

Project 4: Valuing Difference: Developing Inclusive Peer Ecologies in Neurodiverse Primary Classrooms.

Proposed Supervisory team:

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Mainstream classrooms are becoming increasingly neurodiverse, yet many neurodivergent pupils remain socially excluded within them. Neurodivergent pupils may be perceived more negatively by peers, have fewer friends, and face increased exclusion and bullying. Targeting social skills in neurodivergent children without environmental changes places the burden solely on this group, leaving the wider classroom peer ecology unchanged.

Taking a classroom-level approach, this project builds on evidence that children's peer attitudes and behaviours can be shifted by (1) changing how they understand and appraise differences (2) encouraging perspective-taking and (3) helping pupils recognise one another's strengths. By bringing these mechanisms together in a co-produced intervention, the project addresses a key gap: targeting the peer ecology around neurodivergent pupils.

Although the final content will be shaped by co-production, the intervention is likely to include three linked components: a value-in-diversity digital storybook, extending McKeown et al's approach from ethnic minority inclusion to neurodivergent peer inclusion, and building on Keating et al.'s digital storybook tasks co-developed with, and for, neurodivergent primary school children; a perspective-taking session that helps pupils question assumptions about difference (including neurodiversity), and consider how classroom situations may be experienced differently; and strengths-focused activities, drawing on Lei et al.'s zine-making workshops, that introduces the Character Strengths Framework and supports pupils to identify strengths in fictional characters, themselves, and – with the support of an adapted co-produced strength-spotting chatbot – their classmates.

Proposed Research Aims

- Map perceptions of neurodivergent peers, classroom social networks, and the environments and activities that facilitate or constrain intergroup interaction.
- Identify the routines, activities, and contexts most likely to support intergroup interaction.
- Co-produce a classroom-level intervention.
- Pilot the intervention and evaluate the acceptability, feasibility, and impact in the Emerging Minds Classroom.

Potential methodologies

- Mixed-methods approach to mapping mainstream primary classroom peer ecologies (surveys, photovoice methods).
- Co-production with primary school children, parents/carers and educators.
- Pilot intervention.