as the idea of an “ideal student”.

Speaking out

For too long, however, teachers who have not fitted what seemed like the desired mould have stayed quiet - although many would have liked to be more vocal.

For example, when I began speaking and writing publicly about my own ADHD while serving as a headteacher, I was completely unprepared for the scale of the response.

What was most striking was the number of people who reached out privately. More than 100 teachers and school leaders messaged me.

Some had been diagnosed in childhood and many as adults, and others were still awaiting an assessment. Very few had disclosed this within their workplace.

Schools exist for young people. But the culture that pupils experience is shaped largely by the adults who work within those environments.

Lived experience alone does not make someone an expert. But when it is combined with professional knowledge and experience in education, it can offer valuable insight.

When pupils encounter teachers who think, learn and experience the world in different ways but succeed within the profession, it can broaden how they understand themselves and what they believe might be possible in their own futures.

If neurodevelopmental differences are present across society, they are almost certainly present across the teaching profession as well.

The question, therefore, is not whether neurodivergent educators exist, but how visible they feel able to be within the culture of the profession.

Big questions to consider

This also raises a wider question: how many neurodivergent educators may already have left the profession after years of trying to adapt to environments that neither played to their strengths nor fully understood the challenges they faced?

How many prospective teachers or school leaders might quietly conclude that the profession is not a place for someone like them?

And if neurodevelopmental differences are already present across the profession, does it matter that they remain largely invisible? If so, what might that tell us about the culture of our schools?

These are questions that, with SEND reform at the top of the educational agenda, deserve discussion.

Chris Benson is a former headteacher who has led schools in the UK and internationally

What other sectors can teach education about supporting neurodiverse staff

Teaching should use Neurodiversity Celebration Week to consider how other professions support staff to enhance its own processes, says Chris Benson

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Chris Benson

What other sectors can teach education about supporting neurodiverse staff

This week marks the annual Neurodiversity Celebration Week, which seeks to “recognise and celebrate the neurodiverse community”, including in schools.

Doing this for pupils has been something the profession has got a lot better at in recent years - and with the schools White Paper including a clear focus on trying to further improve inclusion, it remains a core area of focus.

But when we turn to the teaching profession itself, a more uncomfortable picture emerges. In a recent Tes article that prompted significant engagement, many educators described their experiences of being neurodivergent in education as far from positive.

Against this backdrop - and during Neurodiversity Celebration Week - it is worth asking what education can learn from other regulated professions about how neurodivergent individuals are supported, valued and retained.

How other professions support neurodivergent staff

For example, in fields such as medicine, law and policing, professional bodies now formally recognise neurodivergence not just in those they serve, but within their own workforce.

Guidance from the General Medical Council, the Law Society, the Bar Council of England and Wales and the College of Policing reveal that professionals may think, communicate and process information differently, and that training and assessment systems may need to reflect that.

Crucially, this is not about lowering standards. In these professions, expectations remain high. But there is growing recognition that there can be flexibility in how those standards are demonstrated and evidenced.

In medicine, for example, guidance is now within medical education frameworks, explicitly supporting neurodivergent doctors in training and recognising that competence can be demonstrated in different ways when support is in place.

In law and policing, professional bodies have guidance, resources and professional conversations that extend beyond compliance, addressing workplace culture, training environments and leadership approaches for neurodivergent professionals.

While this work is still evolving, it is now visible within professional guidance and workforce discussions.

Education slow to recognise neurodiversity

Teaching, by contrast, has been much slower to develop this conversation.

The teachers' standards remain central to initial teacher training, appraisal and career progression - yet they contain little explicit recognition that teachers may be neurodivergent.

More importantly, the way those standards are assessed often relies on particular forms of evidence: lesson observations, written reflections, professional portfolios and verbal articulation of practice.

These approaches are familiar and well established. But they can also unintentionally privilege certain ways of thinking, communicating and processing information.

In other professions, there is an increasing separation between the standard itself and how it is evidenced.

In teaching, those two things are often closely intertwined - much as they are for pupils, where assessment often favours particular ways of thinking, communicating and processing information in ways that are less reflective of real life. That distinction matters.

How can teaching become more inclusive?

It raises the question of whether the profession has fully considered how its systems might be experienced by those who do not fit a typical cognitive profile - even as schools are increasingly expected to recognise and support neurodivergence in pupils.

Across other regulated professions, neurodiversity is now being addressed not only through legal compliance, but through professional development, workplace culture and talent retention.

In teaching, however, the response still sits largely within the boundaries of compliance - focused on legal obligations and HR processes, rather than a broader professional recognition of neurodivergent educators.

Teaching has an opportunity to move beyond this. That could include:

- Recognising neurodivergence more explicitly within professional frameworks.
- Reviewing how competence is assessed and evidenced.
- Ensuring training environments are designed with cognitive diversity in mind.
- Developing guidance that supports schools not just in meeting legal obligations, but in building inclusive professional cultures.

None of this requires lowering expectations. But it does require a shift in how the profession understands and supports the people within it. This is vital not only for current teachers and leaders, but for the future of the profession, too.

After all, the next generation will be making career choices at a time when neurodivergence is better understood and more openly discussed across many professions.

The question is whether education will evolve alongside this - or continue to lag behind.

Chris Benson is a former headteacher who has led schools in the UK and internationally

Neurodiversity in the teacher workforce: what new data tells us

A quarter of teachers self-identify as neurodivergent, according to new Teacher Tapp research that raises questions about what the sector can do to support these staff, writes Chris Benson

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Chris Benson

Last month I wrote in Tes about the invisibility of neurodivergent teachers, the absence of data on them, the silence within the profession about this and the questions that silence raises.

A second article asked what education could learn from other regulated professions that have begun to take their neurodivergent workforces seriously.

Both articles asked questions. Neither could answer them with data because the data did not exist.

However, a recent question submitted to Teacher Tapp asked educators whether they considered themselves to be neurodivergent, and 9,510 replied.

It is a substantial number for a survey, but it is worth acknowledging that the results are self-reported, not clinical. However, in a space where almost no workforce data has existed previously, they provide the most substantial picture that we have. So what are they telling us?

How many teachers are neurodivergent?

The top-line figure is that 25 per cent of teachers self-identify as neurodivergent. NHS Cambridge University Hospitals estimates that around one in seven people in the general population consider themselves neurodivergent. Teachers are coming in at nearly double that rate.

Some of that gap reflects the fact that teachers have greater professional exposure to neurodiversity frameworks than most people. But it is still a substantial gap, and it sits within a wider data problem that is worth acknowledging.

Even for pupils, the picture is incomplete. The Department for Education states that around 15 per cent of the school-age population is neurodivergent, yet formal identification through education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and SEN support captures around 19.5 percent.

The number of pupils with EHCPs, meanwhile, has doubled since 2016, driven largely by improving identification. All of this suggests that the teacher figure, while not empirical, likely carries weight.

A generational shift

Teacher Tapp also shared further information with me on the data behind the top-line figures.

The age breakdown is striking. Some 34 per cent of teachers in their twenties self-identify as neurodivergent. That figure falls to 27 per cent among those in their thirties, 22 per cent in their forties, and 18 per cent among teachers in their fifties and above.

Younger teachers are more likely to have been identified during their own education, which explains part of this pattern. But it also means the profession is recruiting from an increasingly neurodivergent pool. The question is whether it has the culture to retain them.

Teacher Tapp's additional analysis suggests reasons for concern. Neurodivergent teachers in their thirties are significantly more likely to say they are considering leaving the profession than their neurotypical peers.

These are experienced educators at a critical point in their development. What is driving their thoughts of leaving? And what is the profession doing about it?

Who reaches the top?

This matters even more when you cross-reference role, age and neurodiversity responses.

Overall, 26 per cent of classroom teachers self-identify as neurodivergent. Among senior leaders, the figure is 17 per cent.

Senior leaders tend to be older, and older teachers identify at lower rates. So Teacher Tapp tested whether the gap was simply explained by age. It was not.

Among teachers in their twenties and thirties, 30 per cent of classroom teachers identify as neurodivergent compared with 21 per cent of senior leaders in the same age group. Among those in their forties and above, the figures are 22 per cent and 15 per cent respectively.

Is this a pipeline problem? A culture in which neurodivergent educators do not see senior leadership as a place for them?

The data cannot answer that. But it raises a harder question: if neuroinclusion is to mean anything for the children in our schools, does it not need to start at the top rather than be retrofitted from below?

I have ADHD and led schools for 15 years as a neurodivergent headteacher. This is not about lowering standards. It is about understanding people well enough to work with their strengths rather than against their differences.

In the right environment, I excelled; in the wrong one, I shrank to fit in. What might schools look like, for everyone within them, if that understanding ran through every level of leadership?

What next?

Should the DfE consider expanding the School Workforce Census to capture neurodivergence specifically? Should professional bodies ask whether their frameworks inadvertently work against neurodivergent educators?

And at school level, the most uncomfortable question of all: is our school genuinely neuroinclusive for the adults within it, or do we reserve that commitment for the pupils?

Because here is the difficult truth that this data surfaces: you can have all the SEND reforms you like, but culture eats policy for breakfast every time.

The aim now, therefore, has to be to use the data here as a starting point to more truly understand the extent of neurodiversity in the education workforce and create a culture where all types of teacher can thrive.

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