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Neurodivergent Education: Assimilation or Alienation

Introduction

A cramped room packed with clusters of desks, bright flickering LED lights embedded in the ceiling, walls covered in a mayhem of shapes and colors. A slightly-too-loud voice droning on, a pair of kids giggling somewhere to the left. The rapping of a table-mate's fingers on synthetic wood, barely out of sync with the constant ticking of the clock above your head. Only an hour more. Then 50 minutes, then 45... it's never going to end. Your sock is bunching in the wrong place, the tag of your t-shirt rubbing your neck. You can't move, you can't speak, you're stuck. There is so much unbearable noise, filling your brain like TV static.

In conventional classrooms, neurodivergent students are commonly seen as a problem. Maybe they act in ways teachers don't understand, or are unable to meet expectations and comply with rules. People think it's a behavior issue—that they're being difficult on purpose. The students are told to 'fix' themselves, that they're distracting, disruptive, lazy, or disrespectful. What those people are not seeing are the real reasons behind these behaviors. As Efsun Alper Sweet, a drama teacher and mom of neurodivergent kids, put it, "what can be seen as a disruptive behavior might be a stim for someone to be able to soothe themselves, to actually regulate their nervous system." It's not just a misunderstanding on teachers' parts, though. The reason these behaviors are considered a problem in the first place has to do with the education system itself. School is meant to be a space for learning, and yet it expects a vast variety of neurodiverse

people to learn at the same rate and in the same way. The education system was built by and for neurotypical people, and neurodivergent students are forced to put in so much extra unnecessary effort just to stay afloat. When they are unable to meet these ridiculous standards, they are unfairly blamed for it and perceived as lazy, disobedient, and stupid. Behind shiny diversity statements and supposed devotion to teaching, the modern education system's true oppressive and assimilative nature is revealed. This system needs to change, and fast, for this pressure to conform throughout childhood is detrimental to neurodivergent students, and by extension, the equality of our society as a whole.

History of the Education System

Before discussing the specific challenges neurodivergent people face in the education system, it's important to look more generally at the creation and history of mass education in America. There is a deep-rooted structure in schools that forces assimilation towards the dominant culture, or that of the white, heterosexual, able-bodied and minded, middle and upper class men. In "Neurodiversity and the Deep Structure of Schools", Peter Smagorinsky writes, "normative policies established through their power have governed who is considered acceptable in the school setting, and who is deemed disordered." This meant that anyone who did not change to fit that dominant culture would be looked down upon—including neurodivergent students.

This was because in the US, schools began as a way to take a country of diverse people from different cultures and backgrounds and mold them into one national culture. The general mass education system is generally said to be created by Horace Mann, around the mid 1800s. At the time, the US was a new and rapidly growing nation, and it was believed that "the most urgent

task of a rapidly expanding nation populated by diverse people was to create a sense of unity and national identity, using the vehicle of school" (Smagorinsky 13). This belief that assimilation into one culture was necessary in order to form a strong national identity came from the belief that the dominant culture was superior to other cultures, and that any divergence from it was therefore bad. A very significant historical example of this was the assimilation of Native American children through boarding schools. Mostly during the late 1800s, hundreds of primarily religious boarding schools were built near reservations. Native American children were forcibly taken from their families and sent to these "schools", where they were stripped of their identity and forced to adopt the dominant culture of the time—and all of this was done under the belief they were helping to "civilize" the children ("'Cultural Genocide' and Native American Children"). This is what made the education system the way it is—under the guise of helping people become better, schools crush these wonderfully diverse cultures into one, positioning "violators as fundamentally in need of repair, banishment, punishment, exclusion, and disdain" (Smagorinsky 17).

Now, the question is: how did this assimilative schooling affect neurodivergent people? Similarly to the way members of the dominant culture believed their culture was superior, neurotypical people believed the way they functioned was the only correct way to function. Furthermore, at the time America's education system was developed, neurodivergent people were identified only by behaviors. There was significant emphasis on behaviorism, the theory that human (and animal) behaviors can be explained by environmental stimuli or past conditioning, rather than thoughts or feelings ("Behaviorism"). This was integrated into schools, so that students were "judged by their actions—the focus of behaviorism—and not the mental or neurological makeup that produces actions that defy conventional behavioral norms"

(Smagorinsky 17). Just as schools told themselves they were helping people become part of a better culture through assimilation, the education system continuously "helps" neurodivergent students by forcing them to adopt neurotypical behavior—or to mask. When students were unable to mask to the point of blending in with their peers, they were unfairly punished for simply acting in accordance to the way they were wired. In reality, these so-called educators are not supporting the students, but instead forcing the students to change for the comfort of the neurotypical people around them.

Present-day Issues: What hasn't changed

We like to tell ourselves that neurodivergent students are accepted and respected now, but while it's true our education system has become more supportive on the surface, so much hasn't changed. The integration of behaviorism in schools is no exception. Educators are often encouraged to use ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis, a method of changing and controlling behavior based on the theory of behaviorism) methods in classrooms in order to change unwanted behaviors in children. As Jacquelyn Fede and Amy Laurent, in their paper "Masking and Mental Health" put it, masking "is often taught or forced through very common and traditional behavioral educational approaches that promote compliance and conformity and the extinguishing of 'autistic behaviors.'" In my interview with Efsun Sweet, she described how students will often be told to stop doing certain things as if they are in control of those behaviors or are doing it on purpose. As a result of this behaviorist culture that condemns differences, "individuals can also acquire similar skill sets implicitly, as it can be learned through observation of interactions between neurotypical peers, or from media sources" (Fede and Laurent 1).

Everyone can mask to an extent, but Efsun says she has observed both in her own child and other students that "when it's autistic masking, it just seems to be almost like creating a different version of yourself to be able to function, to be able to be liked in a group of people, and to be able to be considered even worthy at times...we are talking about literally not showing any part of yourself...to the point that they may not know who they are after all of that masking." Masking "is this reminder to self that they're not enough. They're not worthy. They're not going to be loved or liked, and they are just weird" (Efsun). Before her second child was diagnosed with autism, she said that she "could mask really well," and so she "was completely ignored because she was not causing any problems... teachers thought that she was listening to people and being very sweet and she wouldn't speak up." Teachers didn't see what Efsun was seeing at home or when volunteering in the classroom, because her child had been so conditioned by the school to hide her autism. "That part was another difficult part because they were also missing severe bullying... being called names and this kind of torture happening for years at a time in a trusted place we thought was her safe place" (Efsun).

Neurodivergent people are already reported to struggle with mental health conditions more than their neurotypical peers. In a paper by Amy L. Accardo and others, it was proven that in youth with ADHD and autism, "rates of anxiety and depression were up to ten-fold the prevalence of adolescents not diagnosed with autism or ADHD." About 69-72% of those with ADHD and autism were diagnosed with anxiety, and 38-39% with depression. The definite reasons for this are still unclear as there is a current lack of research, but it has been observed that autistic people who mask are also at a significantly higher risk of anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Fede and Laurent 1). Neurodivergent students are almost twice as likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers (National Survey of Children's Health), and students who are

bullied are 2-3 times more likely to meet the criteria for depression as a young adult (Bowes et al.). Through all of this it can be seen how school environments can be detrimental to neurodivergent students' mental health and wellbeing.

Efsun later emphasized that during the pandemic, when her second child stopped going to school and the social interactions with peers (and subsequently, social pressures) went away, "there was a big change in the behavior...this frankness coming out, this brutal honesty that could seem mean to maybe another observer, but it was honestly refreshing that she was finally finding it easy to be just who they are." Being able to unmask after social pressures were removed also proves that it was the social pressures keeping the mask up in the first place. "And you know, now she does not have a mask, and as her mom, I couldn't be prouder" (Efsun).

Social pressures are not the only thing wrong with the education system, though. The structure of most schools expect all students to learn the same material at the same rate in the same way. This also comes from the historical nature of schools. When the education system was created, students were pressured to assimilate, and part of this meant learning the same things as one another, in identical classrooms with the same standards no matter the differences in the students. "In terms of subject teaching, we're still doing very much, one person has all the knowledge and that knowledge is getting disseminated outward and the student is supposed to absorb it...I think many of us learned during the pandemic that doesn't work for so many people," Efsun argued. Everyone's brain is different, and so everyone has different needs. One strict system will never work for everyone—some people need visuals, some people need to learn through application, others need to move around, still others need group work. Efsun explains, "my second child... has a language disability where it's very difficult for her to learn

things verbally, whether it's written or spoken." She's very much a visual learner, and when that isn't made an option, it's very difficult for her.

My younger sibling Racoona, who uses all pronouns, struggles a lot with executive functioning, especially when he has to do something she doesn't enjoy. Completing school work has always been a really big struggle, not because they aren't smart enough, but because he is just unable to get herself to do it. In contrast, when they're working on a passion project, she can spend hours absorbed in creating beautiful writing and artwork. He is smart and capable, but the way learning is structured in school doesn't work for them, just like it doesn't work for so many other neurodivergent kids.

Furthermore, Efsun argues, "from the moment you enter the classroom, from the seating, from how everything is made, it looks very formal and jail-like. The kids do not have autonomy." Racoona has also felt this way. He would frequently sit in unconventional places like under a desk or in a cabinet but got in trouble, because it was apparently a "fire hazard." The teachers, rather than understanding and safely accommodating her need for flexible seating and smaller, less-stimulating spaces to work, refused to listen and made him sit at a desk with other students. Teachers too often treat kids, especially neurodivergent kids, like they don't know what they really need. Even in going to the restroom, Efsun says, the students have to ask or get a pass, but really "whether the person is using it to relieve themselves or to get a mental break, it's nobody else's business."

Another big issue for neurodivergent students is testing. Efsun spoke about how there is this big pressure on faculty to prove that the information being taught is retained by the students, resulting in a ton of unnecessary testing. To some degree, testing may be important to evaluate curriculums, and see whether they are effective. However, it so often turns into this competitive,

stressful thing, most of which "has nothing to do with if the student absorbed it enough to make connections, make associations across disciplines, if they can actually take that knowledge and apply it...or to creatively pursue a project and marry different disciplines and do something cool with it" (Efsun). Students with learning disabilities have an even harder time with testing, for a number of different reasons. Students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, for example, are often unable to sit and focus enough to complete a test in the given amount of time, despite having the knowledge to. Academic success is measured in test scores and grades, and when this system doesn't work for your brain, it makes you feel like you're just bad at learning (Armstrong). In reality, you're not—you just learn differently, but testing leaves no room for that.

Present-day "Solutions"

After addressing these issues, the big question is: how do we fix it? To this, I unfortunately have no concrete answer. It's an incredibly complex issue, and fixing it is by no means easy. Today, the current "solutions" seem to be providing accommodations through a 504 or an IEP, and putting kids into special education. Given we still have all of these issues today though, this is clearly insufficient.

For one, these accommodations are only available to those who are able to get a diagnosis. It took Efsun about 6 years to get her first child the diagnoses they needed for a 504, and for her second child, even after getting a diagnosis it took a full year before she was finally given an IEP. In general, it has been found that white children have a much higher chance of being diagnosed than Black or Latinx children (Alyward et al.), and boys are diagnosed much more often than girls (Gesi et al.). This can be for any number of complex reasons, but often is

due to the fact that most of the research is done on white men, and members of marginalized groups may not fit the stereotypes associated with the respective diagnosis (Arky et al.).

This means access to accommodations and special education is unfairly biased and inaccessible. Special education is also so often severely underfunded, which means children who are able to enter it don't get the attention and support they actually need (Samuels). Furthermore, Efsun explains, special education as a whole is "this double edged sword. In technicality it sounds great because you want to be able to give these folks what they need, and there are certain different needs within the spectrum that might require very specific specialized education...but there is also this sense of what the separation itself creates. And that's the part I am not thrilled with because ultimately the specialized education like that ends up getting privatized to the point that entering becomes really difficult." Ultimately, though they do help some, these "solutions" are all flawed modifications to the current education system that are not fully implemented, only available to those able to get diagnosed, and are put in place so the system doesn't really have to change.

The Ideal Education System

Ideally, the education system would be rebuilt completely. Learning would be more flexible, with accommodations provided for every student based on their individual needs. It would also be more passion and strength based. When people are excited about something, they will be more inclined to actually learn about it, and will be able to go on to apply and build off of that and do something cool with it. While general education is definitely important to an extent, students who really struggle with certain subjects should not be made to learn them at the same

rate or to the same extent as others. School really just needs to be a flexible space where students can learn what they love in the ways that work best for them.

This dream school will never exist, but that doesn't mean we can't work towards it. According to LynNell Hancock, a writer and teacher specializing in education and child and family policy issues, before the 1960s, the majority of children in Finland only received six years of public education and were only able to get a quality education if they were privileged and wealthy. To combat their struggling economy at the time, they decided to reform the education system. At first it had its struggles—teachers lecturing obedient children from textbooks, and significant race and class disparities, for example—but now, while still not perfect, it's one of the best in the world. There is no emphasis placed on testing, no rankings or competition between students or regions, schools are publicly funded, and emphasis is placed on the process of actually learning rather than proving material has been learned. Neurodivergent students, rather than being labeled stupid and pushed aside, are given the attention and support they need in order to continue to learn and grow. This is essential both for the childrens' future as well as their self esteem—they may have struggled learning the way others do, but because the teachers believed in them and provided that help, they know that they are capable of learning. Furthermore, Finnish schools and classes are smaller, and teachers are paid more while spending less hours actively teaching, giving them more time to prepare lessons and more closely assess their students. Teaching is also one of the most highly respected professions, and teachers receive much more intense and in-depth training. Ultimately, Finland's schools put much more thought into actual learning, and simultaneously, teachers' and students' well-being. In the words of Finnish principal Timo Heikkinen, "If you only measure the statistics, you miss the human aspect" (qtd. in Hancock).

Realistic Smaller Steps

The United States is not Finland. We are much larger, and are so often divided on what changes to make and why. It is highly unlikely that any significant change will come in any short period of time. That does not mean, though, that change can't come—it just has to come differently. You know, now, many of the flaws with our education system, and how detrimental this education system is for the health and future of neurodivergent students. Change needs to come, for the sake of current and future students and the impact they will have on the world, but change will only come when enough people believe it needs to. For that reason, I hope that you will continue to educate yourself and others on this topic.

That being said—raising awareness is crucial, but does nothing if no real action comes from it. On a smaller scale, simply supporting the neurodivergent people around you who need it, and fighting for individual accommodations or changes to local schools can really help the people in your community get what they need. Even coming together with local parents to change one classroom to have a more flexible and sensory-friendly environment can have a hugely positive impact on those kids—and hopefully, more classroom communities will see that and follow. On a larger scale, we need systemic change through political action, and joining or supporting larger organizations and fighting for that can make all the difference. One person may not be able to fix everything, but it's important everyone does their part. In the words of Efsun Sweet, "whatever small win is good. It's not small. It just needs to have that ripple effect."

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