

The case for recognising and supporting those with spec...

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Introduction

I rarely write blog posts as long as this one.

I am rarely as passionate about a subject as I am about the provision of special educational needs and disability education, which is based on my experience as a governor and Chair of Governors of schools over fourteen years and as a university professor.

Precisely because of the length of this post, this is a TL;DR (too long; didn't read) summary:

TL;DR

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The Daily Telegraph, citing think-tank Policy Exchange, has claimed a “stretched definition of mental health” is costing £16bn a year, implying overdiagnosis of autism, ADHD and related needs.

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In reality, the problem is not “fragile” children but schools designed around a narrow neurotypical model that excludes many pupils. Neurodivergent children aren’t disordered; they are wired differently, and the system fails them.

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The Policy Exchange report is ideological: it ignores children’s needs, frames SEN as an administrative burden, and seeks cuts by forcing square pegs into round holes. This reflects neoliberal economics, which assumes homogeneity and cannot admit that diversity exists.

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Autism (≈2% of the population), ADHD (≈4%), and AuDHD (around 30% of autistic people) are long-standing human conditions. Recognising and supporting them is not indulgence but investment, with far higher returns than the costs of neglect.

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Without support, children disengage, underachieve, and face worsening mental health, shifting costs into the future. With support, they thrive, contribute, and increase productivity in our economy, which is a government goal.

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The right question isn't "why so many diagnoses now?" but "why were needs ignored for so long?" Recognition is overdue, not excessive.

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Policy must shift to:

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Inclusive teacher training, properly designed classrooms, and inclusive curricula

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Easier, earlier access to diagnosis and support

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Proper funding for early intervention

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Redefining success in schools around inclusive outcomes, not narrow exam scores

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Denying SEN support breaches children's right to education under the UK Human Rights Act. Supporting neurodiverse children is one of the wisest investments the UK can make.

Background

The **[Daily Telegraph](#)** had a headline yesterday that stated:

“A stretched definition of mental health is costing the UK £16 billion a year.”

The suggestion, [which is based upon a report](#) from the right-wing think tank, **Policy Exchange**, is that too many children are being diagnosed with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) relating to conditions such as autism, ADHD, AuDHD and related needs, with the consequent number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPS) multiplying beyond what the state can supposedly afford. The implication is that Britain has created a culture of unnecessary labelling of what is called disability, and that this is draining resources from schools, the NHS and the broader economy.

This argument might make a good headline that plays to the biases of the Telegraph, but it badly misrepresents what is really happening on this issue, in which I have taken an interest ever since I was a school governor and Chair of Governors, which I was for well over a decade when I lived in South London, and subsequently as a university professor.

The real problem in schools

The reality is that mainstream education in England, in particular (and the report referred to does relate to the English education system), is designed around a narrow idea of the “average” child. They are ones who can sit still, follow verbal instructions, manage transitions smoothly, cope with noise, and remember to hand in homework on time. That is fine for the majority of children (who are best described as neurotypical) who fit that description, but not all human beings are wired that way (those who are not are best described as neurodivergent).

Children who are autistic, have ADHD (the somewhat inappropriately named attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), or both (often referred to as AuDHD), face barriers that the system itself creates, but what most of them (some of the more extreme cases of autism apart) rarely have is a disorder or a disability. They are simply wired differently from other people, which makes them think, react, behave and learn in non-neurotypical ways, with the divergence in many, and maybe most, cases, being decidedly marked to the extent that the children in question feel like aliens in, and so are alienated from, the school environment into which they are placed for a great many years at the start of the lives.

The problem in my experience is that very few people who are neurotypical seem even to realise these issues, let alone that neurodiversity exists, or attempt to understand them. This issue is not about fragile children being labelled to secure “extra help.” It is about schools being designed for one type of learner and failing to meet the needs of many others as a consequence.

The problems in the Policy Exchange Report

In my opinion, the Policy Exchange report is entirely neurotypical in this respect. It provides no indication at all of any understanding of the reality of the situation of neurodiverse people or children.

If there is one overwhelming criticism to make of the report, it is that it is totally focused upon the administration of education, and that it pays almost no attention whatsoever to the needs of children. This was all too often a problem I encountered when I was chairing governors' meetings, where I frequently had to remind those present that our whole focus of attention should be on children, and not on admin or budgets, which were usually dominant on our agendas. It seems that Policy Exchange has fallen into this trap.

Worse, the whole intention of the report would seem to be to force neurodivergent and other children with either educational needs or disabilities to exist within mainstream education with little or no support provided, all to support an obviously predetermined agenda of cutting education costs, irrespective of the harm that might result as a consequence.

The result would be that these children, who might fairly be considered to be square pegs, are, in Policy Exchange's opinion, to be forced into round holes in the existing education system, into which they can never really fit. This is because that system will never meet their needs, and they will always be alienated from it, meaning that they will create difficulties for any class in which they are placed unless support is provided, which fact the report almost entirely ignores by effectively suggesting that they must simply acquire an improved psyche and an attitude that embraces success rather than failure, and that any problems they face are, as a consequence, seen to be those relating to an absence of moral fibre either on their part or on the part of their parents, rather than the fact that they are being placed into an education system which shows literally no awareness of their needs.

Understanding types of neurodiversity

I am concerned with the well-being of all children with special needs and disabilities. Saying that, I should stress that issues such as anxiety become increasingly prevalent as a child passes through the education system and a child's alienation from that system increases, whatever the cause, including the failure of far too many teachers to ever explain to a child the purpose of the education that they are being supplied with, which in my experience is an incredibly commonplace problem. However, those children with whom I have the most familiarity are in the following groups:

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Autistic students. These students often struggle with sensory overload, ambiguous social cues, and rigid learning structures. Without support like quiet zones, visual schedules, or clear communication, they can become overwhelmed, not due to lack of effort, but due to environmental mismatch. It is likely that ***at least 2% of the UK***

population has autism, but it is also very likely that this might be seriously understated, as the condition was rarely diagnosed in the past, so older people who have it may well be unaware of the fact and so are undiagnosed. This means that around 1.4 million people might have autism.

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Students with ADHD. These students face challenges with attention regulation, impulsivity, and executive functioning. In rigid, lecture-style classrooms with little movement or flexibility, they may appear “disengaged” or “disruptive,” when in fact their brains are coping with unrelenting stimulation. **It is thought that at least 4% of the UK population has ADHD, although many might have no formal diagnosis. This means that around 2.8 million people might have ADHD. It has been more commonly diagnosed in boys than girls, but that might just be because it was once thought only to affect boys, and there is now no evidence that this is the case.**

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AuDHD children. These students are those experiencing both autism and ADHD. They encounter intersecting pressures: sensory overload amplified by impulsive regulation struggles, and a need for both novelty and predictability. Masking their difficulties to fit into a world that does not understand them often leads to burnout, poor mental health, or school avoidance later on. This condition was only recognised a little over a decade ago, before when it was thought that autism and ADHD could not co-exist. **It is now thought that at least 30% of people with autism also have ADHD.**

I should stress that, although there is no clear evidence on how these conditions are passed from generation to generation, it is apparent that they have probably existed for as long as humanity has. They are like issues around gender orientation in this regard, and like them are not learned, and cannot be eliminated: they are not a choice, and nor is neurodivergence. They are just how those with these conditions are, which is why describing them as disorders is so inappropriate. Importantly, there is considerable evidence that neurodivergent people can add value. Those who are neurodivergent can be invaluable within organisations because they view the world in a different way, thereby adding depth to understanding and, very often, to innovation. GCHQ is presently recruiting them, deliberately.

The points noted above are the daily realities that many children and young people face in classrooms across the UK, including in our universities, where education is also commonly poorly adapted to the needs of neurodivergent students. To call diagnosing those with these conditions as “stretching definitions”, as Policy Exchange does, is to overlook the barriers that exist

due to the way schools and other learning institutions are structured. That is the real issue we face: overdiagnosis is not.

Why SEN support matters

EHCPs and special educational need (SEN) recognition are not indulgences. They are instead educational investments with extraordinarily high rates of return.

They are the way we can make sure that children who learn differently through no fault of their own can access education on equal terms with their peers. They provide tailored support, validate children's experiences, and open the door to therapies, teaching strategies, and accommodations that let these pupils thrive.

Without such support, children are far more likely to disengage from school, underachieve academically, or suffer serious mental health difficulties. That does not save money; it shifts greater costs into the future through lost potential, reduced employability, and increased demands on health and social care.

According to ***Beyond Autism***, ***each year the UK spends around £32bn in care and lost earnings to support autistic children and adults. With the right early intervention and support, autistic people can live more independently. This cost is much higher than that of meeting special educational needs.***

A better framing

Instead of asking why so many children are now identified as needing support, what we should be asking is why the system failed to recognise these needs for so long?

Why, in other words, do we insist that the child must bend to the system, rather than adjusting the system to reflect the diversity of minds it serves?

The Telegraph treats this as a story about runaway costs. However, that is the wrong way to look at this; the real story is about our society's need to finally acknowledge the needs that have always existed. Far from there being overdiagnosis, what we are witnessing is an overdue recognition of neurodiversity. And if we did, this policy could pay for itself, handsomely, as noted above. In fact, what is clear is that if investment in managing the educational needs of those with autism, ADHD, and AuDHD was made that would yield an enormous return to the UK whilst achieving another of the government's goals, which is to get more people into employment, whilst increasing productivity because the vast majority of people with these conditions could work if their needs were properly understood, which process has to begin in the education system.

In other words, investing in children who think differently is not a drain on

the resources of the UK. It would be one of the wisest investments it could make.

Why has this failure to understand arisen in that case?

Ever since both Reform and the Conservatives began their assault on special educational needs supply within English education, to which agenda Policy Exchange are now adding their weight, and which cause Wes Streeting is also supporting by claiming that he believes that there is over diagnosis of these conditions, I have wondered why it is these combined forces of neoliberalism are so determined to deny that these conditions exist.

I cannot, of course, prove that this is anything more than their passion for the austerity agenda, but I think it runs deeper than that.

It is important to recall that all these politicians, without exception, are wedded to a model of economics that assumes that optimal outcomes in this world are created when the rules of perfect competition are complied with.

Perfect competition, of course, assumes that the world is populated by homogeneous individuals who seek to buy homogeneous products from homogeneous suppliers in homogeneous marketplaces, with, unsurprisingly, homogeneous outcomes that are deemed optimally beneficial, even though such a situation has never been experienced in the history of humankind.

In that case, if education is considered to be a market supply, as neoliberals think, then they will, of course, consider that the input - a child - should be homogenous, and should be treated homogenously, with the intention that they should become a homogenous product designed to suit a homogenous consumer, who is the buyer of the homogenous labour that these students should be able to supply at the end of their school career. If we want an explanation for why Policy Exchange, which is also very clearly dedicated to the removal of the provision of special educational needs support from mainstream schools (which is their recommendation) and that the number of children who should receive any support for such needs should be reduced significantly, then I think that the best explanation for this ideological demand on their part is that they, too, are firm believers in the perfect world that the neoliberal economist has created as a work of fantasy to which all neoliberal thinkers must subscribe. In other words, for ideological reasons, they cannot accept that neurodivergent people exist precisely because non-typicality does not exist in their worldview.

The consequence is an enormous cost in the real world for all those children, their parents, their carers, their teachers because those children are not wired neurotypically and do not, therefore, fit into the world view of the neoliberal politician who cannot stand the idea that there might be people with differing views on this planet who might, as a consequence, one day even choose to challenge them because they do not accept

the interpretation of the world that those neoliberals promote.

You might disagree with this interpretation, but that is how I explain the quite extraordinary attacks that are taking place on the rights of children, families, teachers, schools and others, all of whom I know care about the well-being of children who have special educational needs, disabilities, and neurodivergent conditions.

Policy conclusions

If we are serious about this, then we need to:

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Invest in inclusive mainstream education. This requires:

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Better teacher training. Most especially for neurotypical teachers, so that they have insight into the needs of neurodivergent children in their care.

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Better classroom design.

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Appropriate curriculum development to recognise neurodiversity as a given, and not as an exception.

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Simplify access to support. This would require that:

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Families should not have to battle for EHCPs to secure basic needs for their children.

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A more universal approach to providing support should be developed, which would streamline bureaucracy and ensure that needs are met earlier and more efficiently.

Fund early intervention properly: This would require that:

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Waiting lists for assessments and therapies should be cut. Providing timely support saves both distress for children and families as they wait for support, and early intervention inevitably saves money later on.

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Redefining success in education. This means that:

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The obsession with narrow attainment scores that currently drives exclusion for far too many children, whether they have special needs or not, should come to an end.

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Schools should be measured by their ability to include and nurture all children, and not just produce what are deemed to be high-quality exam results, when all too often these provide no indication of any ability to actually undertake useful roles in society when education is completed.

Action points

If you share these concerns, here are practical steps you can take:

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Write to your MP to demand proper funding for SEN and early intervention, not cuts dressed up as efficiency. My letter-writing prompt for ChatGPT is linked below for those who want to use it.

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Challenge the narrative: when you hear claims of “overdiagnosis” or “stretching definitions,” remind people that the real issue is inflexible school curricula, not fragile children.

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Support local schools and parents: ask what your local school is doing to

become more neurodiverse-friendly and whether parents are facing battles to secure EHCPs.

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Keep the focus on inclusion: insist that education policy be measured by how well it supports every child to learn and thrive, not just how cheaply it can be delivered.

*** Discuss this issue in terms of human rights. The UK Human Rights Act provides a right to education: Policy Exchange is denying the right of some children to enjoy that right.**

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [**here**](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

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