



Professor Deborah Riby & Professor Mary Hanley

Neurodiversity, Education, and School Life

Background

We know that all students have different educational experiences, but we also know that for many neurodivergent pupils, school is not always a positive experience. Currently UK / national discussions around the SEND Crisis (special educational needs and disabilities provision), National Attendance Strategies, and the Schools White Paper (2026) all emphasise that this is a timely issue.

We need further research evidence to inform future directions and practice for neurodiversity-affirming education and school life – where all pupils can thrive, irrespective of neurotype.

In the Centre for Neurodiversity & Development we have been running a variety of studies, especially with PhD students, on issues such as neurodivergence and school success, school attendance or school distress, inclusion, wellbeing and belonging, the school physical environment, and academic achievement (to name a few). We are interested in the cognitive, social, and behavioural elements of school experience for neurodivergent pupils.

We also have the translation project called Triple-A which focuses on attention, anxiety and sensory arousal at school (see www.tripleadurham.co.uk).

We would be keen to support PhD / MRes projects that build on this programme of research and align to the priorities of the Centre for Neurodiversity & Development under the theme of 'Education and School Life'.

Aims and Methods

The aim is to increase our evidence-base concerning the experiences of neurodivergent pupils within schools (either just in the UK, or internationally).

We would expect students to take a mixed-methods approach and it is likely that this will combine qualitative and quantitative methods throughout the PhD project (to be shaped by the precise research question to be asked).

Relevance

The project bridges interests of various psychology sub-disciplines, including neurodiversity, developmental science and educational psychology. This is a real-world issue with significant applied relevance, beyond a purely theoretical contribution.

Training and Development

The candidate's research activity will be based in Psychology. As well as training in general research skills, the candidate will develop a deeper understanding of the neurodiversity approach. The candidate will receive advanced training in participatory research methods and will be expected to engage with training that might be required for their specific project – we will support the student to complete a development needs analysis for this work and to suit their previous experiences.

As well as this project-specific training, we would expect the student to engage with personal and professional development opportunities during their PhD so that they are ready for a diversity of career routes post-PhD.

Development and support will also be obtained through alignment with, and engagement with, the activities and meetings of the Centre for Neurodiversity & Development and we would expect the student to fully engage with these opportunities.

Suitable for

PhD or MRes students

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References and Further Reading

Fielding, C., Streeter, A., Riby, D. M., & Hanley, M. (2025). Neurodivergent Pupils' Experiences of School Distress and Attendance Difficulties. *Neurodiversity*, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251327056>

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Herbert, G., Hanley, M., & Riby, D. M. (2026, February 20). *Understanding, Affirmation, and Belonging: Autistic Pupils Conceptualisations of Inclusion in Mainstream Secondary Schools*. Preprint. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/aw8xk_v1

Hirst, J., Riby, D. M., South, C., Mulholland, E., Sellars, H., & Hanley, M. (2024). *Exploring the barriers and facilitators of school success for autistic adolescents in mainstream schools using qualitative methods*. Preprint. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/ck6m8>

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McDougal, E., Riby, D., & Hanley, E. (2020). Teacher insights into the barriers and facilitators of learning in autism. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 79, Article 101674. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2020.101674>