UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

ROBERT GILLESPIE ACADEMIC SKILLS CENTRE

The Neuroinclusive Classroom: Supporting Executive Function to Address Disengagement, Procrastination, and Absenteeism

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

ACCESS CHECK

Access is a shared responsibility among everyone in this space. While attention has been paid to reduce barriers to participation, I encourage interventions on the following (and more!) to enhance access.

Technology
Space
Pace

"We all have bodies, hearts, and minds. We all have needs and capacities, strengths and vulnerabilities"

- Skin, Tooth, and Bone: A Disability Justice Primer

Agenda

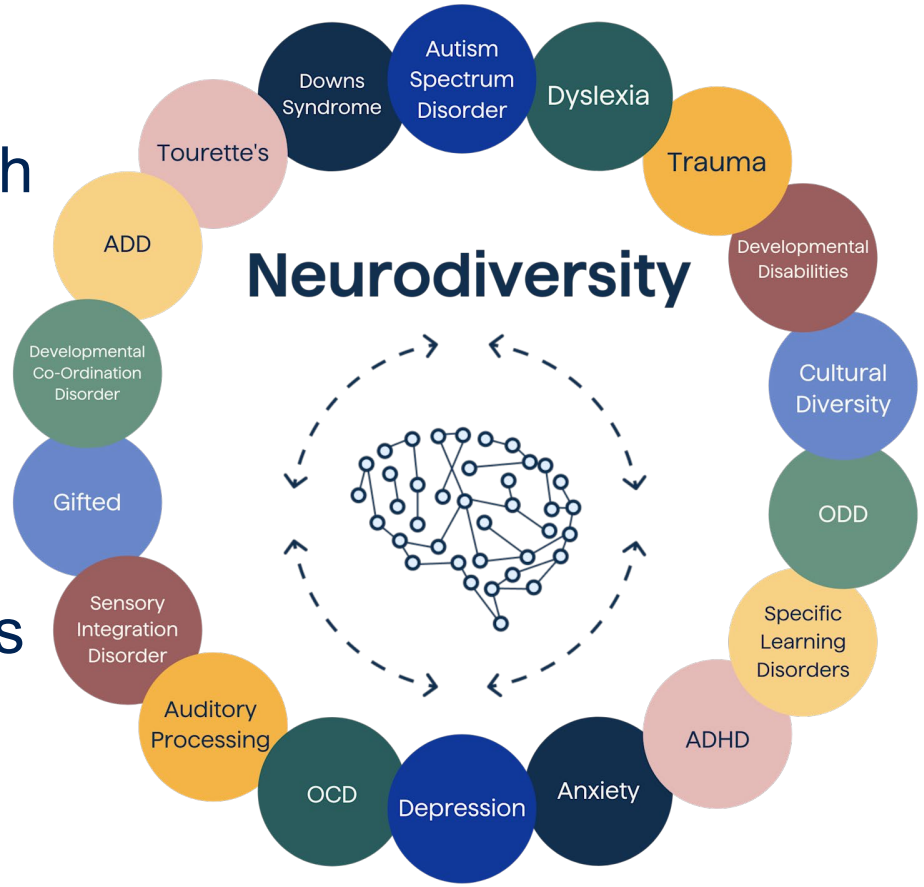
1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Language and Definitions
3. Higher Education Context
4. Executive Function Challenges
5. Neuro-Affirming & Asset Based Approaches
6. Proactive Design with UDL for Neuro-variability
7. Reflection

Session Outcomes

- Recognize executive function challenges and how they can show up in the classroom
- Discover neuro-affirming and asset-based approaches to skill building
- Identify and select strategies to proactively design for neuro-variability so students can thrive

What is Neurodiversity?

- People experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways
- No one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are viewed as strengths not deficits.



Learning Superpower

What strengths do you bring to a learning environment?

- *Creativity*
- *Focus*
- *Empathy*
- *Curiosity*
- *Pattern Recognition*
- *Other?*

Higher Education Context

Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education (2024)

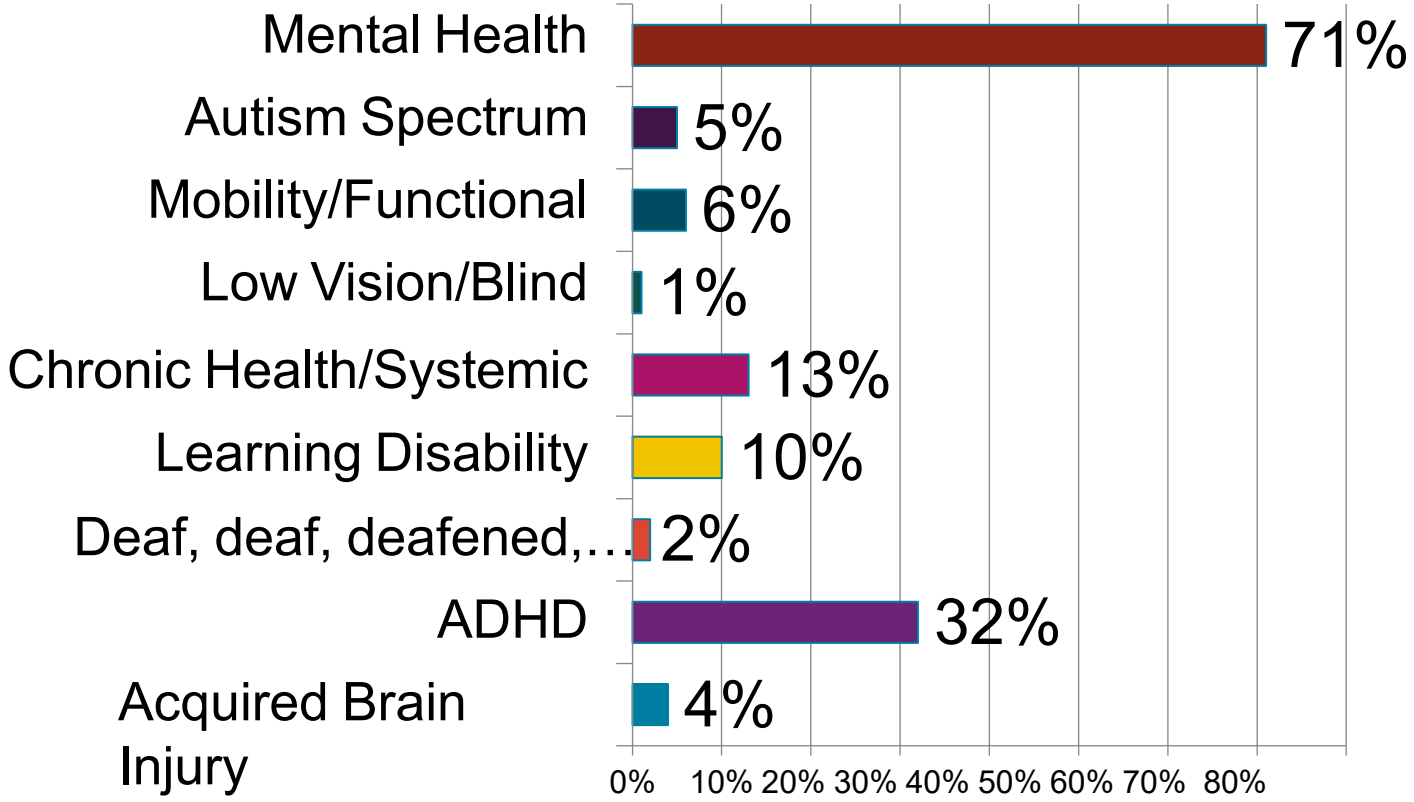
- 1/3 of neurodivergent students do not have a formal diagnosis, which limits access to educational supports and accommodations.
- Less than ½ disclosed identity or diagnosis.
- Challenges w/ Executive Function reported 2-3x more often than any other challenge.

Why do Students Register with Accessibility Services?

2023-2024

Total # of Registered Students

6041



Note: Numbers are from UTSG and do not add up to 100% because students may be registered with more than one disability.

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Duty to Accommodate

The Ontario Human Rights Code guarantees the right to equal treatment in education without discrimination on the ground of disability. The University of Toronto has a duty and is committed to considering accommodations when:

1. Accommodations are requested by a student[1]
2. We become aware of a student's accommodation needs in a reasonable time
3. Accommodations do not cause undue hardship to the University

Requests for accommodation are considered in good faith.

[1]Usually through the student having documented functional limitations related to their disability that impact their ability to meet core competencies/learning outcomes of a course

What else can we do?

Language & Definitions

Person-First

Person with a Disability

Identity-First

Disabled Person

Executive Function Challenges

Dr Thomas Brown

Executive Function Challenges Manifesting in the Classroom

Activation: Difficulty staring assignments or deciding what to do first.

Focus: Trouble staying on task or getting distracted by irrelevant stimuli.

Effort: Fatigue during long tasks or slow task completion.

Emotion: Very strong reaction to setbacks, Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria or struggling with emotional regulation.

Memory: Forgetting instructions or losing track of multi-step tasks.

Action: Acting impulsively or struggling to adjust behavior based on feedback.

Neuro-Affirming & Strengths Based Approaches

- ✓ Presume competence
- ✓ Sensory-friendly environments
- ✓ Clear communication style
- ✓ Advanced notice w/ plans and transparency w/ changes.
- ✓ Interest-based learning, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation
- ✓ NICE acronym for strengths-based attention & focus (novel, interesting, challenging, extreme)
- ✓ Situational variability

Strategy	Proactive Accessible Design	Supports
Welcome EF Variability	Use fidget tools, flexible seating, quiet zones, movement breaks	Focus, regulation, overwhelm
Scaffold Assignments	Break tasks into steps, give clear instructions, offer checkpoints & feedback	Task initiation, organization, sequencing
Reduce Cognitive Load	Simplify instructions, use templates, minimize distractions, use visual reminders	Working memory, processing
Flexible Time & Location	Offer asynchronous options, flexible deadlines, recorded lectures	Fluctuations in attention, energy, distraction
Promote Autonomy & Agency	Let students choose format: paper, video, presentation	Motivation, engagement
Flexible Topics & Formats	Allow choice in topics, sources, and formats that align with interests (maybe even a special interest!)	Relevance, emotional regulation

Reflection

What's one concrete insight or neuroinclusive strategy that you will take away and/or apply to your teaching?

Can you make one immediate small change to your methods, materials or environments to enhance neuroinclusivity in your class?

References & Resources

Brown Model of Executive Function

Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education (2024)