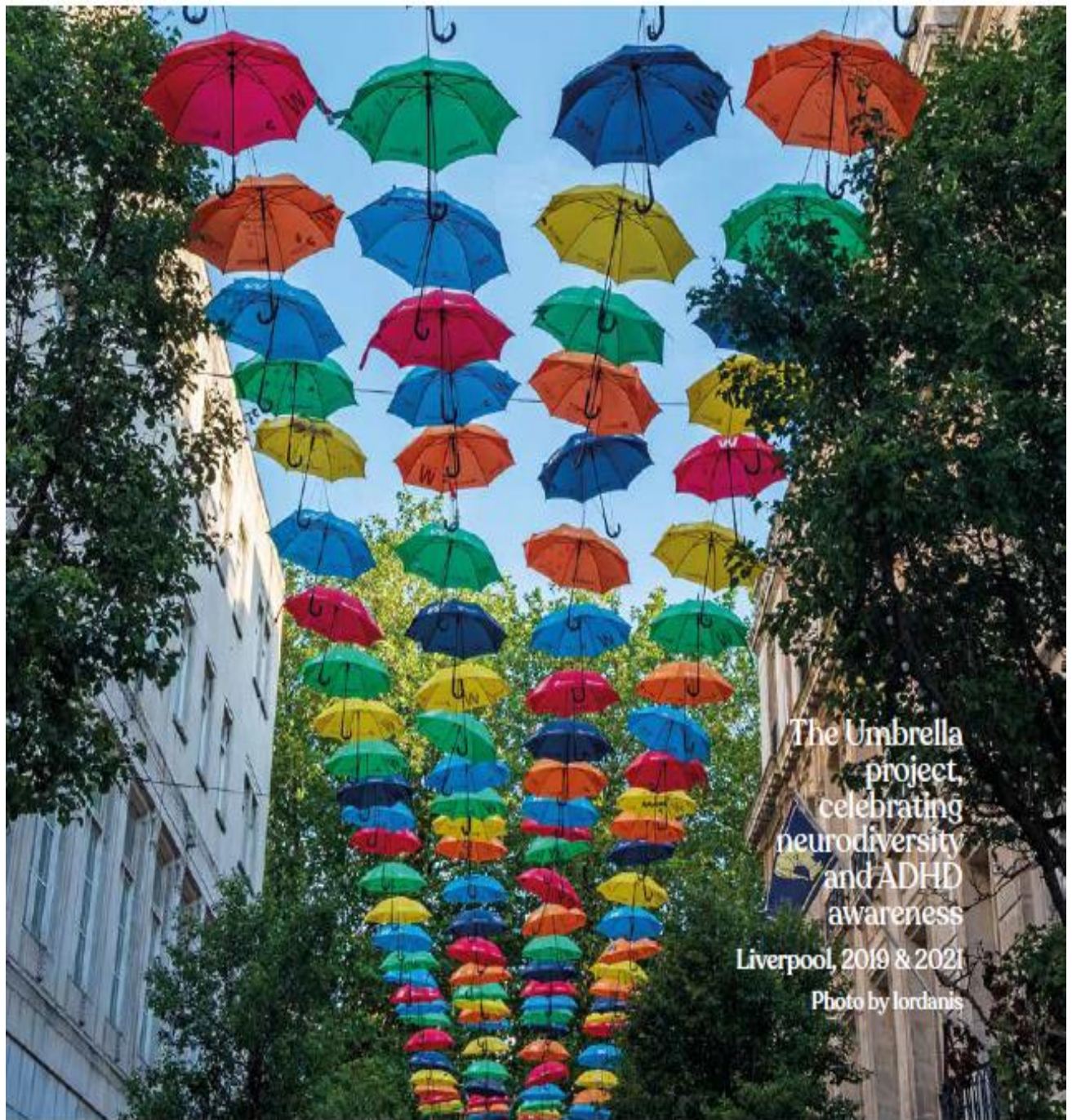


Feature

Vive la différence

Around one in seven people in the UK are neurodivergent. And while educators find lots of ways to support their neurodivergent pupils, they are often reluctant to ask for help themselves, **Emily Jenkins** reports.



The Umbrella
project,
celebrating
neurodiversity
and ADHD
awareness

Liverpool, 2019 & 2021

Photo by Iordanis

NEURODIVERSITY refers to the different ways the brain interprets information and includes conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

All are considered disabilities under the Equality Act 2010, which means employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to support employees in carrying out their job.

However, educators are often unwilling to ask for support, despite finding many ways to support their neurodiverse pupils.

'Don't want to be seen as a nuisance'

"Of course everyone deserves to be supported in their work environment, but at the same time you don't want to be seen as a nuisance," says Charlotte Barnes-Thomas, a design and technology teacher from Walthamstow in east London.

Charlotte has dyspraxia, a condition that affects movement and co-ordination. A self-described "bull in a china shop", Charlotte says: "I'm constantly bruised. Only today I walked into a vice."

She is a slow reader and sometimes muddles up words. Dyspraxia also affects her short-term memory, meaning that even small changes to things like her timetable have to be written down and transferred to her long-term memory. "Organisation is a big thing for me, as I need extra time to get things into my head. If a meeting room changes at the last minute, I have to write it down," she says.

Charlotte has developed strategies to make sure she can do her job – such as



(From left) Charlotte Barnes-Thomas, Mollinee Martin and Hannah Lawrence

keeping her timetable on her lanyard and having multiple copies – but, despite the added pressures her neurodiversity brings to her daily life, she is reluctant to approach her employer for adjustments.

"You have to start the conversation, and that's quite nerve-wracking. You are always taking a leap to see how people will react to you being different to other people," she says.

'Never occurred to me to ask'

Many neurodiverse educators don't even realise they can ask for support. Mollinee Martin and Hannah Lawrence are teachers at the same secondary school in London, and both have dyslexia. As well as causing problems with reading, writing and spelling, dyslexia can also affect memory, organisational and numerical skills. Around ten per cent of the UK population has dyslexia.

"It has never occurred to me that I can ask for reasonable adjustments," says Hannah, a science teacher who wasn't diagnosed until she was in her late twenties.

Her colleague Mollinee, who is head of geography, agrees: "I guess I never considered myself neurodiverse. I think there's a lot of stigma and misunderstanding around dyslexia."

Many neurodiverse staff are so used to developing their own coping strategies – even if these take up additional time or labour in their day – that they are unsure what to ask for from their employer, or feel that they don't have a right to ask for more time or support.

As people with invisible disabilities, they feel they don't have the same right to support as colleagues with visible disabilities.

More time needed

Being neurodiverse can compound the time, workload and accountability pressures all educators struggle with. Despite being an excellent mathematician, Hannah struggles with mental maths, so for each lesson she needs two hours to prepare a PowerPoint presentation with all answers worked out in advance. This means she is often working late into the night putting her lessons together.

"Dyslexic people are given more time in exams, but not in the workplace," says Hannah. For Mollinee, marking homework is very time-consuming, and other writing related tasks take much longer. "I've just had to write a letter to parents and it's taken me two weeks to draft," she says.

These added pressures can create strain. The International Dyslexia Association says that as many as 20 per cent of children with dyslexia also suffer from depression and another 20 per cent suffer from an anxiety disorder. Half of all autistic people regularly suffer high levels of anxiety and half will be affected by depression at some point in their life, according to the National Autistic Society (see Suzanne's story, page 31).

Charlotte confesses that she can often suffer from anxiety: "You're under a huge amount of stress because you're having to put more effort into everyday tasks."

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Know your rights

UNDER section 20 of the Equality Act 2010, neurodiverse conditions including dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism are considered a disability.

If you have a disability which disadvantages you at work, or when you want to apply for a job, employers are obliged to make adjustments which are reasonable in order to prevent you from being placed at a substantial disadvantage compared with persons who are not disabled.

neu.org.uk/advice/reasonable-adjustments-work

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Mallanee agrees: "Things accumulate over time. At least once a half term I'll have a massive breakdown."

Inspiring their pupils in many ways

Despite the challenges neurodiverse educators can face, for employers they bring many benefits. Neurodiverse people are known to be creative thinkers and, because they have often had to do it for themselves, are extremely good at breaking down complicated ideas, concepts or problems for their students.

Having a neurodiverse teacher can also inspire students and allow those with their own neurodiversities to feel less isolated. "I am quite vocal with the kids that having a difficulty doesn't impair your ability to be successful," says Mallanee, who also has a speech impediment. "The children laugh, but I explain it's important to bear in mind that when someone does something that's a bit strange, it's not necessarily funny and there could be an underlying reason."

Sadly, because of workload Hannah has decided to leave the profession at the end of the year. However, for the many neurodiverse educators remaining, it's important to understand your rights and the support and adjustments you are entitled to (see below).

Mallanee herself is aware of the irony: "It's funny, we spend so much time thinking about what the students need, but not what we, as staff, need."

Need more help?

■ NEU AdviceLine 0345 811 8111
or email advice@neu.org.uk

■ Visit neu.org.uk/disability
and neu.org.uk/send

■ Ambitious About Autism
ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

■ National Autistic Society
autism.org.uk

■ British Dyslexia Association
bdadyslexia.org.uk

■ The Dyslexia Association
dyslexia.uk.net

■ Dyspraxia UK dyspraxiauk.com

■ ADHD Foundation
adhd.foundation.org.uk

■ Tourettes Action
tourettes-action.org.uk

'I didn't really know who I was anymore'



"I ALWAYS knew I was different. I struggled to connect with people and I found it difficult to fit in," explains Suzanne Clarke (left), who is autistic.

Suzanne worked as a behaviour management and safeguarding lead at a school in Hertfordshire, before becoming a training consultant for the National Autistic Society (NAS).

Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact. According to the NAS, there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK.

Like many autistic people Suzanne has difficulties interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice, making it difficult to navigate the social world. When she was young she developed a coping mechanism called 'masking', where she would mimic the behaviours of others, or hide her own behaviours, in order to fit in.

"I would behave in a way that I thought was 'acceptable'. I became a chameleon and learned to hide all of my difficulties to a point where I didn't really know who I was anymore."

Masking may include forcing facial expressions, copying gestures and mannerisms, pre-preparing conversation topics or jokes, and imitating eye contact. Particularly common in girls and women, masking is thought to be one of the reasons why three times more men than women are diagnosed as autistic.

Suzanne was so adept at masking that she wasn't diagnosed until she was 38. However, the pressures of masking took their toll and she experienced several mental breakdowns.

"It's draining. The older you get, the mental list of behaviours you think you should do or avoid doing becomes bigger and more complex. I think eventually anyone would collapse under that pressure of trying to do everything right when you just can't ever be yourself."

When she was finally diagnosed –

accidentally, by a psychology student after years of misdiagnosis – she describes finding out as "a huge relief". But she also felt a lot of anger that her condition had been missed for so long.

Suzanne applied for the role of behaviour manager a few years after her diagnosis, disclosing her condition in her application and talking about it in her personal statement. "People need to learn about autism. I thought the reason my autism was missed for so long is because there's so little awareness of it."

Suzanne believes being autistic helped in her role at school. She was able to identify and support neurodiverse students in a way that many neurotypical colleagues were unable to do. "I noticed an awful lot of students, particularly girls, who had gone unnoticed like me, and I could relate to so many of them."

After giving presentations on autism to her colleagues, she created a women's group which was open to any female educators who felt they may be autistic. "It was really successful, so many people could relate to what I'd said."

'Many undiagnosed female educators'

Suzanne believes that there are many autistic educators, particularly women, who have gone undiagnosed: "It's the kind of profession that draws autistic people because it involves having specialist knowledge, and the school environment is really structured with a clear hierarchy." But she also says that many who are drawn to these positions may struggle with the workload and last-minute changes, especially with the added pressures of social interactions and potential masking.

When asked what she would recommend to anyone who might think they are autistic, she says: "Not everyone needs a diagnosis. But what helped me most was reading about it and learning to live in a positive autistic way."

Suzanne says she is now much kinder to herself, and won't put herself into situations she feels uncomfortable, such as work drinks or a staff party.

"Before, I felt I had to go and would come back miserable and exhausted. Now I just don't put myself through it."