

Neurodiversity and Mental Health Conversation



WHAT: A thoughtful as well as thought-provoking discussion about neurodiversity. Several college students from Landmark College's Center for Neurodiversity in Putney, Vermont, will be visiting to speak about their own perspectives and experiences regarding mental health and learning challenges.

WHEN: The meeting is scheduled for **11:30am-1:30pm on Friday April 12th**, with the Landmark contingent expected to arrive at noon.

WHERE: It will be in **Conference Room #127 at the NVRH Business & Conference Center.**

WHY: As you may know, Landmark College serves neurodiverse students who have received a diagnosis of a condition that affects learning, such as a learning disability, ADHD, or an autism spectrum condition. The representatives coming to visit have succeeded in college and/or the work world, and worked hard to get where they are. **What they are willing to share with us could be invaluable to our own work.** The Director of Landmark's Center for Neurodiversity, Professor Solvegi Shmulsky, will also be present.

Lunch will be provided from the hospital cafeteria (please, RSVP to Kari White (kariw@nchvt.org) so that she can get a head count for the lunch). We hope you will be able to join us then. **Please feel free to share this invitation** with your colleagues, especially those working with youth.

Thank you!

Brad

Bradford Smith, Executive Director

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Mental Health & Neurodiversity Discussion

w/ Landmark College Center for Neurodiversity Panel

Healing & Learning Synergies Meeting
St. Johnsbury VT
April 12, 2019

1. Welcome Guests
2. LC Center for Neurodiversity group will introduce themselves (Andy Donahue, Solvegi Shmulsky, Steven Vitt, Max Lyttle, Anais Sidonia); interns will share a brief bio each
3. Andy and Solvegi will start discussion by asking interns questions in panel format:
 - a. **Mental health issues** associated with neurodiversity in an educational setting (self-worth, camouflaging, social treatment, stigma, anxiety & depression)
 - b. **What helps?** Factors that support mental health in an educational setting
4. Broader discussion, Q & A



8 Reasons Why We Need Neurodiversity in Education

APRIL 23, 2018

THOMAS ARMSTRONG



The concept of neurodiversity emerged in the 1990's as a way for autism advocates to affirm their identity as people with neurological differences rather than as disabled individuals. The idea has spread as other advocates (including myself) have sought to articulate the "diversity rather than disability" message to a broader segment of the population than just autism, including children and adults with ADHD, dyslexia, intellectual disabilities, and social and emotional disorders. Moreover, some of us have been attempting to apply a "diversity" worldview in the field of education, and in particular, to reform special education so that it de-emphasizes a "disability" paradigm and reflects instead a "diversity" perspective. Here are 8 reasons why we need to integrate neurodiversity into our educational practices:

1. **Higher Expectations Lead to Higher Achievement.** Starting with the "Pygmalion in the Classroom" studies of the 1960's, educators have long been aware that teachers who have higher expectations of their students end up with their having higher achievement levels (and the reverse is true as well). Neurodiversity emphasizes looking at students with special needs primarily in terms of their gifts and abilities, and uses these strengths to help them deal with their challenges. This positive view pays off in dividends as students rise to the expectations of their teachers.
2. **We Need a Growth Paradigm to Replace a Deficit Paradigm.** The field of special education in America (and elsewhere in the world) has a long history of focusing on the negatives of children and adults with special needs. The pioneers of special education in the first half of the twentieth century used terms to describe neurodiverse individuals such as "moron," "feeble minded," "minimally brain damaged," and "educationally handicapped." In the 21st century, we're discovering that people with neurodiversities possess gifts that often dovetail with cutting edge careers in information technology, entrepreneurship, and science. It's time that special educators use this knowledge to help their students affirm positive futures for themselves.
3. **Neurodiversity Supports the Inclusion Movement.** Students with special needs who are included in regular classrooms develop more positive views of themselves, form friendships with neurotypical kids, and are better able to keep up with the curriculum and learn important academic skills. One of the obstacles to inclusion is the attitude of teachers who feel that the addition of one or more students with special needs in their classroom just adds a greater burden to their teaching load. Neurodiversity helps support inclusion by convincing the regular classroom teacher that adding neurodiverse students will actually make the classroom better; that students with neurodiversities will bring in positive qualities, attributes, and gifts to make a positive contribution to the class.
4. **Neurodiversity Aligns with a School's Other Programs and Policies on Diversity.** Virtually all schools have policies that promote the value of diversity, both cultural diversity (honoring students from different races, ethnic groups, gender roles, etc.) and bio-diversity (through classes and units on biology and related disciplines). Some school districts even have departments of diversity to promote these policies. Neurodiversity can be viewed as another

positive contribution to this overarching commitment to diversity, and should be integrated into both classroom lessons on diversity, and educational policies dedicated to promoting equity in learning.

5. **Neurodiversity Helps to Stimulate Real Reform in Our Schools.** Sometimes I like to compare neurodiverse students with canaries in the coal mine. Coal miners brought canaries down into the mines with them. If an air blockage developed, the canaries would fall off their perches for lack of oxygen and this would warn the miners to get out. I think our students with special needs are telling us through their difficulties with academics, behavior, and attention, that there isn't enough air, so to speak, for ALL students in school, and that we need to institute real reform (not the phony reform of standardized testing which is part of the problem) for every student. This means more hands-on learning, experiential learning, project-based learning, expeditionary learning, arts-based learning, brain-based learning, Universal Design for Learning, and other programs and projects that kids with neurodiversities will have success with, and that will benefit every other student in school as well.
6. **Neurodiversity Helps Reduce Bullying in School.** Bullying is one of the biggest problems in education today, resulting in untold social, emotional, and behavior problems that in many cases can last a lifetime for the bullied. Bullies tend to pick on students they perceive as weaker than they are to accentuate their own sense of power and prestige. Students with special needs are frequently perceived by bullies as weak and thus are often targets of their scorn, fury, and manipulation. Neurodiversity helps to change this situation by emphasizing (and promoting) the gifts and abilities of students with special needs, thus projecting a more powerful image to potential bullies, and thereby making them less of a target.
7. **Neurodiverse Individuals Can Change the World.** We typically think of those individuals who have had the greatest impact on the world as super-individuals who had extraordinary power and expertise. However, when you begin to look at individual lives, you see something entirely different. These individuals had both strengths and significant challenges. Some examples: Winston Churchill had a conduct disorder and a speech impediment. Henry Ford had learning disabilities. Thomas Edison had clear signs of ADHD. Agatha Christie had dyslexia. Helen Keller had significant sensory impediments. The list could go on. This should remind us that the kids with special needs in our classrooms may be the ones to make the crucial discoveries or the key decisions for our world in the coming decades. As the line goes from "The Imitation Game" [the story of computer pioneer Alan Turing]: "Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do the things no one can imagine."
8. **We Need a Diversity of Minds to Be Prepared for Whatever May Happen in the Future.** The Irish potato famine killed one million people and caused the emigration of another two million. The famine was due to the fact that the Irish farmer had come to depend upon only one variety of potato, and when it was infected by a strain of *Phytophthora infestans*, there was no back-up available for nourishment (there are over 4,000 varieties of potatoes out there to pick from). This cautionary tale suggests to us the advantages of diversity; that diversity has tremendous adaptational advantages. Over the past thirty-five years in the United States, there's been a trend toward a one-size-fits-all type of thinker as far as standards and standardized testing are concerned. We don't need one type of learner, we need to have many varieties of minds, and a multitude of perspectives and views, so that there will be many solutions offered in the uncertain times we face in the future.

For more information about neurodiversity, see my books:

- [The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain](#) (DaCapo/Hachette);
- [Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life](#) (ASCD).