



# Cultivating the Creativity of Neurodivergent Thinking: A New Educational Approach for ASD Students

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## Abstract

*According to the highly popular American podcast series The Neurodiversity Podcast, there is now a newfound appreciation for the creative works of autistic people and how they help to empower and enlighten young minds in a variety of educational contexts. This article demonstrates how the promotion and cultivation of an autistic and neurodivergent person's creativity could effectively pave the way for a new educational approach that would potentially challenge and revitalise the training influenced rigid, rule-bound approach that has grown in prominence in most educational institutions in recent years. Building on a recent conference paper, this article argues that the seeds for this highly innovative type of education could be effectively sown through the establishment of a collaborative Third-Level-based research project. It outlines how this could be achieved through a stronger focus on a transformative participatory action research methodology. Furthermore, it identifies future directions that would support this vital and pressing educational objective.*

**Keywords:** autism, education, inclusive teaching, participatory research, socio-cultural theory

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## Introduction

The term neurodiversity was introduced by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s. She proposed that neurological diversity is a natural and healthy attribute, arguing that such differences should be understood as part of human diversity and regarded as natural variation (Goldberg, 2023). More recently, Singer (2024) added that neurodiversity offers a lens for examining social issues (Singer, quoted in Miller, 2024, p. 1). She described individuals with autism, ADHD and learning difficulties like dyslexia and dyscalculia as “neurological minorities” (Singer, quoted in Miller, 2024, p. 1). The concept has expanded to include those who self-identify as neurodiverse or who think and process in unconventional ways (Goldberg, 2023). In its consideration of curating a new educational approach this article focuses particularly on Autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

ASD are lifelong neurodevelopmental conditions characterised by deficiencies in social and communication skills, alongside patterns of restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests (Sefotho and Onyishi, 2021). These challenges, such as struggling to understand abstract concepts, forming friendships, recognising the intentions of others and reading conventional social cues, pose a significant barrier to accessing and completing courses at higher level educational institutions. A recent *Irish Times* editorial highlights an alarming three-fold rise in autism amongst young school children (Mac Cormaic, 2025). The increase, they argue, results from several factors, including heightened awareness of ASD, improved diagnosis and a broader assessment criterion (Mac Cormaic, 2025).

According to Maximus M. Sefotho and C. Onyishi (2021), there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that learners with ASD and their families experience a number of limiting obstacles when they attempt to transition between different phases of academic life. Studies by K. Sproston *et al.* (2017), R. Salter (2019) and A. Munroe and M. Dunleavy (2023) suggest that ASD-related challenges create significant difficulties in primary and secondary environments. This is certainly true within an Irish educational context. Despite the welcome rise in special schools in Ireland from 300 to 3,000 since 2010 and the fact that around 30% of the education budget now goes towards special education classes, what is sorely required is an effective whole-of government response that ensures the planning and delivery of vital services such as financial assistance, specialised autism units and one-to-one tuition for individuals with sensory difficulties (Mac Cormaic, 2025). Many children still do not have appropriate school placements and long assessment waiting lists are now the norm. Limited access to essential therapies and alternative educational approaches further hinders the independence of neurodiverse learner and affects their self-esteem and overall well-being (Mac Cormaic, 2025).

Recent research by E. McPeake *et al.* (2024) shows that students with ASD encounter similar obstacles in third-level education, where different routines and structure can make coping with postsecondary experiences challenging (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024). Students are expected to adapt to new surroundings, navigate unfamiliar social and physical environments and fulfil the demands of academic life simultaneously. B. Cook and Y.

Purkis (2022) likewise note that this transition poses major difficulties as it severely limits their academic progress, independent functioning and leads to a variety of emotional and behavioural symptoms. One challenge lies in the scale of third-level institutions, which can be very overwhelming for many autistic people. The difficulties with self-awareness, personal skills and the ability to disclose personal information experienced people with ASD can create further challenges. Bell *et al.*, (2018) highlight that higher education may be the first setting in which students with ASD must advocate for themselves to access supports or accommodations, potentially putting them at a disadvantage when entering universities, technological institutions, training colleges or other higher education contexts.

This emphasises the need for measures that support the transition of ASD individuals from secondary to post-secondary education. Furthermore, a glaring omission from current research is the voice of autistic people themselves. J. Shepherd (2022) notes that autistic children and young people may be even less likely to have their views considered. Indeed, in many cases, autistic individuals remain excluded from key decisions about further education, such as where to find and access the types of services and support they require. This lack of autonomy greatly contributes to an autistic/allistic<sup>1</sup> divide in higher education, where neurodivergent students experience isolation from their neurotypical peers.

Including the perspectives of autistic individuals is essential for diversifying knowledge in education. This article argues that cultivating the creative, non-linear thinking of students who are on the autism spectrum would support this objective. Such an approach may generate innovative and authentically inclusive educational strategies while challenging the technically prescriptive mindset that has become a problematic feature of contemporary education (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 1989; Buckley, 2021; Holt *et al.*, 2024; Roth, 2018). This text will draw from the author's current PhD research. It will demonstrate how the promotion of autistic creativity could be more fully explored through the establishment of a collaborative Third-Level-based research project, supplemented by a focus on a transformative participatory action research methodology. This would help to guide future policies and practices in post-secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> Allistics are neurotypical individuals.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review illustrates how the cultivation of autistic, creative, non-linear, neurodivergent thinking could establish a new educational approach that enhances the learning experiences of students with ASD. There is growing recognition of autistic creativity and its potential to enrich education, with commentators addressing stereotypes surrounding autism and discussing the potential of creative practices to challenge conventional models of learning.

To explore the topic, a range of sources were consulted. The Boole Library catalogue at University College Cork was the primary resource for books and journal articles, with searches conducted using terms such as *Autism AND Inclusive Education*, *Autism AND Creativity*, and *Autism AND Creative Research Methods*. Additional material was identified through the Cork City and County Library Catalogues, while streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube were used to access relevant discussions and podcasts. Emerging themes were identified through inductive review, allowing for the organisation and categorisation of the literature.

### ***The Concept of Creativity and Autistic Intelligence***

The concept of creativity in education is a prominent theme in the literature. D. Roberts and N.J. Roberts (2015) pinpoint how educators grapple with creative thinking to better understand the “relationship between information and insight” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 3). G.A Davis (1991) argues that helping students to understand and develop their creativity increases awareness promotes innovative ideas. Likewise, T. Warne and S. MacAndrew (2010) suggest that creative practices in the classroom allow students to connect abstract theories to personal experience. In contrast, K. Robinson (2006) contends that the education system suffers from a lack of creative ‘outside the box’ thinking due to entrenched hierarchies of subject knowledge (Robinson, 2006). This, he believes, has resulted in an “academic inflation” that “devalues education and stigmatises creative application” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 3).

V. Lyons and M. Fitzgerald (2013) highlight how the classic portrayal of someone with autism is often moulded by the ‘Rain Man’ stereotype, originating from the 1988 film in which Dustin Hoffman played an ‘autistic savant’. This term refers to an individual with ASD who also possesses

exceptional skills in a particular area, often in stark contrast with their overall cognitive or developmental abilities (Treffert, 2025). *Guardian* journalist K. Knights (2018) convincingly argues that this particular representation of autism still has a profound influence on perceptions of ASD. Roberts and Roberts (2015) reiterate this claim and note that people with ASD are often depicted in popular culture as having “stereotypical behaviours with a preference for sameness and routine resulting in a lack of imagination” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 3). Likewise, J. Vincent, *et al.* (2016), draw attention to the persistent belief that creative thought is rare—and sometimes virtually non-existent—amongst people on the spectrum. I. Roth (2018) offers an important counterargument. Aligning with writers such as E. Buckley (2021), she posits that many autistic individuals possess “exceptional artistic gifts” and often gravitate towards “activities typically associated with creative expression” such as “visual art, music, poetry and theatre” (Roth, 2018, p. 1).

These claims have a great deal of credibility. Like Buckley, J. Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) demonstrate the value of drama techniques and performance-based approaches in enhancing the learning experiences of people with autism. Consistent with other researchers in this field (Corbett, 2003; Kasari *et al.*, 2002; Soorya *et al.* 2015) Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) also stress the increasing focus in recent years on “interventions that improve social skills” for people on the spectrum (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2017, p. 916). Due to this, there has been greater emphasis on techniques such as peer interaction, peer modelling and video instruction, which aim to improve the communication abilities of individuals with ASD.

In common with these commentators, Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) venture to affirm that many developmental psychologists and educationalists are increasingly highlighting the value of dramatic play for people with autism. They suggest that such approaches can help participants “read each other’s beliefs and intentions” within a safe, structured and encouraging environment (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2017, p. 916). Similarly, M.D. Lerner and A.Y. Mikami (2012) point out that these performance-based activities provide opportunities for students to develop their behaviour in more naturalistic ways. By contrast, N. Shaughnessy (2011) outlines the parallels between the three central concepts of drama—*Imagination* (the construction of a fictional or alternative reality)

*Communication* (the dialogue between a performer and their audience) and *Interaction* (the physical engagement between an audience and the actual performer themselves)—and the ‘triad of impairments’ often associated with autism (Wing and Gould, 1979).

These views directly echo writers such as J.W. Ivy and K.A Schreck (2016) who demonstrate the effectiveness of the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). This is therapy based on the science of learning and behaviour (Autism Speaks Inc., 2025). Its main objective is to help us to understand the origins of certain behaviour; how this is affected by the environment and how learning takes place. In addition, it aims to decrease behaviours that are harmful or negative. Within the context of autism, it seeks to improve social skills, communication and reduce challenging behaviour through positive reinforcement (Ivy and Schreck, 2016). Yet this method has also faced strong criticism. J. Garey (2025), for example, echoing feminist commentators such as C. Jones (2022), argues that this emphasis on eliminating ‘undesirable’ behaviours pressures autistic people to suppress their natural characteristics, sacrifice individuality and conform to neurotypical standards.

However, Garey’s (2025) perspective warrants critical examination. The methods used by American-based disability organisations such as Building Blocks Therapy contradict this view. They specialise in using targeted and person-centred approaches to assist children with autism who may experience developmental difficulties (such as executive dysfunction or emotional regulation). They aim to accomplish this through a combination of structured activities, play, and personalised techniques that are tailored to suit the specific needs of an autistic individual (buildingblockstheapy.org, 2025a). Moreover, they call attention to a newfound emphasis on ‘unstructured play’, which seeks to foster creativity and individual expression (buildingblockstheapy.org, 2025b). This approach provides those with ASD the freedom to explore their interests beyond the constraints of a structured environment (buildingblockstheapy.org, 2025b). Furthermore, it allows them to engage in imaginative scenarios that can enhance social skills and emotional intelligence.

J. Holt *et al.* (2024, p. 4) accentuate how some educators are building upon Lave and Wenger’s (1991) ‘situated learning theory’, which stresses

that “people learn by becoming part of a community of practice” and through “active engagement” with other students (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 1). Consistent with N. Gillberg *et al.* (2024), Holt *et al.* (2024) effectively illustrate how this benefits those with ASD as it would lead to a creative and collaborative space in which “autistic individuals” could engage with “neurotypical peers and other autistics” through a variety of shared activities (Holt *et al.*, 2024, p. 4) Expanding on Roth (2018), they advocate for workshops that incorporate a mixture of art and storytelling and demonstrate how such methods can foster psychological empowerment for those on the spectrum. These perspectives underline how emphasising non-linear neurodivergent thinking could pave the way for more innovative educational approaches that would help to facilitate the inclusion of autistic and neurodivergent students within mainstream institutions.

### ***Technically Prescriptive Teaching***

The ability to fully incorporate and acknowledge the versatile creative thinking of those on the spectrum is made increasingly problematic if the views of theorists such as Deborah J. Gallagher (2004), who demonstrate another important subtheme within the research on this issue, are considered. According to this school of thought, many Third-Level institutions still adhere to an objectivist educational framework. The logic behind this approach is that good teaching is a matter of applying good technique. It depicts knowledge as a collection of impersonal facts. Knowing how to teach, according to this perspective, means that one must accumulate data, skills and techniques that will somehow eliminate the uncertainties that accompany teaching. This ‘technical-rational’ framework fails to account for the fact that human beings learn best by making sense of the world. To put it another way, it implies that learning is no longer a meaning-making process. It eliminates the role of consciousness. Both teachers and students are discouraged from intellectual engagement and curiosity—which are vital for genuine learning.

Gallagher (2004, p. 6) argues that an over-reliance on an objectivist framework ultimately results in “teacher deskilling”, in which teachers focus on a small set of specialised skills. In doing this they lose the connection between their practices and the ideas that inform them and eventually abandon the idea of teaching as meaning-making process.

Teachers are discouraged from critically engaging with the intellectual aspects of their work, prioritising the “how to” of instruction at the expense of the “whys” of learning (Gallagher, 2004, p. 6).

Various studies (Allington and McGill-Franzen 1989; Gibson, 2012; Kang, 2009) reveal how special-needs students have been subjected to this kind of technically prescriptive teaching. Students with disabilities tend to experience greater levels of failure in general educational settings that are dominated by traditional teaching methods. Indeed, in many cases, there is an underlying assumption that they will benefit from a more tightly controlled form of instruction and that they will be somehow ‘remediated’ (i.e. made more like everybody else) through the use of this approach. However, as with their teachers, traditional teaching methods can render students unable to reach their full potential. Students are left feeling passive, as they are not given the opportunity to develop as learners, often resulting in inattentiveness, low motivation and behavioural difficulties. Such teaching practices reaffirm traditional perceptions of disability within Third-Level institutions, as this type of framework contributes to the notion that some students are ‘different’ from their ‘normal’ peers.

Conversely, many authors are aiming to counteract this deficit-focused approach by adopting socio-cultural perspectives that acknowledge how family, friends, environments and religious views shape an individual’s thoughts, behaviours and actions (De La Ossa *et al.*, 2025). J.G. Kang (2009) notes how many Third-Level teachers are adopting a socio-cultural perspective of disability. This theory advances the view that concepts such as normalcy and disability are “not formed by objective facts but constructed through existing social interactions and discourses” (Kang, 2009, p. 3). More importantly, it demonstrates how students who are “labelled as disabled” can be valued for their differences (Kang, 2009, p. 3).

These theoretical approaches would play a vital role in a cross-collaborative research project which is currently being developed as part of this author’s doctoral thesis. They have very strong relevance within the field of Autism Studies. In addition, they heighten our understanding of how the creativity of neurodivergent thinking can be cultivated. Applying these theories to the classroom would also greatly benefit students with ASD. Social-cultural theory stems from the work of Vygotsky (1978) and it has been used to

develop several related teaching practices. M. Cole (1985) and W.M. Roth and Y.J. Lee (2007) link their work to Vygotsky's way of thinking. They put forward a strong case for viewing education as a socio-cultural process; how it is important to grasp social relations that occur within a learning environment and how it is vital for educators to critically examine it. Grenier (2010), in her work about disability in the classroom argues that engaging in socio-cultural learning theory, particularly with reference to the social interaction of students, can lead the 'critical educator' (i.e. an educator who wishes to critique their own practice) to acknowledge and promote the positive possibilities of their profession. She points out that:

Difference, like nature, calls forth possibilities for developing transformative relationships [...] Disability is a way of seeing the world via the social and cultural constructions that prioritise values and bias actions. (Gibson, 2012, p. 256)

The importance of applying of socio-cultural theory also features prominently in the work of Suanne Gibson. She advances the idea that a socio-cultural perspective on education—which emphasises learner development as understood by an educator—can be easily linked to contemporary work on inclusive theory, practice and policy. Furthermore, she maintains that if this concept were to be applied critically, it may add significant insight to inclusion critiques of special education and could lead to new and innovative developments for the students involved (Gibson, 2012, p. 256). Similarly, A. Jackson and J. Conteh (2008), suggest that the application of socio-cultural theory to one's examination and assessment of a particular learning environment provides insight into previously hidden practices of educational exclusion:

Socio-cultural theories help us to recognize how all players in the game of learning, while they are active and purposeful in a range of ways, have unequal access to the most powerful discourses available [they] add weight to the argument that we need to 'engage with the details [with regard to] classroom processes in order to understand the bigger picture. (Jackson and Conteh, 2008 as quoted Gibson, 2012, p. 256)

J.S. Valenzuela (2007) reaffirms these viewpoints, offering a critical overview of socio-cultural theory that highlights the links between special

education and exclusion, along with a critical history of the theory and its various incarnations. Like Gibson (2012), she proposes that: “a key aspect of socio-cultural theory is the positioning of the social” and adds that it: “has the potential” to “provide a starting point” for addressing key issues in special education (Gibson, 2012, p. 256). In alignment with Roth and Lee (2007), Valenzuela (2007, pp. 280–289) asserts that the development of inclusive teaching practices—that is teaching processes that are geared towards the individual learning styles of students—is clear proof of how socio-cultural theory can help a pupil to become more independent. Echoing Cole (1985), Valenzuela (2007) argues that a stronger emphasis on inclusive teaching strategies could provide a rich and theoretical backbone when investigating complex aspects of ‘educational exclusion’ such as language, culture and identity. Like Gibson (2012), she also maintains that the area of ‘special education’ and related research may have a reciprocal effect on the development and refinement of socio-cultural perspectives of education. Moreover, in contrast to Grenier (2010), she accentuates how this needs to relate to critical theory, especially when addressing what “appears to be [a] hard fixed resistance” towards the empowerment of “previously silenced voices” within the Third-Level system (Gibson, 2012, pp. 256–257).

This desire to provide students with disabilities with a stronger voice within an educational context directly parallels the sentiments expressed by theorists such as S. Lynch and A. Irvine (2009). Yet, unlike theorists such as Gibson (2012), these writers often draw attention to the concept of “authentic inclusion” (Lynch and Irvine, 2009, p. 846). Lynch and Irvine (2009, p. 846) define this as “a unified system of public education” that sees “diversity as the norm” and aspires to deliver “a high-quality education” for every student “by providing meaningful curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary supports”. An influential author in this area is DL Fergusson (1995). Since the publication of his original work, prominent theorists such as J. Andrews and J. Lophart (2000) have sought to adapt and build upon this approach.

A recent article by McPeake *et al.* (2024) illustrates how many theorists still seek to expand upon Fergusson’s theoretical framework. They too emphasise the necessity of developing a more inclusive learning environment for people with disabilities. Like educationalists such as

Lynch and Irvine (2009), they stress its importance for students with ASD. Similar to L.L Geller and M. Greenberg (2010), they demonstrate the vital role that both university professors and disability support staff could play in heightening awareness of how educational professionals could help to facilitate the transition of neurodivergent students from secondary to Third-Level education.

### ***A 'Deficit' Model of Autism***

McPeake *et al.* (2024) also draw attention to a striking commonality within the literature. Echoing the viewpoint of S. Lambe (2018), these educationalists clearly demonstrate, how, despite a strong desire to incorporate more inclusive learning practices, higher education institutions have come to embody a 'deficit' model of autism whereby "students must disclose a medical diagnosis to receive extra support or accommodations (such as extra time in exams)" (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). It views autism in purely medical terms and reinforces certain stereotypes associated with it i.e. difficulties in social communication, executive functioning and a tendency to 'hyperfocus' on restricted/repetitive interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Moreover, this conceptualisation of autism ignores the "intellectual capacities and strengths of individual students" (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). It instead reaffirms "pathologizing discourses, where autistic people are viewed as 'abnormal', 'dysfunctional' and/or requiring treatment" (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). In other words, it does not fully acknowledge the person *behind* the disability.

This tendency to gravitate towards a 'deficit' interpretation of autism is a noteworthy subtheme to consider. E. Kircher-Morris (2024) and ESY Tang *et al.* (2024) demonstrate the importance of this finding. They argue that, in recent years, there is a strong desire to deviate from this medical model approach in many higher educational institutions. This, they believe reflects changes in how autism is thought of and demonstrates how "definitions of handicap, impairment and disability" are now being replaced by a "more nuanced understanding of difference" and a fuller acknowledgement of "strengths as well as needs" (Tang *et al.*, 2024, p. 135).

However, one must critically question this perspective. Drawing parallels with theorists such as N. Humphrey and S. Lewis (2008), D.W.

Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) utilise a wealth of primary source material, which are based on a series of semi-structured interviews with autistic students, to demonstrate how people on the spectrum continue to experience discrimination within Third-Level institutions. They address the significant dropout rates amongst autistic people, a factor later also noted by McPeake *et al.* (2024), by observing that they are:

Twice less likely than people with other disabilities and four times less likely than people without disabilities to hold a bachelor's degree or higher. (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345)

Unlike McPeake *et al.* (2024), these commentators express that a “fear of discrimination” is the principal reason for students “not disclosing their autistic identity” and highlight how this reluctance to reveal their diagnosis delays the receipt of supports (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345). Moreover, they point out that no significant studies to date have addressed students’ anxiety concerning the possibility of experiencing discrimination.

In their analysis of autistic college experiences, Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2023) paint a revealing portrait of how autistic students perceive a Third-Level academic environment. It is worth noting that many participants felt “profoundly misunderstood” at universities (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345). Like Shepherd (2022) who articulates a similar viewpoint, Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2024) note a lack of awareness about the true nature of autism amongst university staff. In common with McPeake *et al.* (2024), Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) explore how these findings have important ramifications for the establishment of authentically inclusive practices within Higher Education. It is imperative to bear in mind how many of those interviewed by Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) also believed that autism was something that educational professionals “just don’t have a clue about”, with one student allegedly being told that they obviously had “no support needs” since he did not “act like Rain Man” (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345).

Evidence like this proves how necessary it is for educators to provide a stronger voice within institutions to people with ASD so that that their academic needs are met. Furthermore, it provides ample proof that this can only truly be accomplished through the encouragement of autistic and neurodivergent creativity and the establishment of a new set of inclusive teaching practices that would diminish over-reliance on the deficit model

of autism and the technically prescriptive mindset that often accompanies it.

### *Ableist Practices*

Another significant subtheme emerges in the form of ableist practices, which are often defined as actions that “devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities [...] based on society’s perceptions of what’s considered ‘normal’” (Disability & Philanthropy Forum, 2024, p. 1). Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) note the severe impact that this has had on autistic students within Third-Level settings. They refer to the fact that several interviewees described the design of their curriculum as “extremely ableist”, “deficit based” and “dehumanising” (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345). Paralleling Waldman *et al.* (2023), Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) show that a widespread lack of knowledge about autism amongst educators raises serious concerns about the effective implementation of inclusive teaching methods in Third-Level contexts.

Similar to McPeake *et al.* (2024), Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2024) draw attention to how a “fear of not being believed” can have negative repercussions for the educational development of autistic students (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348). However, in contrast to McPeake *et al.* (2024), Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2024) cite instances in which applications for special considerations or support from lecturers were perceived as “cheating the system” since they requested “extra time”, “rest breaks” and/or “extensions” (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348). Furthermore—and unlike Waldman *et al.* (2023)—Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) also allude to how some participants, who expressed an interest in working in caring professions, such as teaching or nursing, were often “questioned about their career choices” after they disclosed their autism diagnosis (Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348).

One participant in the Weiting Tan *et al.*’s (2024) research describes the current situation for many autistic students who struggle within a university setting due to the ableism they encounter:

People don’t even realise that they are being ableists. If you shove a wheelchair person out of the way, you know you are being ableist. It is pretty clear. If you don’t build a lift. It is pretty clear. It is more overt. Whereas, if you are just not sure if that person is

being a little weird and you make a joke [...] it is much more nuanced, the microaggressions and ableism that autistic and neurodivergent people experience. (Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348)

First-hand accounts like this illuminate the authentic experiences of many autistic students on university campuses. They reaffirm the necessity for educational professionals to support the voices of students with ASD by acknowledging their creativity and strong desire for self-expression in the classroom.

### ***Catering for Non-Linear Thinking***

In light of these findings, this article argues that an emphasis on promoting the non-linear, creative thinking patterns of those on the spectrum would help to revitalise the current educational system. It could lead to a whole set of teaching practices, which would yield innovative results for universities and centres for further education. Many commentators have pointed this out. For example, D.R. Sadler (2009) noted that the concept of peer review is of utmost importance as it helps foster a type of learning “whereby [...] individuals with ASD/AS” may be “immersed in an environment where they can focus on recognising elements of creativity” and implement them into their own original work (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 5). Likewise, D. Roberts and K. Ousey (2004) argue that skilled group facilitation strikes an effective balance between letting students think creatively and meeting the required learning outcomes of a particular module. Conversely, others such as A. Rizzo *et al.* (2012) advocate for the use of teaching strategies to “stimulate both convergent and divergent thinking as means of fostering creativity such as problem or enquiry-based learning” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 5).

### ***Towards a Suitable Methodology***

These findings demonstrate the importance of developing a cross-collaborative teaching and learning project to further explore how educators can properly acknowledge the growing field of neurodivergent creativity. This proposed initiative—which will form part of this author’s PhD dissertation—addresses the following research questions:

- i. How can creativity be defined within an educational context?

- ii. What creative approaches can be utilised to help autistic and neurodivergent students develop and thrive as independent learners, particularly in post-secondary environments?
- iii. How can the concept of creativity be used to establish more inclusive learning environment for students on the spectrum?
- iv. What forms of collaboration or new initiatives could be developed to promote autistic creativity across different educational settings?

To show a greater appreciation for neurodiverse creativity, and how it could lead to a more positive college experience for autistic students, a suitable methodology is required. JA Smith *et al.* (2009) and M. Zakai-Mashiach (2022) note that an interpretative phenomenological approach is a particularly suitable way of gathering data from those on the autism spectrum, as it focuses on their lived, authentic experiences. However, recent research by McPeake *et al.* (2024) has drawn to attention to how this particular process is “predominately researcher-led” and does not fully reveal the true perspectives of its autistic participants (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 17). Taking this into account, this article advances the view that different participatory approaches are necessary for deepening the understanding of autistic voices within educational institutions and identifying the creative teaching practices that best support learning.

Autism studies have evolved considerably in recent decades. Early work by L. Kanner (1943) was rooted in psychiatry, but the field has since expanded to include psychology, neuroscience and education (Kourti, 2021). As a result, ideas concerning neurodiversity are now being examined across the humanities and social sciences, to gain a broader understanding of the ways in which social inequalities continue to influence the experience of those on the autism spectrum (Kourti, 2021). Despite these advances, relatively little attention has been given to establishing a robust philosophical foundation for autism, and this area has been widely overlooked by many researchers.

### ***A Transformative Mixed-Methods Design***

Contemporary researchers such as L. Dennehy (2024) have provided excellent insights into the relationship between educators and autistic students within an academic context. They have made extensive and effective use of the interpretative/constructionist paradigm, which advances the view that all knowledge is socially constructed. In contrast, the study proposed by this article—and the collaborative doctoral research project which has been designed to accompany it—will directly engage with the ‘transformative paradigm’. The principal aim of this form of educational inquiry is to find new ways to overcome issues of power and allow marginalised groups to have a greater sense of control over the research process. D. Mertens (2005, p. 220) argues that a mixed-methods approach is an essential component of this type of pedagogical research. Its principal focus is on “collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data” within a specific study (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 32). Adopting this approach would allow future researchers to gain a greater understanding of research problems. Scholars within the field of autism studies (Rose, 2005; Pellicano *et al.*, 2014; Prince-Hughes, 2002) all make proficient use of this research design. This makes it an ideal form of methodology.

### **Participatory Research**

A strong relationship between participatory action research and mixed-methods designs is well-documented. Several educationalists (Madriaga and Goodley, 2010; Rose, 2010; Vincent *et al.*, 2016) examine the connections between these two areas in greater depth. Participatory action research is closely linked to critical theory, which aspires to transform society through democracy and the empowerment of marginalised groups. It emphasises “doing research *with* people and communities” as opposed to “doing research *to* or *for* people and communities” (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 56). This form of research is based on the view that ordinary people are capable of conducting research by critically reflecting on and analysing their own situations (Pinto, 2000). Central to this approach is its democratic ethos: it promotes egalitarian researcher–participant relationships, aspires to participatory rather than representative democracy (Giroux, 1983, 1989) and encourages researchers to share their humanity with participants (Tandon, 2005).

As with mixed-methods and action research, participatory research is pragmatic. It is a fruitful blend of knowledge and action (Tandon, 2005). It focuses on micro-development as opposed to macro-development and aims to enhance overall well-being (Brown, 2005). Researchers who engage in this approach are facilitators, catalysts for transformation. Its main agenda is liberation from all forms of oppression.

In this sense, participatory research bears a striking similarity to W. Carr and S. Kemmis' (2003) "Habermasian theory of action research" which emphasises an "ideological impetus towards promoting social justice and resisting domination" (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305). Furthermore, this agentic approach to knowledge production parallels the social model of disability as it envisages the "systematic demystification of the structures and processes which create disability" as well as the establishment of a more egalitarian relationship between the research community and disabled people to "facilitate the latter's empowerment" (Barnes, 1992, p. 122).

### ***Socially Just Pedagogies***

Research methods associated with the participatory research model would heighten awareness of autism and neurodivergent thinking. The tools which accompany these would be an ideal fit for a cross-collaborative university-based research project which is currently being developed to compliment this author's PhD dissertation. Vincent *et al.* (2016) note the significance of participatory approaches within the context of autism research. Many researchers (McPeake *et al.*, 2024; Weiting Tan, 2024, Rose, 2010) identify a lack of participatory studies that deal directly with the topic of neurodivergence. Indeed, M. Madriaga and D. Goodley (2010) repeatedly call for more 'socially just pedagogies in higher education. This type of pedagogical approach aims to counteract resistance and establish conditions of social justice. More significantly, socially just pedagogies aspire to move beyond minimum 'base level' practices and openly encourages creative, participatory and inclusive approaches (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305). If these were more fully integrated into academic institutions, this could effectively 'give voice' to autistic students (Vincent *et al.*, 2016).

Scholars such as Van Hees, Moyson, and Roeyers (2014) echo these sentiments. They stress that participatory approaches—and how they permit students to effectively use their creative abilities—are vital as they allow for increased insight into the lived experiences of participants. Like

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) Van Hees, Moyson and Roeyers (2014) argue that it is imperative to engage with ‘insider perspectives’ as this often yields richer data and, more importantly, provides autistic students with more of a voice in the research process. Furthermore—and in common with Vincent *et al.* (2016)—they convey how research methods that accompany the participatory model effectively foreground the perspectives of people on the spectrum and pave the way for a “creative space” in which different aspects of university life could be explored and critiqued” (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305).

### **Creative Qualitative Research Methods**

The perspectives of V. Van Hees, T. Moyson and H. Roeyers (2014) and Vincent *et al.* (2016) is reinforced by Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent (2023), who argue that the use of creative qualitative research methods in psychology and other disciplines has steadily increased in recent decades to address power imbalances within research (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023). They highlight how these considerations are particularly pertinent for historically marginalised groups, including autistic and neurodivergent people. Like other authors, (Cook and Purkis, 2022; Vincent *et al.* 2016; Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024) Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent (2023) also outline how research on first-person perspectives is still limited and represents a significant gap within the literature.

However, in contrast to theorists such as McPeake *et al.* (2024) Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent (2023) suggest that embodied techniques, which are grounded in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of existence and feminist theories of corporeality, have the potential to open creative and novel data possibilities (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023). Potential methods could include imaginative play (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023), drama or performance (Medina *et al.*, 2021). Like Jager *et al.*, (2016) they effectively pinpoint how the concept of body-mapping is another promising participatory method. This involves tracing around a person’s body to establish a life-sized outline. Through a reflective and creative process, it is then annotated to produce an image representing multiple aspects of their embodied experience (Jager *et al.*, 2016). Guided ‘walking’ tours, a therapeutic technique, in which students are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings to reduce stress and anxiety and boost creativity and

inspiration (Camponovo *et al.*, 2021; Stephenson and Adey, 2010, Vox City, 2025) also offer opportunities to better understand how an autistic person experiences their environment (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023).

The recognition that such methods are more naturalistic than traditional or experimental approaches—or even qualitative studies in psychology—illustrates the unlimited possibilities that lie in drawing on creative and participatory approaches in developmental research (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023). At the heart of this approach lies the principle of seeing autistic and neurodivergent people as ‘credible knowers’ of their own experiences (Fricker, 2007). Moreover, it aspires to democratise the research process and lead to a greater sense of empowerment amongst the autistic community.

### ***Developing a New Measure of Creativity***

Exploring creativity within the autistic and neurodivergent community is important as their strengths are often overlooked. It should be recognised that these individuals may express creativity in ways that differ from standard expectations. However, commonly used measures do not account for the unique ways that neurodivergent individuals interpret information (Hayashibara *et al.*, 2023). Ultimately, these conventional approaches fail to capture their distinct presentations of creativity.

The desire to establish more innovative research methods is reflected in the work of many contemporary scholars. Several explore how the power of narrative can facilitate self-expression amongst neurodivergent students and challenge the technically prescriptive approaches that have become common in educational institutions in recent years (Hayashibara *et al.*, 2023, McMurdo, 2023, Russ *et al.*, 1999). E. Hayashibara *et al.* (2023) demonstrate the value of utilising story-based approaches. They argue that contrary to traditional ways of conducting research, which are thought to measure only one creative process, storytelling uses and critically examines real-life products that are then evaluated by others (Hayashibara *et al.*, 2023) This, they believe, allows for a multidimensional evaluation of creativity (Fehr and Russ, 2016; Russ *et al.*, 1999). Narrative and visual components, such as film, also allow both students and practitioners to explore different thinking styles, such as visual and verbal thinking

(Nishimura *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, adopting this approach would provide further insight into both autism neurodivergence and establish a valuable outlet for their creativity within the classroom.

Conversely, Vincent *et al.* (2016) note that narrative-based projects need to move beyond personal story-telling and closer to what he calls ‘critical autobiography’, whereby “individual experience is mixed with theory and reflection about politically situated realities” (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305). Likewise, I. Rose (2005), argues that the mere existence of autistic narrative and autobiographies (what she memorably describes as ‘autie-biography’) allows those on the spectrum to radically question the diagnostic criteria for autistic conditions (DSM-V) and resist de-humanising interpretations of neurodiversity (Vincent *et al.*, 2016).

A recent study by N. McMurdo (2023) echoes these sentiments. She also stresses the importance of more visual forms of creative expression. In her thesis on the nature of self-identity amongst young autistic adolescent women, McMurdo explores how a greater engagement with non-verbal narratives could potentially result in a more positive sense of self and encourage more autistic and neurodivergent students to freely express their creativity within classrooms. The principal way of accomplishing this, she argues, is through the use of *collage inquiry*. The term collage literally means “to stick” and derives from the French verb “coller”. It involves the process of combining bits of different materials together to transform it into something new. This approach also helps to generate new and often unconscious ideas (McMurdo, 2023).

Commentators such as R. Leitch (2009) note how a major concern within this type of arts-based research is that that students may be reluctant to participate, due to concerns that they lack artistic ability. However, collage does not raise this kind of concern (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). This research tool uses materials that are readily available. It does not require a certain level of skill (Prasad, 2018). Collage is often regarded as a ‘safe container’ and ideal for working with vulnerable people (Kramer, 2000). It often leads to moving, powerful and emotional stories through a visual representation (Leitch, 2009). This particular method has excellent potential. It clearly illustrates how visual methods could be used alongside and to compliment language-based data to discover more about the lived

experiences of young autistic and neurodivergent students within Third-Level institutions.

### ***Innovative Data Collection Methods***

Prominent researchers (Attard, 2012; Rose, 2005; Vincent *et al.*, 2016) draw attention to the value of these approaches. Vincent *et al.* (2016) note that emphasis on creative research methods empowers participants and encourages a greater degree of self-expression as it allows individuals to analyse their lived experiences and reflect more deeply on their own situation (Vincent *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, writers such as K. Attard (2012) increase our understanding of how they can also be used as an effective means of analysing and collecting data from autistic and neurodivergent students. J. Cammarota and M. Fine (2010) have clearly shown how this has led to unconventional, inventive and innovative ways of discovering more about the individual, lived experiences of people who are on the spectrum. Including the voices of autistic students has traditionally been viewed as problematic (Stalker, 1998). It is often erroneously assumed that these students lack empathy and do not possess the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith, 1985). More recently, however, there is a stronger desire to show the true value of their perspectives and illustrate the vital contribution that they could make to the entire research process. Unlike these authors, commentators such as R. Winter (2002) accentuate the importance of providing those who may be autistic and/or neurodivergent with the opportunity to analyse each other's narratives (based on their own consent) to create a greater sense of solidarity (Vincent *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, educationalists such as Vincent *et al.* (2016) have demonstrated how this approach is pivotal as it allows these students to gain a greater sense of ownership of the research material and share their own personal accounts of the educational system.

These interpretations highlight the major strengths of transformative and participatory research designs and how they could provide valuable insights into how educators could effectively cater to the autistic student population within educational institutions by encouraging and fostering their innate sense of creativity. The research project described throughout this piece—which is being designed in conjunction with this author's PhD thesis—will build upon this approach. Adopting the research methods associated with these is an ideal way of addressing its core research questions. It focuses

primarily on a university context. It aims to shed more light on the views and perspectives of both sexes from the ages of eighteen to thirty-five. At a later stage, to supplement the data, a reflexive thematic analysis will be employed to demonstrate different presentations of creativity across this particular sample. Full ethical approval will also be sought from Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at University College Cork. The eventual research findings of this initiative and the author's final dissertation may have significant implications and could help policymakers to design effective strengths-based interventions to facilitate the creative and non-linear thinking of autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

## Conclusion

This article has explored and highlighted the benefits of establishing a university based collaborative research project on autistic and neurodivergent creativity. It has demonstrated that this could effectively establish a new and highly educational approach that would directly challenge the technical training influenced mentality that has become a regrettable feature of many modern educational institutions. Moreover, it has drawn attention to how this would also lead to more positive, transformational and rewarding educational experiences for students with ASD.

A stronger emphasis on cultivating the creativity of neurodivergent thinking could also result in a wealth of new and exciting educational possibilities. These could include:

- An increase in teacher knowledge: Several theorists (Barry *et al.*, 2021; Sproston *et al.*, 2017, Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023) convincingly argue that it is necessary to create opportunities for teacher knowledge when it comes to the area of autism and education. In light of this, future research could effectively build on the work of educationalists such as Holt *et al.* (2024) by establishing creative and collaborative communities of practice between both staff and students which would showcase the artistry of autistic students and allow teachers and lecturers to gain more insight into what teaching approaches would be of most benefit to people on the spectrum within secondary and post-secondary environments. Furthermore, it could lead to the establishment of educational

programmes and or departments that cater specifically for students on the spectrum, which would help this demographic to thrive and grow as learners within a variety of educational settings.

- Opportunities for cross-collaboration: Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) highlight how techniques from the world of the performing arts are often beneficial for autistic and neurodivergent students within the classroom. Taking this into account, it can be argued that such an approach could lead to fruitful collaborations between educational institutions and arts organisations, for example partnerships between University College Cork and the Everyman Palace Theatre. Collaborations of this kind have the potential to generate new and innovative ways of encouraging the creativity and non-linear thinking patterns of autistic and neurodiverse students.
- Arts-based research: Cultivating autistic creativity could also result in more engagement with the much-neglected area of arts-based research. According to Barone and Eisner (2006), the principal aim of this type of approach is the ‘enhancement of perspectives’ to suggest “new ways of viewing educational phenomena” and to “entertain questions that might have otherwise been left unasked” (Barone and Eisner, 2006, p. 96). Similar to Holt *et al.* (2024) and Buckley (2021), Barone and Eisner (2006) emphasise how a stronger engagement in this particular research process allows educators to discover new techniques that would enable autistic students to grow and develop within an academic context.

This article has outlined how the promotion of the creativity that often accompanies neurodiverse thinking could result in some radical reforms within the current educational system. It has highlighted this through a thematic review of the literature, an emphasis on a transformative, participatory methodology and suggestions for possible future directions.

Fiona Earley, the Autism Co-Ordinator from Dublin City University once remarked that we should value individual difference and strive to ensure that every neurodivergent student gets what they need as well as educating others about neurodiversity (O’ Neill, 2024). This statement encapsulates how this change would have positive outcomes for the autistic community and why it is such an important research area within the field of contemporary education. Yet, this topic is summed up most aptly in the

words of the musician Tori Amos. She once stated that: “[s]ome of the most wonderful people are the ones who don’t fit into boxes” (Letch, 2023, p. 1). These words beautifully capture how it is now high time for Irish academia to fully integrate these “wonderful people” with autism spectrum disorders into its educational institutions through the establishment of new teaching approaches that would help cultivate a more open, inclusive and progressive university (Letch, 2023, p. 1).

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