

ELLeN - English Language Learning & Neurodiversity

Project description

Neurodiversity is a term that was originally developed within online lay discourses (Singer 2017), and popularized by the nascent Autistic Pride Movement (Silberman 2015). It was then extended to include a wider range of individuals not part of the neurological mainstream. A neurodivergent person is thus understood as a person who belongs to a minority neurotype, e.g., by being autistic, dyslexic, or by having ADD or ADHD. The term “neurodiversity” should not be read as a medical term, though neurotypes are traditionally defined clinically, but as “the consideration of differences in brains as an element of diversity within societies” (Baker 2011: 3): “Fundamentally, neurodiversity asserts that neurological differences can be understood and experienced as much as a source of community and communal identity as can differences more routinely associated with politicized diversity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.” (Baker 2011: 20) We believe that these experiences and opinions of neurodivergent learners can be highly relevant information for (future) teachers. While not all learners’ intuitions about their learning process are borne out by the facts (this applies to learners of all neurotypes), they are essential starting points for investigating how to best support each learner. This project will contribute to teacher training by collecting first person accounts of neurodivergent learners and making them available as means for teacher training and professional development. These first person accounts are intended not as mere data points or illustrations to research results, but as voices of key stakeholders in any discourse about heterogeneity in education. Teacher training students will be involved at every stage of the project, both in conducting interviews, and in working with the resultant texts, in a context of Inquiry-based learning (IBL). While the roots of IBL can be traced back to Dewey (1933), its implementation in higher education settings remains challenging, despite its potential to contribute to the development of the reflective practitioner (Wallace 1991; Fichten 2010). Preparing students-as-future-teachers to investigate issues of importance as defined by them not only strengthens their own ability to critically pursue significant questions situated in specific contexts as part of a community of practice (Justice et al 2007; Lave & Wenger 1991); it also models the stances and skills these pre-service teachers will need to engage with neurodivergent learners in contemporary, heterogeneous school settings. This project involves teacher training students in researching the needs of a specific learner group by interviewing learners themselves, i.e., by treating neurodivergent learners as evolving experts of their learning process. By scaffolding the IBL-related skills and competencies of pre-service teachers for their own learning, this initiative equally models how, in partnership with neurodivergent learners, the target population’s learning strengths and needs can be critically identified, analyzed, and addressed in educational settings.

This project profits in three ways from its transnational design:

- (a) Learners’ experiences from different countries can contribute to a broader picture, and better understanding of neurodivergent learners’ needs, strengths, and opinions.
- (b) Inquiry-based learning is perfectly positioned to include elements of telecollaboration/virtual exchange, allowing university students from different partner institutions to profit from each other’s work.

(c) The transnational setup of this project allows for an optimal combination of expertise.

Results and expected outcomes

Strengthening the role of Inquiry-Based Learning as a fundamental approach in teacher training. Developing & disseminating best practices for Inquiry-Based Learning in EFL teacher training, specifically with a perspective on inclusive educational contexts. Implementing these in teacher training and thereby developing the skills of future English language teaching related to inclusive education in the English language classroom. Extending our knowledge of the needs of neurodivergent language learners in the inclusive EFL classroom, & development of concomitant teacher training material. Modelling a more participatory approach to topics related to inclusive education in the EFL classroom, contributing to a normalization of such approaches. Supporting participating students in reflecting about their own experiences with and attitudes toward neurodivergent learners and other neurodivergent stakeholders.

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