

*A poem presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Children's Autism Services Edmonton Conference in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada for a Neurodiversity in Research Panel (January 23, 2020)*

## NeuordiVERSE

Yes, I am autistic,  
And I do research and evaluation,  
Of programs and of policies so this is quite an invitation...  
when I think about the notion of neurodiversity  
and assessing whether it is evident in current ASD  
interventions and if so... then to what degree?  
There is so much to consider; so much that I do see.

I have come to the conclusion that it is very evident  
in current interventions. Neurodiversity does present  
in a sense that our "BEST" practices are really a reflection  
of how starved our current tactics are for some neurodiverse injection.  
When I look at interventions designed to teach or to support,  
It's unfortunate, but it's true - so I'm not sorry to report:  
That a majority of interventions are at best misguided,  
And at worst, degrading...and they don't even try to hide it.

Let's talk about misguided, because I think it's really common...  
Where goals and aims and programming are all what staff and mom want.  
It's not to say these humans don't have some good intentions,  
But most of you are operating from neurotypical conventions.  
From norms and your experience; from what you find effective.  
Ironically, its all of you that need to learn to take perspective.

Autistic people have different brains; that are different in their wiring  
And functioning in a same brain world is challenging and its tiring.  
The world was made for NT brains and made by them, too  
The world was made by and for people with brains like you.  
Too much of current practice aims to make different look the same,  
But I assure you different things work better for supporting different brains.

Believe it or not, there are different-brained people who have been all the way through school!  
The neurodiverse and autistic communities should be our greatest tool.  
They have knowledge, and experience; they share aspects of profiles  
With students who are in school now; and they know what was worthwhile,  
And what was damaging to them and what was so much better,  
So educational practices should be conceptualized together -

If you think things have improved, and there is truly collaboration  
Between neurotypicals and autistics and all this positive innovation,  
Then I ask you to consider the last time you, your class, or school or district  
Sought input about programming directly from autistics.  
If you don't know or you know it's never, what evidence do you have then,  
To say that things are much improved from the past and what they have been?

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“Best practices” have long been biased by a neurotypical mindset,  
And judgement of what progress is has been based on our compliance  
To norms and to the status quo - to make us look like you do,  
So that positive outcomes for autistics are essentially being untrue  
To who we are and how we think and our natural inclinations  
And we know that this has very serious mental health implications.

I saw a quote the other day by an autistic advocate,  
Asking educators to consider who does benefit  
From therapy and interventions... is it the student who's supported?  
Or is it you who feels so good when task completion has been rewarded?  
If it is the latter, I assure you change is likely needed.  
We can learn to act and pass, but that facade will always beat us.  
In the end we fall apart, because we have only learned to act,  
We haven't learned to navigate the world with our personhood in tact.

So why am I up here rhyming, putting all my thoughts in prose?  
It's really a perfect example of what my own past truly shows.  
I have always had an easier time expressing myself in writing,  
And rhyming provides a patterned scheme; there's comfort in the timing,  
So I think when I can focus on the structure and the flow,  
It eases my amped up energy around words and how to know,  
If what I'm saying is what I mean and if I can portray it,  
Just as clear as in my head when out loud I need to say it.

So, In school I would often change assignments without asking; without permission  
Like writing essays as rhyming poems was a commonplace decision.  
My teachers never told me I was being difficult or noncompliant,  
They encouraged it, or built it in - I was creative, not rigid and defiant.  
this was so empowering; true to me I could complete the task  
Without going along to get along; without wearing a burdensome mask.  
It fit within the rubric; it was completed without a token  
And the message I received was not that I was difficult or broken.

Rhyming for a research panel is not the norm or expectation  
But show of hands - who out there is still getting information?  
You see, differences aren't deficits, but we often treat them as they are,  
And interventions that focus on this will never take us far -  
Not you, not me, not kids today, not those who have endured it  
And now I pass the mic, I'm out and you can tell 'em where you heard it.