



Buzz Psychology with Dr Jane Park

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Publishing a research paper post-doc while keeping up with the times: reflections on neuro-affirming practices and language.

Looking back over the past two decades, the evolution of autism research and practice feels nothing short of transformative. My professional life pre-doctorate centred around working with autistic children and their families—whether at Rainbow School (back when it was housed in a humble demountable; now part of the Beyond Autism group of schools) or as a Personal Assistant for a wonderful autistic boy and his family—the research landscape was starkly different. Autism was largely framed through a deficit-based lens, and the voices of autistic people were rarely at the forefront.

Fast forward to my time as an enthusiastic Trainee EP doctoral researcher, keen to take the opportunity for advocacy: proposing direct voice-led research with autistic young people raised eyebrows. Hard to imagine now, but back then, not so long ago, it appeared to be radical. My doctoral research (2014-16) explored the lived experiences of autistic young adults navigating further education. Friendships and social relationships emerged as powerful mediators of successful transition from secondary to further education, challenging some long-held myths. At that time, the accepted language was person-first—‘people with autism.’ By the time I published in [Educational Psychology in Practice](#), identity-first language—‘autistic young people’—was gaining traction. Today, we’ve moved even further, embracing neuro-affirming language that truly reflects the wishes of the autistic community.

Why Language Matters

Language shapes culture. As [Kerry Murphy](#) reminds us: “*Neurodivergence itself, such as being autistic, is not just a set of symptoms. It’s a valid lived identity for a child. This is something we should celebrate and support.*”

For me, Murphy’s work on neuro-affirming practice has been pivotal in challenging outdated narratives and promoting a strengths-based approach. It’s about moving away from “fixing” children and toward affirming their identity. Similarly, Damian Milton’s [theory of the double empathy problem](#) reframed long-standing misconceptions:

“Empathy is a two-way street... Autistic people do not lack empathy; they experience and express it differently. The disconnect is mutual.”

This insight dismantles the damaging myth of autistic people as inherently lacking empathy (truly, how did we ever get *there*?!) and instead highlights the cultural gap between autistic and non-autistic worlds.

One of my favourite books, Steve Silberman's 'NeuroTribes' amplified this paradigm shift, arguing for a broader, more compassionate understanding of neurodiversity:

"One of the most promising developments... has been the emergence of the concept of neurodiversity: the notion that conditions like autism... should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths."

Silberman's words remind us that difference is not deficit—and that society benefits when we embrace cognitive diversity. Luke Beardon echoes this sentiment with characteristic clarity:

"Does this mean that autistic people are inherently impaired in social skills? No, absolutely not... Are the PNT [predominantly neurotypical] impaired in autistic social skills? The answer, unsurprisingly, is a resounding yes."

Intersectionality and Inclusion: Dr Tiffany Nelson's Contribution

While progress has been made, and there is much to celebrate, it's vital to recognise that not all autistic voices are heard equally. Dr Tiffany Nelson's [recent research](#) with Black autistic girls in UK education highlights this gap. Her study explored the lived experiences of masking and belonging at the intersection of race, gender, and autism. One participant's words capture the complexity: "Before people see the autism, they see my race."

Nelson's Kaleidoscope Analysis framework—drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Intersectionality Theory, and Disability Critical Race Theory—offers a powerful lens for understanding these layered identities. The findings underscore how masking often becomes a survival strategy in environments shaped by racialised and gendered expectations. For Educational Psychologists, this research is a call to adopt intersectional, neuro-affirming, and anti-oppressive practices that centre pupil voice and challenge systemic inequities. Surely this is where the profession of Educational Psychology must be centred in order to truly reflect the communities we serve.

Where We Are Now—and What's Next?

I've been fortunate to work alongside brilliant EP and SaLT colleagues to embed these ideas into practice, including developing a bespoke ELSA module on neurodiversity, now shared nationally. Within our EP service we have begun to explore Kerry Murphy's [Zones of Reflection](#) and how we might embed neuro-affirming practices into our everyday work, supporting inclusive environments where all children can thrive. But there's still so much to do. Our language, our systems, our attitudes—they all need to keep evolving. As Silberman so aptly puts it: "Not all the features of atypical human operating systems are bugs."

We must keep leaning into autistic voices, challenging stereotypes, and embracing difference as strength. Language isn't just semantics—it's power. It's how we nudge society toward genuine inclusion and unleash autistic potential.

References

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