



Field placement experiences of neurodivergent pre-service teachers

Expériences de stage de futurs enseignants neurodivergents

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche-action a examiné les expériences de stage pratique de neuf étudiants canadiens inscrits à un programme de baccalauréat en éducation au cours de l'année universitaire 2025-2026. Tout au long d'un stage de huit semaines, les participants ont été placés au cœur du processus les considérant comme des coproducteurs de savoirs, en explorant leurs perspectives, leurs expériences vécues et leurs besoins de soutien. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide de journaux réflexifs ainsi que des entrevues, avant et après le stage. Selon l'analyse thématique réflexive, les participants avaient au préalable une conscience métacognitive élaborée. Les stagiaires ont exprimé des préoccupations légitimes (p. ex., la peur du rejet, l'épuisement, les défis liés à l'autorégulation) et des forces attribuées à leur condition (p. ex., la capacité à être des modèles, l'empathie accrue, la créativité pédagogique). Les discussions après le stage ont montré une intégration sociale réussie et un développement favorable au développement de l'identité professionnelle. Malgré les défis sur le plan des fonctions exécutives et des besoins sensoriels, les participants ont identifié la conscience de soi, l'autoreprésentation et les relations comme des facteurs clés de succès. Les résultats mettent en évidence les forces cognitives et les méthodes d'enseignement innovantes des étudiants neurodivergents. Les programmes de formation à l'enseignement devraient ainsi explicitement enseigner les compétences liées aux fonctions exécutives. De plus, les superviseurs universitaires devraient défendre efficacement les droits et intérêts associés à la neurodiversité. Cette recherche-action présente une méthode innovante pour renforcer les voix marginalisées et produire des connaissances contextuelles favorisant l'inclusion dans l'enseignement.



MOTS-CLÉS

Neurodiversité, formation des enseignants, inclusion, stage, recherche-action participative, futurs enseignants

ABSTRACT

This participatory action research study examined field placement experiences of nine Canadian neurodivergent pre-service teachers (PST) in a Bachelor of Education program during 2025-2026. The research centred participants as collaborative knowledge producers, investigating their anticipatory perspectives, lived experiences, and support needs across an eight-week field placement. Data collection occurred through interviews and reflective journals. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that prior to placement, participants demonstrated sophisticated metacognitive awareness, articulating genuine concerns (fear of rejection, burnout, self-regulation challenges) alongside anticipated strengths explicitly attributed to their neurodiversity (serving as relatable role models, demonstrating heightened empathy, bringing creativity to instruction). Post-placement reflections indicated successful navigation of social integration and professional identity development, though managing executive functioning and sensory demands remained challenging. Participants identified self-awareness, self-advocacy, and relationship-centred approaches as essential supports. Findings challenge deficit-oriented narratives by highlighting cognitive strengths and innovative pedagogical approaches neurodivergent educators contribute to teaching. Implications suggest teacher education programs must explicitly teach executive functioning skills while ensuring university supervisors advocate effectively for neurodivergent PST. This study contributes methodologically by demonstrating how participatory action research amplifies marginalized voices and generates actionable knowledge for transforming teacher education toward radical inclusivity.

KEYWORDS

neurodiversity, teacher education, inclusion, field placement, participatory action research, pre-service teachers

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is an inherently complex and demanding profession, requiring educators to simultaneously manage instruction, assessment, classroom dynamics, and diverse learning needs (Aleccia, 2017; Green, 2021). For individuals who identify as neurodivergent, this complexity is compounded by systemic barriers embedded within both the teaching profession and teacher education programs (Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Riddick, 2003; White *et al.*, 2024; Wood & Happé, 2023). Despite increasing recognition of neurodiversity in K-12 education, teacher education programs remain largely designed for neurotypical learners, creating obstacles that limit neurodivergent pre-service teachers' (PST) opportunities for success (Vogel & Sharoni, 2010). Research suggests that approximately 15 to 20% of the general population identifies as neurodivergent (Doyle & McDowall, 2023), yet workforce data indicate lower representation in

teaching (Sanford *et al.*, 2011). This gap is troubling given that neurodivergent teachers offer unique cognitive strengths, innovative pedagogical approaches, and critical representation for neurodivergent students (White *et al.*, 2024).

This study addresses these gaps using participatory action research (PAR) with nine neurodivergent PST enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program at a Canadian university. Grounded in a visionary pragmatist framework (Coles, 2016), this research examines field placement experiences from the perspective of those navigating them.

1. *Situating neurodiversity*

First coined in the 1990s by Judy Singer, neurodiversity is defined as “a biological truism that refers to the limitless variability of human nervous systems on the planet, in which no two can ever be exactly alike due to the influence of environmental factors” (Singer, 1999). Within the civil rights movement, this term became synonymous with advocacy for people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and/or learning disabilities (LD). It has since expanded to include other manifestations of neurodivergence.

As the neurodiversity movement seeks to separate itself from the medical model of disability, which pathologized these diagnoses, it aims to promote the view that diversity in thinking, learning, and behaving should not be seen as deficits requiring repairs (Dwyer, 2022). For pragmatic reasons, the medical model of disability and the neurodiversity paradigm sometimes overlap (Kapp, 2026). Who belongs within this movement is itself contested: some neurodivergent individuals align themselves with the disability community, while others do not, and some neurodivergent people (particularly within populations with more severe disabilities) do not align with the neurodiversity paradigm at all (VanDaalen *et al.*, 2025).

Given this ongoing debate, this study took a deliberately inclusive approach: individuals who identified as neurodivergent were not questioned or required to provide a diagnosis. Self-identification alone situates them as members of this community. This aligns with the neurodiversity-affirmative paradigm, which asks that educators, as a first step, understand, respect, listen, and accommodate neurodivergent individuals in their learning environments, whether traditional classroom spaces or field placements (Brice & Dwan, 2025).

2. *Neurodiversity in higher education and teacher education*

While enrollment rates for students with disabilities in post-secondary education have increased, completion rates remain substantially lower than the general population (Sanford *et al.*, 2011). It points to a pattern that post-secondary institutions often lack adequate support for students, who face challenges beyond academics (Carroll *et al.*, 2020; Doyle & McDowall, 2023; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024). This experience would apply to many students who identify as neurodivergent, recognizing that not all students who identify as neurodivergent identify as

disabled. Social communication difficulties, sensory overload, and executive functioning demands contribute to lower degree completion rates (Carroll *et al.*, 2020).

Teacher education programs, which in Canada are typically completed after an undergraduate degree, present additional challenges. The varied instructional approaches in teacher education programs increase barriers for some neurodivergent learners (Cook, 2024), and mandatory field placements create contexts where established university accommodations may not transfer (Csoll & Gallagher, 2012).

Field placements, widely recognized as the cornerstone of teacher preparation (Zeichner, 2010), present particular challenges for neurodivergent PST. University-based accommodations often do not transfer to the field (Akins *et al.*, 2001; Wilson *et al.*, 2018), leaving neurodivergent PST to navigate professional expectations without familiar support. White and colleagues (2024) identified three interconnected challenges: navigating social identity within school communities, developing professional identity as a teacher, and managing the cognitive and sensory demands of classroom practice. This review organizes the challenges below around PST identity and the cognitive and social demands, merging the first two categories proposed by White and colleagues.

2.1 PST identity

Field placements require PST to integrate personal and professional identities within contexts where neurodiversity may be viewed as incompatible with teaching competence. In one Scottish study, neurodivergent student teachers faced barriers to success, including accessibility and attitudinal issues, challenges with representation that varied by neurotype (Jack *et al.*, 2025). Disclosure decisions form a central part of this identity work: less than one half of higher education students typically disclose their neurodivergent identity, though those who do regularly describe the experience as supportive (Kennedy *et al.*, 2025a, 2025b). For those who disclose, fear that bias or stigmatization may impact evaluation is real (Riley & Haggard, 2015). Conversely, non-disclosure can lead to “masking exhaustion”, increasing stress, burnout risk, and impeding field placement performance (Kapp, 2026; Sarginson, 2024).

2.2 Cognitive and social demands

Classroom environments present challenges including rejection sensitivity, relationship management, executive functioning differences, and sensory overload (Akins *et al.*, 2001; Babinski *et al.*, 2019). Teaching demands simultaneous management of instruction, assessment, classroom dynamics, and diverse learners needs (Aleccia, 2017; Green, 2021), a complexity compounded for neurodivergent educators managing these professional demands alongside their own support needs.

Executive functioning is defined as the set of self-regulatory cognitive processes (including inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility) that allow individuals to direct behaviour toward goals and monitor their own performance over time (Barkley & Fischer, 2019). Executive

functioning differences are well documented across neurodivergent populations, but they are not uniform: direct comparisons of ASD and ADHD groups against typically developing peers find that both groups underperform while showing little consistent difference from one another on performance-based measures (Ceruti *et al.*, 2024; Townes *et al.*, 2023). This suggests that executive functioning challenges in field placements are better understood as a shared vulnerability across neurotypes than as a single, diagnosis-specific profile. For 90% of individuals diagnosed with ADHD, for example, executive functioning skills develop at a slower rate than in neurotypical peers, making self-awareness, inhibition, working memory, emotional regulation, self-motivation, and planning more difficult than for many neurotypical peers (Barkley & Fischer, 2019).

Executive functioning is also vulnerable to the social and evaluative context of the placement itself. Disclosure decisions and masking behaviours do not merely produce psychological strain (Sarginson, 2024); they appear to draw directly on the same executive resources that classroom practice demands. Research on stereotype threat has shown that anticipating evaluation on a stigmatized trait consumes working-memory and inhibitory-control capacity, because targets spend cognitive resources monitoring and suppressing their own anxiety rather than allocating that capacity to the task at hand (Johns *et al.*, 2008; Schmader & Johns, 2003; Schmader *et al.*, 2008). For a neurodivergent PST, a disclosure decision under uncertain conditions is not simply an emotional or identity-related choice; it is a moment of concentrated executive load layered on top of the classroom's ordinary demands.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. The neurodiversity paradigm

This study aligns itself with the current neurodiversity paradigm, rather than framing neurodivergence purely as a matter of disability accommodation. Kapp and colleagues (2013) draw a foundational line between viewing neurodivergences as deficits versus as differences, a distinction that shapes how the remaining frameworks in this study are organized: neurocognitive variation involves both strengths and challenges, but is not inherently a disorder.

2. Visionary pragmatism

This study is grounded in visionary pragmatism (Coles, 2016), a framework that holds productive tension between transformative change and pragmatic realities of working within existing institutional structures. It is unlike traditional pragmatism, which emphasizes incremental problem-solving within current conditions, or revolutionary idealism, which dismisses working “within the system”. Instead, this approach recognizes that marginalized groups must often leverage elements of dominant orders to create conditions for deeper transformation. Applied to teacher education, visionary pragmatism suggests simultaneous advocacy for a radical

restructuring of field placement systems while identifying immediate, practical supports that make current systems more navigable for neurodivergent PST.

Visionary pragmatism values experiential knowledge, particularly one that is generated by those navigating marginalized positions within systems (Coles, 2016). This epistemological stance aligns with PAR methodologies that centre affected communities as knowledge producers rather than research subjects (Haar *et al.*, 2025). This framework rests on three assumptions, shaping both methodology and interpretation. First, neurodivergent PST possess experiential knowledge essential for transforming teacher education, knowledge accessible only through collaborative inquiry *with* them, not studies *about* them. Second, structured reflection, particularly when collaborative, can generate both individual agency and collective consciousness, catalyzing change. Third, systemic barriers facing neurodivergent PST are not inevitable features of teacher education; they are experiences maintained through particular practices, policies, and assumptions.

Importantly, visionary pragmatism does not assume all change must be revolutionary, or that incremental improvements are complicit with oppressive systems (Coles, 2016). Rather, it holds that strategic engagement with existing structures (such as working within current field placement requirements while documenting and discussing their limitations) can create leverage points for deeper transformation. This study embodies that stance: working within the Bachelor of Education program as currently structured while gathering evidence and amplifying voices calling for its restructuring. The neurodiversity paradigm identifies *where* difficulty concentrates while visionary pragmatism explains *how* the study responds to it methodologically.

3. Gaps in current research

Despite growing attention to neurodiversity in higher education (Kuder & Accardo, 2018; McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024), research on neurodivergent PSTs' field placement experiences remains limited (Jack *et al.*, 2025). While support strategies are frequently recommended (including careful placement matching) (Sokal *et al.*, 2017), accommodations (Akins *et al.*, 2001), and mentorship (White *et al.*, 2024), little empirical evidence exists regarding which supports neurodivergent PST themselves identify as meaningful, feasible, and effective. Recommendations are typically generated by researchers or administrators rather than grounded in experiential knowledge of those navigating these systems. This study addresses these gaps through PAR with neurodivergent PST, examining their field placement experiences across three research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: What concerns and anticipated strengths do neurodivergent PST identify prior to field placement?;
- RQ2: How do they experience field placement?, and;
- RQ3: What affirmative practices and support structures emerge as meaningful for neurodivergent PSTs during field placements?

METHODS

This study was originally designed as a PAR and, as data generation began, it became clear that field placements limited the sustained co-analytic labour. Participants were then engaged unevenly across cycles, with capacity, cognitive load, and energy reserves fluctuating alongside the demands of an 8-week practicum. In response, the methodology was adapted into a facilitated approach. This facilitated stance operationalizes visionary pragmatism by balancing power dynamics, safety, and structured inquiry to generate actionable knowledge for immediate programmatic change and long-term systemic reform (Coles, 2016; Dancis *et al.*, 2023). A related limitation stems from the facilitated design itself. While this flexibility was an ethical necessity given participants' concurrent workload, it means the findings should be read as reflecting the range of experience articulated by those most able to engage deeply, rather than as equally weighted across all nine participants.

The alignment between PAR and visionary pragmatism was enacted through iterative, participant-validated analytic cycles. In visionary pragmatism, “leverage points”¹ are identified from the margins (Coles, 2016). Three analytical checkpoints were built into the analysis process. At each checkpoint, participants reviewed, questioned, and refined emerging interpretations. This participant-validated cycle that the programmatic recommendations presented in the discussion reflect grounded sites of genuine community possibility rather than researcher speculation.

1. Research context and principal investigator positionality

This study was conducted within a Bachelor of Education program at a Canadian university, which serves an annual cohort of approximately 100 PTS. The research focused specifically on the experiences surrounding the first field placement, an intensive 8-week practicum in K-12 classrooms spanning urban, suburban, and rural settings during the fall 2025 semester.

As a neurodivergent person, I position myself within and alongside the community under study. With the study participants, my insider status as a neurodiverse person enhanced trust, informed the nuance of reflective prompts, and facilitated deep relational empathy during data generation. However, I recognize that my neurodiversity manifests differently: my positionality may differ from some, and my faculty position creates an inherent power imbalance. To mitigate this dynamic, recruitment occurred strictly after final grade submissions for the course I taught. Furthermore, participants were explicitly invited to critique the Bachelor of Education program without fear of reprisal. They were provided multiple opt-out points, and retained full autonomy over their response formats. Finally, while my white, middle-class, and tenure-track privileges afford structural protections, this study primarily isolates neurodiversity. A key limitation is its limited intersectional analysis of how race, class, or gender co-constitute practicum experiences.

1. Sites of systemic vulnerability where targeted action creates transformational change.



2. Participants

The inclusion criteria for this study were membership in the 2025-2026 Bachelor of Education. All volunteers are self-identified as neurodivergent, with self-identified diagnoses including ADHD ($n = 7$), learning disabilities ($n = 2$), autism ($n = 1$), and generalized anxiety ($n = 1$): some self-identified as holding multiple diagnoses. The principal investigator had taught eight of nine participants previously, establishing pre-existing relationships that facilitated trust and open communication. Table 1 summarizes participant demographics using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. At Checkpoint 2, please note the addition of two additional participants, who asked to participate after the Checkpoint 1 data was collected.

Table 1. Study Participants

Participant	Gender Identity	Neurodiversity (Self-Identified)
A: High School, French	Female	Dyslexia
B: High School, English 1	Male	ADHD
C: High School, English 2	Male	Dyslexia, ADHD
D: Primary, English 1	Female	ADHD
E: Primary, English 2	Male	Autism
F: Primary, English 3	Female	ADHD
G: Primary, English 4	Female	ADHD, Generalized Anxiety
H: Primary, English 5	Female	ADHD
I: Primary, English 6	Female	ADHD

Note. This table identifies the study participants, their gender identity, and the neurodiversity identity they disclosed.

3. Data generation and universal design for learning (UDL)

Guided reflective prompts were administered at two key milestones: Checkpoint 1 (immediately prior to the 8-week field placement) and Checkpoint 2 (immediately following field placement completion). These moments enable PTS to critically unpack professional identity, structural barriers, and personal positionality (Lew & Schmidt, 2011; Thorpe, 2004).

The first set of prompts included reflections on how neurodivergence impacts: the individual, their undergraduate experience and them as a teacher; the fears they have entering the profession, and; how they identify as a teacher. The second set of prompts included what they noticed about themselves at PTS, how their neurodivergence impacted them on field placement, the impact of their setting on their experience, and their emerging teacher identity.

To operationalize neurodiversity-affirming research practices, data generation incorporated Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2024). Participants chose their preferred modality at each time point to accommodate varying executive functioning, processing styles, and communication preferences:

- Pre-Placement (Checkpoint 1): Five participants opted for semi-structured interviews (10-30 minutes); two submitted written reflections (250-1,500 words). No participants selected video recordings.
- Post-Placement (Checkpoint 2): Seven submitted written reflections; two engaged in semi-structured interviews. No participants selected video recordings. Please note the addition of two participants at this point in the study.

The shift toward written reflection at Checkpoint 2 is notable and is addressed further in the Discussion; it plausibly reflects reduced capacity for live, synchronous engagement following the practicum rather than a change in preference alone.

Semi-structured interviews expanded on the guided journal prompts were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Written submissions were securely shared via document upload or email.

4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a hybrid model combining reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) with PAR collaborative validation protocols (Cornish *et al.*, 2023; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The process moved through three distinct phases:

- Phase 1: Initial coding and induction (Principal investigator-Led). Following each time point, the principal investigator conducted repeated readings of transcripts and written reflections to establish deep data familiarization. Inductive coding yield to 12 preliminary codes across the dataset;
- Phase 2: Collaborative analysis and co-interpretation (PAR Checkpoint). Preliminary codes and data summaries were returned to participants via asynchronous member-checking digests. Consistent with the study's facilitated design, response depth varied by participants: some offered extensive qualitative additions to code definitions, while others confirmed briefly that the codes captured their experience accurately;
- Phase 3: Theme refinement and resonance validation. The principal investigator synthesized participant feedback into thematic narrative structures and selected representative excerpts. These final themes were returned to participants, confirming that tone, context, and intent were preserved accurately.

RESULTS

Reflections revealed that participants demonstrated sophisticated metacognitive awareness, including their ability to anticipate their needs and reflect on their reflections. Both before and during their field placements, they articulated genuine concerns alongside meaningful strengths they anticipated (and ultimately realized) bringing to their teaching practice.

1. RQ1: Pre-placement concerns and anticipated strengths

1.1 Pre-placement concerns

Participants articulated substantial concerns about their upcoming field placements. The most frequent included: fear of rejection by students or cooperating teachers ($n = 5$); maintaining boundaries to prevent burnout ($n = 4$); challenges with self-regulation ($n = 3$); difficulties with focus ($n = 3$); reading-related concerns ($n = 3$), and; environmental sensitivity ($n = 3$).

Fear of rejection emerged as the most prevalent concern. One dyslexic participant recounted a substitute teaching experience that crystallized these anxieties. After struggling to read a French story to grades 2 and 3 students despite prior practice, she reflected, “I know I am capable, but after that experience... Some young students laughed and corrected me, which is totally alright (I encourage it), but it does impact how I view myself and if I will ever do a disservice to my future students” (High School French). She further expressed concern that neurodiversity-related challenges could result in ridicule: “In a negative way, it can result in students or colleagues making fun of me...They could poke fun at how I misspelled something or said something wrong because of my difficulties in reading”.

Participants with ADHD expressed particular concern about maintaining professional boundaries. One articulated the tension between authentic self-expression and professional expectations:

The fears that I probably have are being maybe ‘too much’, particularly for my CT [cooperating teacher]. Sometimes I can get so passionate about things, and I can be very impulsive in what I say... It’s just being aware of where I am and who I am with. Sometimes that is not the right space, which is challenging (Primary English).

Most participants expressed concern about potential burnout. One participant demonstrated metacognitive awareness by working with an ADHD coach prior to placement:

It is going to be crucial for me to have boundaries, so I don’t burn out... Because as much as my ADHD is good at motivating me, sometimes I’m going so fast that I’m not recognizing the warning signs, and then I just kind of hit the wall. So, I just really need to make sure that I am listening to my body and those warning signs before it happens (Primary English).

Other participant identified concerns included establishing organizational structures and routines, requiring additional time for tasks, processing information through alternative modalities, managing environmental stimuli, and sustaining focus. Notably, while participants articulated these concerns, many had already identified potential accommodations and support strategies.

1.2 Anticipated strengths

Despite genuine concerns, all participants identified strengths they anticipated bringing to teaching, with many explicitly attributing these to their neurodiversity. The most frequently

mentioned strengths included serving as relatable role models ($n = 5$), demonstrating heightened empathy ($n = 5$), and bringing creativity, enthusiasm, and engagement to instruction ($n = 5$).

Five participants disclosed their neurodivergence as positioning them to serve as meaningful role models for students. They anticipated that their lived experiences would make them more relatable, particularly to students sharing similar profiles. This perception is connected to participants' belief that visible neurodivergent educators could normalize diverse ways of learning and processing information. This does not mean they chose to share their neurodivergence on field placement, just that they anticipated it having a positive impact.

Empathy was identified as a key strength ($n = 5$) stemming from their neurodivergence, manifesting in understanding the need for accommodations, heightened sensitivity to student needs, and general compassion for diverse learners. One participant explained, "I think this also makes me more empathetic to all types of learners, even if they are not necessarily neurodivergent" (Primary English). This somewhat aligns with Milton's (2012) research on the double empathy problem, which indicates that cross neurotype communication can present challenges when there is a bidirectional mismatch.

Five participants highlighted creativity, enthusiasm, and the ability to make learning engaging as strengths connected to their neurodiversity. A high school mathematics PST exemplified this: "I'm really good at being enthusiastic while I'm teaching, so I'm hoping it can get them excited and curious at the same time". This participant described innovative instructional approaches, including connecting mathematical concepts to multimedia applications.

Additional strengths included strong motivation and drive ($n = 2$) and cognitive agility ($n = 2$). One participant described ADHD as a motivator: "My ADHD is much of a motivator and driver for me. I'm a go-getter, and I think I will be great with working with younger kids" (Primary English). Another highlighted pattern recognition: "I can switch gears very quickly or see the connections between things" (High School English).

2. RQ2: Realized experiences and alignment with anticipations

2.1 Empathy, relatability, and relationship-building

Following their eight-week field placement, post-placement reflections revealed sophisticated metacognitive awareness had translated into nuanced understandings of how neurodiversity shaped their teaching practice. Rather than viewing experiences through deficit frameworks, many identified specific ways their neurodiversity functioned as a pedagogical asset while simultaneously acknowledging persistent challenges.

Most participants ($n = 7$) spoke of enhanced empathy and relatability resulting from their neurodiversity. Two participants explicitly used their neurodiversity as a bridge to students. The high school French teacher used her dyslexia to provide "representation", while a primary English

teacher used his experiences to design the classroom he wished he had as a learner: “I would say being diverse definitely helped me because a lot... I got to run the classroom how I would have liked when I grew up”. Other participants did not specify why they felt their neurodivergence would enhance relatability or empathy, simply stating that it did.

One primary teacher connected empathy to patience: “My own experience allowed me to have an immense amount of patience with the students who were neurodivergent because I know some of the inner workings behind the behaviours presented outwardly”. Another noted her ability to “notice little details”, using it for relationship building: “I genuinely connected with my Grade 5 class... I naturally notice little details about people, and that helped me build relationships quickly with the kids” (Primary English).

Participants routinely cited their ability to form relationships and maintain enthusiasm as strengths. One high school English teacher spoke of his natural enthusiasm: “I also find it easy to become enthusiastic with the work I create! It’s exciting to share what I planned for the day”. With this finding, it is important to restate the large number of participants self-identifying as having ADHD in the current study. Similar observations appeared across five participants’ reflections, citing creativity and engagement with content as strengths. Other strengths included processing speed ($n = 2$), anticipating challenges ($n = 1$), motivation ($n = 2$), and energy ($n = 3$).

2.2 *Executive functioning and workload: the main realized challenge*

Executive functioning emerged as a universal concern, with all nine participants identifying challenges with task management ($n = 7$), organization ($n = 6$), or workload ($n = 5$). These concerns included procrastination’s impact on performance, forgetfulness, and overwhelming workload. One high school English teacher noted, “I now feel the sense of wondering if I’m cut out for this. The workload was a lot more than I was expecting... The workload at home was a bit soul-wrenching over time”. One primary English teacher elaborated on procrastination challenges:

Sometimes I’d have the ideas but couldn’t get myself to sit down and plan everything out until the last minute. The workload, lesson planning, the practicum binder, marking, and prep felt overwhelming at times, and I wasn’t always sure if the stress came from the placement itself or from how my brain processes and prioritizes things.

One high school English teacher illustrated how executive functioning challenges manifest not as incapability but as vulnerability to routine disruption:

My brain can only focus on one thing at a time, so if I’m forced to switch from one task to another, it can throw me off. I may end up forgetting to complete the previous task... By the time class ends, I wouldn’t even realize I didn’t do the attendance since I didn’t follow along with my normal routine.

2.4 *Sensory and social demands*

Sensory overload ($n = 4$) and social demands ($n = 3$) were also mentioned. One high school English teacher described “yelling expletives quietly” at school bells, while one primary English teacher found noise “overstimulating”. Notably, fear of rejection (the most frequently cited pre-placement concern) was absent from post-placement reflections. Similarly, no one mentioned the experiences of being “too much”.

3. **RQ3: Meaningful support structures**

3.1 *Self-initiated preparation*

Participants identified self-awareness, self-advocacy, and relationship-centred approaches as essential support structures in their responses, though these themes emerged implicitly rather than through direct questioning about support. During the inductive coding phase, the researcher identified a pattern of responses connected to these themes and coded them as such. Pre-placement reflections demonstrated participants sophisticated metacognitive awareness and their ability to articulate both vulnerabilities and strengths. This awareness enabled proactive preparation by participants, such as working with ADHD coaches, establishing organizational systems in advance, and mentally preparing for disclosure decisions.

3.2 *Disclosure to cooperating teachers*

Participants who disclosed their neurodiversity to cooperating teachers reported positive experiences, particularly when disclosure was framed as pedagogy (providing representation) rather than requesting accommodation. Participant A had positive experiences with disclosure stating, “I have also been casually telling the staff at the school, and everyone tells me how awesome it is (dyslexia diagnosis)! How important representation is! And that I belong here, especially to show students what is possible”. However, disclosure remained complex and context dependent. The quality of the cooperating teacher relationship emerged as critical. Participant E who reported a “fine” relationship with their CT [cooperating teacher] noted:

My brain has a cap to how much information it can effectively take in, and I found this to be embarrassing and made me feel guilty at times because I physically could not process the information my CT [cooperating teacher] was telling me.

This demonstrates that participants who felt supported by cooperating teachers navigated challenges more successfully, while those lacking this support struggled despite strong self-awareness and preparation.

DISCUSSION

This study examined field placement experiences of nine neurodivergent PTS, revealing a significant shift from psychological apprehension to systemic navigation. While participants

entered placements fearing social rejection, they exited identifying the cognitive cost of administrative and organizational demands.

1. Metacognitive awareness and strength-based perspectives

Participants demonstrated remarkable metacognitive sophistication prior to placement, articulating genuine concerns while simultaneously identifying meaningful strengths explicitly attributed to their neurodiversity. These findings challenge deficit narratives suggesting neurodivergent individuals lack insight into their own functioning. Instead, participants demonstrated nuanced self-understanding, identifying both vulnerabilities (fear of rejection, burnout risk, self-regulation challenges) and assets (empathy, creativity, role-modelling potential).

This sophisticated awareness aligns with experiential accounts from neurodivergent educators like Kircher-Morris (2025), who cite creativity, motivation, and empathy as professional strengths. However, this study reveals something new: the sophistication of PSTs' self-awareness *before* entering high-stakes professional contexts. Participants did not develop this awareness through placement experience; they possessed it entering placement, suggesting that metacognitive strength itself may warrant recognition as a neurodivergent asset in teacher education.

Post-placement reflections revealed participants leveraging neurodiversity as a pedagogical asset. They used their lived experiences to design inclusive classrooms ("Run the classroom I would have liked"), provide representation to students, demonstrate "immense patience" grounded in understanding "inner workings behind the behaviours", and notice "little details about people", enabling rapid relationship building. This reframing from "accommodation to asset" represents a critical contribution. Their heightened empathy, creative instructional approaches, and relationship-building strengths are precisely what today's classrooms need.

2. From psychological apprehension to systemic navigation

Pre-placement, fear of rejection by students and cooperating teachers emerged as the most prevalent concern ($n = 5$). Post-placement fear proved largely unfounded. While some participants experienced moments of ridicule (particularly around reading difficulties), their capacity to navigate these moments through humour, reframing, and self-acceptance exceeded their anticipation.

This finding extends White and colleagues' (2024) identification of social identity navigation as a core challenge. These results suggest that while social integration concerns are genuine and warrant attention, neurodivergent PTS possess adaptive strategies enabling successful navigation. The more significant barrier proved to be not social rejection (by students, colleagues, and administrators), but executive functioning demands. Executive functioning challenges emerged universally post-placement ($n = 9$) yet were mentioned by only three participants pre-placement. The "soul-wrenching" workload participants described related primarily to planning, marking, and organization (the invisible labour of teaching) rather than instructional time with students. One

participant's account of forgetting attendance when routines were disrupted illustrates how executive functioning challenges manifest not as incapability but as vulnerability to the cognitive complexity embedded in teaching administrative demands.

This finding has critical implications. Participants' anticipated strengths (empathy, creativity, and relationship building) largely materialized during instruction. Their struggles centred on the executive functioning skills educators need; these administrative and organizational skills are often rendered invisible. These challenges proved unexpectedly high, contributing to burnout and questioning of professional fit ("I now feel the sense of wondering if I'm cut out for this").

3. Visionary pragmatism and the limits of individual navigation

Through a visionary pragmatist lens, participants navigated tension between authentic self-expression and professional conformity. Pre-placement fears of being "too much" reflect internalized pressure to mask or mitigate neurodivergent traits. Post-placement, several participants reframed intensity and enthusiasm as pedagogical strengths. This shift represents strategic engagement with dominant systems (professional norms) while keeping in view transformative possibilities (redefining professionalism to value neurodivergent authenticity). However, the executive functioning demands participants described suggest limits to individual navigation.

The support structures identified in RQ3 (self-awareness, self-advocacy, and relationship-centred approaches) surfaced implicitly, through participants' own descriptions of what helped them cope. The most meaningful supports in this study were not named as "supports" by participants. That gap suggests that teacher education programs cannot rely on PSTs to self-identify needed accommodations proactively; the capacity is there, but the vocabulary and institutional invitation to name it may not be.

The centrality of the cooperating teacher relationship (participants who felt supported navigated challenges more successfully regardless of their preparation) echoes Wood and Happé's (2023) finding : colleague attitudes are the primary barrier to inclusion for neurodivergent educators. Taken together with the executive functioning, this suggests two levers for intervention operate at different levels: individual-level scaffolding (executive function coaching and planning templates address the cognitive load participants described) while relational-level intervention (supervisor advocacy and cooperating teacher preparation) addresses whether that scaffolding is allowed to work in practice.

4. Implications

The findings of this study generate specific implications for stakeholders across teacher education.

Teacher education programs. Teacher education programs must move beyond general accommodations to provide explicit executive function scaffolding. This includes teaching

boundary-setting and workload management as core professional competencies, providing planning templates that reduce cognitive load, exploring how AI-assisted tools can offset executive demands, and normalizing organizational supports (e. g., visual schedules, task breakdowns, reminder systems) as universal design rather than special accommodation.

Based on participants' sophisticated pre-placement awareness, programs should implement structured pre-placement reflection and planning, including affinity group meetings. Explicit discussion of disclosure decisions, proactive identification of sensory triggers, and development of executive functioning and self-regulation plans should be discussed.

Participants' fear of being "too much" reflects narrow conceptualizations of teacher professionalism. Programs must actively redefine professionalism to value enthusiasm and storytelling as engagement strategies, verbal processing as collaborative thinking, and relationship-building over performative conformity.

For teacher educators. Teacher educators must function as advocates who bridge communication between neurodivergent PTS and cooperating teachers. This includes explaining that "verbal brainstorming" is a processing style, not a lack of planning; helping cooperating teachers recognize "high enthusiasm" as a pedagogical strength; intervening when executive functioning challenges are misinterpreted as a lack of commitment; and facilitating conversations about accommodations and supports. Furthermore, given that cooperating teacher relationships emerged as critical to success, field placement supervisors should explicitly monitor these relationships and intervene when neurodivergent PTS lack support.

For cooperating teachers. Professional learning for cooperating teachers should enable them to recognize the strengths a neurodivergent person brings to the classroom rather than focusing exclusively on challenges. Further, cooperating teachers can provide executive function support through co-creating organizational systems aligned with PSTs' needs, providing planning templates and routines, and explicitly teaching invisible aspects of teaching workflow (when to do attendance and how to balance planning/marketing/instruction). Again, cooperating teachers should not wait for disclosure from PTS to embed these mindsets and strategies into their mentoring. In instances where disclosure occurs, individualization of support and strategies can occur.

For policy and systemic change. Thoughtful placement matching at the university level, considering cooperating teacher openness to neurodiversity and school culture around inclusion, is essential. The challenges described related to executive functioning needs suggest that teacher education should examine whether current workload expectations (lesson planning, practicum binders, marking, simultaneous coursework) can be managed differently. Finally, rather than individualizing support, programs should apply UDL principles to field placement structures, making organizational supports, planning templates, and executive function scaffolding available



to all. Systemic change must occur broadly: at the policy level within institutions (university, school board).

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the small, single-institution sample constrains the generalizability of findings and may introduce institutional bias, as participants' experiences reflect the particular culture, policies, and supports of one program. Second, self-selection bias likely shaped the sample: because students opted into the study, participants may not represent the broader population of neurodivergent PTS. Third, this study does not account for the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, whereby neurodivergent PTS who face barriers earlier in their teacher education journey may exit the pipeline before reaching the stage at which they could be recruited for this study. As a result, the experiences reported here may reflect only those neurodivergent PTS who persisted. Fourth, this study did not employ an intersectional analysis and therefore does not capture how neurodivergence intersects with other identities (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status) to shape participants' experiences. This omission limits the depth and applicability of the findings. Perhaps most significantly, the researcher's positionality and power, as outlined in the methods section, represent an important source of bias.

CONCLUSION

PTS who identify as neurodivergent often encounter environments that are not designed with their needs in mind, limiting both their access to and ability to thrive in these contexts. In this study, using participatory action research methodology, the lived experiences and insights of neurodivergent PTS were centred, allowing for the exploration of transformative practices that support them and strengthen the educational system as a whole. In centring neurodivergent voices through PAR, this study demonstrates that radical inclusivity in education is not just about "supporting" neurodivergent teachers but about transforming the system to benefit from their unique cognitive agility, empathy, and creative pedagogy. The move from a deficit-oriented model to one of visionary pragmatism requires teacher education programs to dismantle the systemic hurdles, ensuring that these innovative educators can thrive without the cost of burnout. Ultimately, creating radically inclusive spaces in teacher education benefits all members of the learning community, educators, students, and institutions alike.

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