

Non-neurodivergent Students' Perspectives on Neurodivergent Students in a High School Setting

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how non-neurodivergent high school students perceive the treatment of their neurodivergent peers and how they believe students can help create a more inclusive school environment. Fifteen non-neurodivergent male high school students were interviewed about their understanding of neurodivergence, opinions on inclusion, perspectives on peer interactions, and suggestions on how to improve belonging and social participation using a qualitative interview method. Analysis through thematic coding identified three main themes from participants' interview responses. The first theme was that students have varying degrees of knowledge about what it means to be neurodivergent. The second theme is that students tend to describe their experiences of exclusion as subtle and rooted in stereotypes about identity, personality, academic performance, and social status. Finally, the third theme demonstrated that students understood inclusion through daily actions such as participating with peers in classroom activities, clubs, making friends, sending out invites for social occasions, and attending school-sponsored events. Altogether, the results indicate that both school-wide policies and practices and student-to-student behaviors are necessary for true inclusion. While schools can create structures that promote inclusion, students also play an important role in recognizing differences, questioning assumptions, and practicing inclusion in ordinary high school settings. Inclusion should therefore be understood as an active practice rather than just a passive belief.

Keywords: Neurodivergence, neurodiversity, autism, ADHD, high school students, peer inclusion, belonging, stigma, stereotypes, qualitative interviews

INTRODUCTION

Neurodivergence, including autism, ADHD, and other cognitive differences, is increasingly understood through a neurodiversity framework that emphasizes variation rather than deficit. Rather than viewing neurological differences only as problems to be corrected, as in the past, the neurodiversity framework recognizes that individuals process, communicate, and participate in social life in different ways. However, despite growing public awareness, neurodivergent individuals continue to face stigma, misunderstanding, and exclusion in everyday social settings. The increasing awareness of neurodivergence has evolved alongside increased identification and diagnoses of neurodevelopmental differences. Until recent years, awareness of neurodiversity was more limited across medical, educational, and social settings. Thus, many people have gone undiagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders. The same is true today, as awareness of neurodiversity varies widely across nations and communities.

Prior research shows that attitudes toward neurodivergence can shape real-life interactions, including how neurodivergent people are perceived, treated, and included by others (Schuck et al., 2024; Turnock et al., 2022). High school students are a particularly important age group to study because adolescence is a period when peer interactions, identity development, and a sense of belonging become especially central to students' daily lives. Schools are important settings for studying these dynamics because peer relationships, classroom interactions, group work, club involvement, lunch conversations, and informal friendships all shape students' sense of belonging and participation.

At the same time, peer inclusion occurs within a larger environment. Peer inclusion within an institutional context includes school policies, teachers' expectations for student behavior, classroom support systems, advisory programs, affinity groups, and the broader organizational culture around student differences. Therefore, examining peer perceptions also requires consideration of institutions, as students' daily decisions about who they talk to, invite, and include are shaped by the structures and guidelines that schools provide.

Existing research has examined autism stigma, neurodiversity attitudes, first impressions of autistic individuals, and interventions designed to increase acceptance among non-neurodivergent populations. For example, Sasson et al. (2017) found that neurotypical observers were less willing to interact with autistic individuals based on brief first impressions, suggesting that social exclusion can be influenced not only by neurodivergent students' behavior but also by the perceptions and biases of others. Other studies have shown that neurodivergent students often face barriers to inclusion in mainstream schools, including difficulty forming friendships, managing social expectations, and feeling understood by peers (Bailey et al., 2020; Milner et al., 2025). In addition, research on peer interaction suggests that social challenges are not simply individual faults, but can emerge from mismatches in communication styles between autistic and non-autistic students (Chen et al., 2021). These findings show that peer perception is central to understanding inclusion in school life.

The large number of studies concerning either the experiences of neurodivergent students or the general public's perception of autism and neurodivergence has resulted in very few studies regarding the views of non-neurodivergent high school students toward the treatment of their neurodivergent peers.

These views matter since non-neurodivergent students do not merely observe school culture, but rather, actively participate in creating it through everyday, common decisions (e.g., inviting classmates to engage in conversation, including them in group projects, challenging stereotypes about their abilities, and making room for alternative forms of communication). Research has shown that both personal interaction and exposure to schools can increase positive attitudes toward autistic students and decrease acceptance of bullying, while stigma reduction programs often use non-neurodivergent students as key agents of change (Cook et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2023). Because neurodivergence exists on a spectrum, this study focuses especially on students whose support needs may be less visible in everyday high school settings. Thus, this study will explore how non-neurodivergent high school students perceive the treatment of their neurodivergent peers and how they believe non-neurodivergent students can help establish an inclusive school environment.

This paper is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do non-neurodivergent high school students perceive and describe the ways their neurodivergent peers are treated?

RQ2: How can non-neurodiverse students help shape an atmosphere of inclusion, belonging, and social participation in school for neurodivergent students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brief Background and History

The concept of neurodivergence is closely connected to the broader neurodiversity movement, which challenges the idea that neurological differences should automatically be viewed as deficits (Schuck et al., 2024; Turnock et al., 2022). The neurodiversity perspective does not view individuals with autism or ADHD solely through the medical/disorder model. Rather, it views differences in attention, communication, sensory processing, learning, and social interaction as merely natural aspects of human variation (Schuck et al., 2024). The way we understand neurodivergence will influence our perception of, treatment for, and inclusion of neurodivergent individuals. While there is an awareness of autism among many, there is still stigma associated with those behaviors that deviate from what society deems “normal.” The two studies provide evidence that it is not just whether individuals understand the term neurodivergence that causes stigma, but also their interpretation of the different behaviors that fall outside common social norms. For example, in a high school setting, one may view the definition of “normal” behavior as the informal expectations of peers regarding being socially outgoing, engaging in conversation, maintaining eye contact, participating smoothly in group work, or being comfortable in common areas. Informal expectations matter because stigma often arises when behaviors are viewed as different from what society deems acceptable (Turnock et al., 2022). Such judgments can affect whether or not to include neurodivergent students in conversations, invite them to join groups, welcome them into clubs, or accept them as members of their school community.

A comprehensive review conducted by Bailey et al. (2020) identified several barriers to inclusive education for autistic students attending mainstream schools. They found that autistic students experience significant challenges in forming friendships, experiencing high levels of anxiety related to peer interactions, managing sensory-related difficulties, and participating in social activities. Based on these findings, Bailey et al. (2020) concluded that inclusive education represents a relationship between an

individual's diagnosed disability and the environmental support provided for that individual. The findings also expand upon Turnock et al.'s (2022) argument about stigma by providing evidence that social expectations in a school environment become barriers for neurodivergent students in their everyday lives and in their ability to build relationships with peers, take part in school-based activities, and receive support from teachers.

DEFINING NEURODIVERGENCE

In 1943, child psychiatrist Leo Kanner of Johns Hopkins University first described the set of symptoms now known as autism; he called it “infantile autism” (Baron-Cohen, 2015). One year later, Hans Asperger at the University of Vienna (Austria) wrote an article similar to Kanner's describing a similar set of behaviors in children he'd observed. In 1981, psychiatrist Lorna Wing, rediscovering Asperger's paper, which had gone unnoticed for some time, coined the term Asperger syndrome (Baron-Cohen, 2015). However, this name became controversial when the public found out about Asperger's work for the Nazis. The condition changed names between the DSM-4 and the DSM-5, where it became part of the diagnosis for autism spectrum disorder (National Autistic Society, 2023). Neurodivergent individuals may include people with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome, or other cognitive and developmental differences (Schuck et al., 2024; VanDaalen et al., 2025). Although these conditions differ from one another, they are often grouped under the broader category of neurodivergence because they involve ways of thinking, learning, or interacting that do not always match dominant social expectations.

Students' Understanding of Neurodiversity

At the same time, defining neurodivergence can be difficult because many students have only a partial or unclear understanding of the term. Some students may associate neurodivergence with only autism, while others may confuse it with mental illness, disability more broadly, or academic ability, reflecting the problem that neurodiversity is often unevenly understood among students and school communities (Milner et al., 2025; Schuck et al., 2024). This lack of clarity can shape how students perceive their peers. If students do not understand neurodivergence, they may misread behaviors such as quietness, intense focus, social discomfort, impulsivity, or difficulty with eye contact as rudeness, stupidity, arrogance, or lack of interest (Milner et al., 2025; Sasson et al., 2017). Sasson et al. (2017) demonstrated that non-autistic observers often form less favorable impressions of autistic individuals based on brief social cues, which suggests that misinterpretation can occur quickly and affect people's willingness to interact. As a result, a misunderstanding of neurodivergence can contribute to exclusion even when students do not purposely discriminate.

Different Types of Neurodivergence

Although this study uses the broader term neurodivergence, it focuses especially on students who may be on the lower-support or less visible side of autism and ADHD. The reason for this focus is that students who have a greater need for support will often not participate in or be fully involved in inclusive settings within traditional public high schools, whereas students whose support needs are less apparent will often appear as though they are socially or academically “functioning” and therefore will also

experience misunderstandings, mocking, or negative peer interactions. Because non-neurodivergent students may not immediately recognize neurodivergence due to their lack of knowledge, neurodivergent characteristics may be labeled using terms such as “awkward,” “quiet,” “weird,” “distracting,” or “overwhelmingly intense” (Milner et al., 2025; Sasson et al., 2017). These labels can affect a student’s sense of belonging even when the student is not directly bullied or openly excluded.

Autistic individuals may present with varying degrees of differences in terms of social communication, sensory processing, routines, attention to detail, and interaction style (Bailey et al., 2020; Milner et al., 2025). Autism is also diagnosed more frequently in boys than in girls. Recent CDC data reported by the National Institute of Mental Health found that autism was about 3.4 times as prevalent among boys as among girls, though this difference may also reflect patterns of identification and diagnosis rather than only actual prevalence (National Institute of Mental Health, 2025). While some autistic individuals may find it difficult to meet certain social expectations while also desiring friendships, a sense of belonging, and peer connections, there is no reason to assume that all autistic individuals do not want to develop social relationships. Friendship is especially important in this context because inclusion is not only about being placed in the same classroom as peers, but also about whether students have opportunities to form mutual relationships and feel accepted within peer groups. Tsou et al.’s (2025) research has shown that the loneliness experienced by autistic children is not shaped only by the amount of face-to-face interaction they have with others, but also by whether peers like and accept them as members of their social group. Therefore, belonging depends on the quality of peer acceptance, not merely the quantity of interactions. Meaningful inclusion should not be based on pity or sympathy toward neurodivergent students. Instead, it should involve recognizing them as full members of the peer community who can form friendships, contribute to group life, and participate socially without being treated as inferior or separate.

ADHD raises a similar issue of visibility and misinterpretation. Like some autistic students, students with ADHD may have differences that are not immediately recognized as neurodivergence but are instead interpreted through behavior-based labels. ADHD is characterized by differences in attention, impulsivity, organizational skills, emotional regulation, and activity level (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In schools, children and adolescents with ADHD may be misinterpreted as being careless, unruly, lazy, or lacking maturity because their behaviors may be judged by peers without understanding the executive-functioning differences behind them (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Schuck et al., 2024). Most importantly, since these behavioral characteristics are usually reflective of difficulties in executive function (such as the brain systems responsible for planning and organization) rather than lack of effort, students with ADHD may experience rejection or exclusion from their peers due to misunderstandings regarding their motivations. In general, since most students with autism or ADHD will have fewer obvious signs of their disorders than students with physical disabilities, they will likely be judged by their peers based solely on observable behaviors rather than their underlying causes (Milner et al., 2025; Schuck et al., 2024). As a result of this dynamic, students with autism and/or ADHD may experience exclusion by way of subtle forms of disengagement from peers.

PEER INTERACTION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

While Sasson et al. (2017) show that non-autistic observers may judge autistic individuals quickly, Chen et al. (2021) complicate this by showing that social interaction is relational rather than one-sided. For this reason, research on peer interaction is especially important. Chen et al. (2021) argue that social challenges faced by adolescents with autism should not be considered only as internal issues or deficits of the adolescent with autism. Peer interaction is instead determined by the degree of similarity/dissimilarity between an individual student and his/her peers. When comparing group interactions involving two adolescents, Chen et al. (2021) found that group interactions between two students with autism involved greater reciprocation and motivation to interact than did cross-group interactions. Therefore, their findings suggest that social connection occurs when both parties understand and share similar perspectives. Together, Sasson et al. (2017) and Chen et al. (2021) suggest that social exclusion should not be understood only as a result of neurodivergent students' behavior. Instead, peer understanding, communication mismatch, and group expectations all shape whether neurodivergent students are included.

SENTIMENTS TOWARD NEURODIVERGENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

A growing amount of research examines how young people, students, and peers perceive neurodivergence (Cook et al., 2020; Milner et al., 2025; Zavaleta, 2020). Students' attitudes influence everyday school culture. Peer acceptance is not created only through formal policies or adult-led programs; it is also created through ordinary social behaviors. These include who students sit with, who they invite to join groups, how they respond to differences, and whether they challenge or repeat stereotypes.

Previous research shows that peer judgments can form quickly and may persist when students and teachers lack a clear understanding of neurodivergence (Sasson et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2025). The researchers reported that neurotypical adults were less likely to engage in social interactions with individuals with autism when those individuals' social behaviors had been viewed briefly and in real time (Sasson et al., 2017). These findings suggest that social distance among classmates can start prior to the classmates having enough opportunity to get to know one another. A classmate may become socially distant not because he/she has done something wrong, but because his/her peers misinterpret some aspect of the way he/she communicates verbally through tone, facially through expressions, or physically through body language.

The "Beyond the Stereotype" study by Milner et al. (2025) also relates closely to how students view neurodivergence. In their research, neurodivergent students reported that their peers and educators would gain an advantage by learning what neurodivergence really is. Milner et al.'s (2025) findings indicate that disclosing one's neurodivergence status comes with inherent risks such as stigma, discrimination, and misunderstanding. Additionally, neurodivergent students who have less obvious disability may be faced with a very difficult decision. They may either choose to inform others of their neurodivergence status and subsequently be perceived through the lens of stereotypes or remain silent regarding their neurodivergence status and therefore continue to risk being misinterpreted by peers.

In addition to the previously mentioned research relating to changes in student attitudes towards autistic students due to personal contact and school-related experiences, there is evidence indicating that

students' views on autistic students can improve as well. Cook et al. (2020) demonstrated that children who had more frequent direct contact with autistic individuals during a single school year displayed improved positive attitudes toward individuals with autism. These findings demonstrate that inclusion involves more than just awareness of issues related to autistic students. Direct contact, combined with experiences that occur within the context of a school setting, can lead to a reduction in social distances between autistic and non-autistic students. However, contact alone does not necessarily equate to meaningful interaction. Students require encouragement to interact respectfully, reciprocally, and inclusively so that contact results in meaningful exchange.

Kim et al. (2023) found that many stigma-reducing interventions developed specifically for non-autistic participants include K–12 and undergraduate students. However, most of these programs are adult-designed or program-based. Relatively few studies explore how non-neurodivergent high-school students perceive the treatment of their neurodivergent peers or how they conceptualize their own role in promoting inclusion.

Zavaleta's (2020) work helps address this gap by shifting attention toward the neurotypical peer perspective. Zavaleta emphasizes that neurotypical peers provide genuine social opportunities for autistic individuals. Yet, research often places greater emphasis on the autistic individual rather than on the peer perspective (Zavaleta, 2020). If non-neurodivergent students create the peer culture at schools where they attend classes with neurodivergent peers, then it stands to reason that their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors warrant further examination.

CONNECTION TO THE CURRENT STUDY

Across these studies, several connected patterns emerge: neurodivergent students often face barriers to friendship and participation, stigma is shaped by how others interpret difference, and non-neurodivergent peers play an important role in either reinforcing or reducing exclusion (Bailey et al., 2020; Cook et al., 2020; Milner et al., 2025; Sasson et al., 2017). However, there continues to exist a need for further exploration of how non-neurodivergent high school students view the treatment of their neurodivergent peers. Understanding this is particularly significant in daily school settings, since exclusion may take many forms, including indirect or “hidden” forms of behavior such as social distancing, not inviting another person to participate, misinterpreting the communication style of a student, or believing that a neurodivergent student does not wish to be friends or have group involvement.

This study focuses specifically on neurodivergence in a high school setting. Therefore, by conducting interviews of non-neurodivergent high school students, this study examines how students perceive the treatment of neurodivergent peers and how they believe students can work together to support a more inclusive learning community.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative interview method to examine how non-neurodivergent high school students perceive the treatment of neurodivergent peers and how they believe students can help create a more inclusive school environment. A qualitative method was appropriate because the study focused on

how students explain, interpret, and make meaning of peer interactions in their own words, which aligns with qualitative research's emphasis on understanding participants' experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making in context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews allowed participants to describe their observations, assumptions, and ideas about inclusion in greater detail.

The sampling criteria for this study required participants to be current high school students who identified as non-neurodivergent and were willing to discuss their perceptions of peer treatment and inclusion in school life. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, commonly used when participants are selected simply because they are accessible to the researcher (Andrade, 2021). Recruitment occurred through in-person outreach, and participants were asked whether they were willing to complete a short interview about neurodivergence, peer interactions, and inclusion at school.

The participants were 15 male high school students, labeled P1 through P15 to ensure their anonymity. The all-male sample was not intentionally selected but rather due to convenience sampling and participant availability. Each participant was interviewed about their understanding of neurodivergence, their experiences or observations involving neurodivergent students, their views on inclusion at school, and their ideas for improving belonging and social participation. The interviews were relatively short, approximately 10–20 minutes each, which allowed responses to be gathered from multiple participants but limited the number of follow-up questions and room for more elaboration.

Table 1
Participant Demographics and Prior Understanding of Neurodivergence

Participant pseudonym	Grade level	Race/ethnicity	Participants' understanding of neurodivergence
P1	Freshman	Asian/Chinese	Clear understanding
P2	Sophomore	Asian/Chinese	Limited/General understanding
P3	Sophomore	African American	Clear understanding
P4	Junior	Chinese American	Clear understanding
P5	Junior	White	General understanding
P6	Junior	Asian/Indian American	General understanding
P7	Junior	White/Iranian American	General understanding
P8	Junior	Chinese American	Clear understanding
P9	Junior	White	General understanding
P10	Junior	Asian/Chinese American	General understanding

P11	Junior	White	Clear understanding
P12	Junior	Middle Eastern American	General understanding
P13	Senior	White/British American	General understanding
P14	Senior	White	Clear understanding
P15	Senior	Asian American	General understanding

Note. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Understanding of neurodivergence was categorized based on participants' interview responses.

The main tools used in this study were an interview guide, interview notes, transcripts, and a spreadsheet-based codebook. The codebook organized participant responses into demographic, contextual, and thematic categories. These categories included prior knowledge of neurodivergence, first-hand experience with neurodivergent students, use of stereotypes, views on inclusion, mentions of exclusion, empathy, collaboration, school events, and suggested improvements.

The data were analyzed using thematic coding, a process that involves identifying patterns across interview responses. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research to develop and interpret patterns of meaning across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After the interviews were reviewed, participant responses were compared to identify common themes related to the two research questions. For RQ1, the analysis focused on how students described the treatment of neurodivergent peers. For RQ2, the analysis focused on how students believed non-neurodivergent peers could support inclusion, a sense of belonging, and social participation in school.

FINDINGS

This study's findings are organized around three major themes that emerged from the participant interviews and codebook analysis: 1) students had general awareness of neurodivergence, but their understanding was often incomplete; 2) exclusion was often described as subtle, unintentional, and shaped by stereotypes; and 3) inclusion was understood through everyday participation, empathy, and intentional peer action. Together, these findings suggest that non-neurodivergent students notice patterns of poor treatment toward neurodivergent peers. Still, they do not always have the language or depth of understanding to fully explain those patterns.

GENERAL AWARENESS OF NEURODIVERGENCE

Most participants had some awareness of neurodivergence, but their understanding was often broad, partial, or uncertain. P4 gave one of the clearest definitions, explaining, "When I hear the word neurodivergent, I think of people whose brains process information differently. It can include things such as ADHD, autism, or dyslexia." In contrast, P2 reasoned through the word more generally, stating, "I'm guessing it's how people's minds... process things differently, or how... we're just different human

beings as a general.” These responses show that participants often understood neurodivergence as a difference, but not always with the same precision or depth.

For example, P8, a Chinese American junior, explained that not every student knows what neurodivergence means, and that he found out through his own curiosity, stating, “I don’t think everyone knows what it means, because... I’ve read a medical journal, actually, [to] figure out what it means.” This response shows that some students understand neurodivergence through formal or academic sources rather than through direct social experience. While this type of knowledge may provide a basic definition, it may not prepare students to recognize how neurodivergence appears in everyday school life.

While many students reported they were aware of the term neurodiversity at school, others said their experience with the term developed from friendships and direct interactions with peers who are neurodivergent. P3 described a similar pattern, explaining that his awareness of neurodiversity developed through a friendship with a student with ADHD whom he met in the school’s Black Student Union affinity group. Similarly, P11 stated, “I initially uh didn’t know anything about neurodiversity. It wasn’t like until I joined the Chess Club that I met and eventually befriended an individual who has uh ADHD. He was like initially wary to tell me his condition, but like as we got to know each other better, he told me openly, and I began researching about neurodiversity.” The quote illustrates that developing friendships with peers may be a way for some students to move their knowledge of neurodivergent terms beyond generalizations toward a more personal awareness of neurodivergence.

Across the interviews, participants often seemed more comfortable describing neurodivergence generally than explaining how neurodivergent students might experience school socially. Knowing a definition is not the same as understanding lived experiences. Thirteen of the fifteen participants could identify neurodivergence in broad or partial terms, such as autism, ADHD, learning differences, different ways of thinking, or differences in how the brain processes information. One exception was P1, who described himself as having a clear understanding of neurodivergence but later confused the term with mental illness during the interview. This demonstrates that perhaps younger students may sometimes think that they know the term, but in reality, they still need more time, exposure, and school-based discussions to understand the true definition of neurodivergence. However, fewer participants could describe specific examples of how neurodivergent students might be excluded, misunderstood, or socially distanced by peers.

This finding connects directly to RQ1 because it shows that non-neurodivergent students’ perceptions of peer treatment are shaped by how well they understand neurodivergence in the first place. When students only have a broad or textbook-based understanding, they may be less likely to notice subtle forms of exclusion. They may recognize obvious bullying, but not recognize quieter patterns, such as not being invited into a group or being excluded from friend groups.

SUBTLE EXCLUSION SHAPED BY STEREOTYPES

Participants generally did not describe exclusion as direct, aggressive, or always intentional. Instead, many described exclusion as mild, subtle, or mostly unintentional. In the codebook, twelve of the fifteen participants found that exclusion or social distance could happen in some form, but they often

stated that it was the result of misunderstanding, lack of awareness, or existing friend groups rather than pure cruelty. P4 described exclusion as something that can happen through already-formed social groups rather than open hostility: “There have been moments where I felt excluded, especially in situations where groups had already formed, and it was harder to join conversations. Sometimes... people unintentionally ignore others if they’re focused on their own friend groups.” P4’s comment is important because it shows that his understanding of exclusion came from personal experience. Even though P4 was not describing himself as neurodivergent, his experience of being left out of already-formed groups helped him empathize with how neurodivergent peers might also feel excluded in informal social settings. Similarly, P8 recalled that a student with ADHD at a previous school was kind, but was still socially avoided because peers saw his behavior as disruptive.

This pattern suggests that non-neurodivergent students may recognize exclusion, but they often soften it by describing it as not on purpose. Some participants identified exclusion as “primarily” unintentional, while others indicated that exclusion may occur due to misunderstandings, lack of knowledge, or lack of awareness. P7 made this distinction directly, explaining that exclusion may be a misunderstanding when someone “did not know that the student... is neurodivergent,” but intentional when someone understands the difference and uses it “in a negative way, like calling him names.” Rather, a student may be excluded simply because others may be unaware of how to interact or are too afraid or embarrassed to engage with them.

Given the informal nature of much social interaction in most schools, this theme is particularly relevant. Much of school belonging occurs during ordinary moments like group activities, lunch, and casual invitations. Furthermore, if exclusion is subtle and occurs in informal settings, it may be more difficult for staff and teachers to identify such exclusionary practices and for students to articulate the specific reasons for their exclusion.

In response to RQ1, this theme indicates that non-neurodivergent students typically view the treatment of neurodivergent students as mixed. They do not describe the school climate as openly hostile, but they do recognize instances in which students who are perceived as different may experience exclusion due to misunderstandings and/or social isolation.

Another part of this theme concerned the role of stereotypes in participants’ descriptions of school culture and peer treatment. In the codebook, multiple participants mentioned stereotypes, though the types varied. Some comments connected to academic identity, such as the stereotype that Asian students are quiet, academically focused, or high-achieving. P1, a first-year student who has limited experience in high school, described this stereotype through his own experience as an Asian student, stating, “Since I’m from the Asian ethnicity group, then people would most likely think that I’m academically high achieving, which sometimes may not be true.” Although P1 was not speaking directly about Asian neurodivergent students, his comment shows how students may interpret others through identity-based assumptions before understanding them as a whole. P4 similarly noted that Asian students are viewed as academically focused or quiet. Other comments connected to wealth, status, family pressure, leadership, competition, or being “the best” in the class. P13 stated that “a lot of the kids here are very rich” and that because of this, some students “don’t have the same experiences as a lot of other people,” which can make them come across as “ignorant.” P5 likewise noted that some students’ behavior

could be seen as “stuck up,” especially when conversations involve expensive clothing or status symbols. If subtle exclusion can still occur in a wealthy school environment that many participants described as generally inclusive, then exclusion may be even harder to identify in schools with fewer resources, less school support, or less direct emphasis on diversity and inclusion.

Stereotypes are important because students are likely to interpret a behavior before knowing the individual involved; so when a student is quiet, focused, or socially reserved, his/her peers will most likely view them from racial, academic, or personality stereotypes rather than considering neurodivergence, anxieties, discomforts, or communication style. This suggests that students may use social categories to make sense of differences before they fully understand the person involved. The finding complicates the research question because, while students’ understanding of neurodivergence influences how neurodivergent students are treated by their peers, other assumptions based on race, gender, achievement, personality, income level, or social standing also play a role. Therefore, a neurodivergent student may be evaluated through various social categories, as students may not always know whether they were excluded due to their neurodivergence, personality, race, or academic standing, or some combination of these factors.

Additionally, participants’ responses indicated that stereotypes can complicate the identification of exclusions. Because students see themselves and others as “quiet,” “competitive,” or “socially awkward,” students may fail to recognize that the treatment of that individual may be exclusionary. When students lack a clear understanding of neurodivergence, they may rely on stereotypes to explain behaviors that they find unusual (Milner et al., 2025; Sasson et al., 2017).

The findings related to RQ1 demonstrate that non-neurodivergent students evaluate peer treatment using a broader social context. In terms of RQ2, the findings indicate that the inclusion of neurodivergent and other socially misunderstood students requires increased self-awareness among students about the assumptions they hold about others.

INCLUSION THROUGH EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION, EMPATHY, AND INTENTIONAL PEER ACTION

Participants often connected belonging to everyday school activities, especially classes, clubs, sports, group work, and friendships. P2 described inclusion through academic collaboration, explaining that in math class, students might “work together as a class to figure out how to solve this question more efficiently.” He added that although it “felt good as an individual,” it “felt even better as a team” (P2). P4 also connected inclusion to group work, though he noted that participation can become harder when one person dominates the discussion. This suggests that participants viewed inclusion as something that happens through participation, not just through general acceptance.

For neurodivergent students, belonging may be shaped by whether peers actually invite and include them in group projects, conversations, clubs, lunch spaces, and activities. Several participants seemed to understand that shared interests, such as academics, sports, or clubs, can create natural opportunities for connection. P1 similarly connected belonging to shared academic interests and lunch socializing. This pattern was also reflected in later interviews, where P3 and P11 described learning about

neurodivergence through friendships formed in the Black Student Union affinity group and the Chess Club. However, many responses focused more on visible participation than on deeper emotional belonging, meaning students may see someone as “included” simply because they are present, without knowing whether they truly feel accepted.

Because participants understood inclusion through everyday school life, their suggestions for improvement also focused on ordinary peer actions and school-based opportunities for connection. Participants generally believed that inclusion could improve, though their suggestions varied. Some suggested school events, discussion-based classes, affinity groups, or individual support. Others felt that no major change was needed, which may show that some students view the school as already inclusive or may not fully recognize subtle forms of exclusion.

Empathy was an important theme across several interviews. P1 described empathy as trying to understand others in “their shoes,” “their past experiences,” and “their values.” P2 focused on smaller acts of care, stating, “I think it’s the small actions that count, that make people feel included,” such as texting someone after a party to ask, “Did you get home yet?” Many participants suggested that students need to better understand one another, but the strongest responses went beyond empathy and pointed toward action. This included inviting others, collaborating more intentionally, creating welcoming spaces, and helping classmates feel included in everyday school life. P8 described meaningful inclusion as “just treating them like everyone else, talking to them... inviting them to places,” and treating neurodivergent peers “the same like you would treat your friends or your family member.” P10 similarly highlighted respect, getting to know others, and using community-building events to encourage inclusion.

For RQ1, this indicates that non-neurodivergent students often understand treatment through visible school participation. For RQ2, the findings suggest that students can support inclusion through small but meaningful actions, such as inviting peers into groups, including them in conversations, and making clubs or class activities more welcoming. Their actions matter because school belonging is created through repeated small choices: who gets invited, who gets listened to, who gets included, and who is treated as part of the community.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Overall, the findings suggest that non-neurodivergent high school students generally view school as an inclusive environment, but they also recognize that exclusion, misunderstanding, and stereotypes can still occur. Most participants had some understanding of neurodivergence, though this understanding was often general or incomplete. Participants were more likely to describe exclusion as subtle or unintentional than as openly hostile. They also connected inclusion to everyday school life, especially group work, friendships, classes, clubs, and shared activities.

These findings answer the first research question. In general, respondents viewed treatment of their neurodivergent peers as a mixture of both positive (inclusive) and negative (due to stereotypes/misunderstanding/awareness). Additionally, these responses also answer the second question. Participants provided some suggestions to enhance inclusion, such as through empathy, collaboration,

intentional invitations, school events, or other forms of peer-led initiatives that promote a sense of belonging among students.

Students may confuse a generally kind school environment with a fully inclusive one. Many participants said that the school was welcoming and respectful, but their responses also revealed that exclusion can still exist in subtle ways. Exclusion does not always appear as superficial, such as bullying, name-calling, or overt hostility. It can also appear when a student is not invited into a group, when classmates assume someone does not want to participate, or when students avoid communicating with someone because they do not know how. In this sense, the absence of visible tensions does not necessarily mean belonging.

The findings of this study also indicate that knowing about neurodivergence does not automatically translate into a deeper understanding. While many respondents were able to define neurodivergence broadly, few were able to provide descriptions of how neurodivergence impacts everyday school experiences. As such, non-neurodivergent students may feel confident that they are being accepted while simultaneously overlooking the subtle ways their behaviors/actions affect another student's sense of belonging.

There is also considerable value in considering that peer treatment is influenced by factors that go far beyond neurodivergence. Participants' references to the influence of race, academic pressures, socioeconomic status, personality, and social status illustrate that students regularly assess peer relationships based upon multiple assumptions regarding social identity. Such labels make it even more difficult for students to identify if a student's behavior may be reflective of neurodivergence or anxiety within a social situation. Thus, inclusion efforts would benefit from defining neurodivergence; however, they should also help students question assumptions they make about classmates who act, communicate, or participate differently.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the majority of participants conceptualized inclusion primarily in terms of visible neurotypical participation. Participants defined inclusion through group assignments/participation, class discussion participation, membership in clubs or student organizations, lunchtime socialization, and participation at school events. However, they do not always ensure that a student will feel emotionally accepted. A neurodivergent student may participate in a club/group assignment while still experiencing feelings of disconnection, misunderstanding, or expectation to conform to typical expectations for social interaction. Thus, true acceptance/inclusion can best be achieved through more than just participation. True acceptance includes being heard, respected, invited, and accepted without having to hide or describe one's individual differences.

These findings reinforce previous research on stigma and peer perceptions in demonstrating that social barriers occur frequently due to how other students perceive differences rather than solely due to the differences exhibited by neurodivergent students. Previous research demonstrated that first impressions/social assessments can significantly influence students' willingness to associate and socialize with autistic individuals (Sasson et al., 2017). The current study supports this concept within the school context by illustrating that non-neurodivergent students commonly utilize assumptions regarding familiarity/discomfort and past experiences/knowledge when assessing peer behavior. The current study

also offers a student-focused perspective by describing how high school students typically report these issues within daily school settings.

The results indicate that high school students possess the capacity to positively enhance inclusion. While participants did demonstrate recognition of inclusion as something that can be created through student action and behaviors (such as empathy, respect, and collaboration), some participants had difficulty articulating specific ideas/initiatives for promoting inclusion. These observations suggest that students likely agree to support inclusion in theory; however, they require additional instruction/examples of what inclusive behaviors look like in practice. Values such as “kindness” and “respect,” although useful starting points for enhancing inclusion, may not be sufficient to prevent exclusion unless students receive education on the various subtle ways exclusion occurs and how their actions/behaviors can decrease social distance.

Overall, this study suggests that inclusion depends on both school culture and peer responsibility. Schools can provide structures such as affinity groups, discussion-based classes, and community events, but students ultimately shape much of the social environment through daily behavior. Neurodivergent students’ sense of belonging may depend on whether peers are willing to listen, invite, collaborate, and question their assumptions. Inclusion should be treated as an active practice rather than a passive belief. A school may value inclusion, but students must repeatedly choose to create it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, schools should not rely only on general messages about kindness, respect, or diversity when trying to improve inclusion for neurodivergent students. While participants often suggested empathy, invitations, school events, and peer support, the broader implication of the findings is that students need more specific guidance on how exclusion occurs in everyday school life. Therefore, schools should create opportunities for students to think critically about stereotypes, misunderstandings, and subtle forms of exclusion. These opportunities could include advisory lessons, student-led discussions, town meetings, classroom activities, or peer education sessions focused on common school situations such as group assignments, lunch conversations, jokes, and informal friend groups.

Student-led inclusion initiatives should be promoted. Non-neurodivergent students can contribute to creating a sense of belonging for neurodivergent peers by including them in conversations, making space for alternative communication styles, listening during group projects, and avoiding jokes or assumptions based on differences. Because many instances of subtle exclusion occur through repeatable ordinary decisions, these behaviors may appear minor, yet they are significant.

These findings also suggest that accommodation should not be understood only as a formal legal or institutional requirement. Accommodations in an educational setting are typically viewed as formal support systems, such as testing adjustments and classroom modifications. However, informal types of accommodations are necessary for inclusive relationships among friends. For example, allowing others more time to answer questions and complete tasks, communicating with each other using one’s preferred method of communication, selecting group activities based on comfort and accessibility levels, avoiding

overwhelming environments when possible, and acknowledging that others will contribute differently than you are all part of true friendship. In this sense, inclusion requires students not only to be kind but also to adjust how they interact so that neurodivergent peers can participate more fully.

Schools can use formal programs, advisory lessons, and discussions at the school-wide level to provide students with information regarding neurodivergence. In addition, daily peer actions can help neurodivergent students recognize they have been noticed, recognized, and accepted. Improving inclusion will require students to continually engage in inclusive behaviors in everyday school settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how non-neurodivergent high school students perceive the treatment of neurodivergent peers and how they believe students can help create a more inclusive school environment. Participants generally viewed their school as an inclusive environment; however, they also recognized that misunderstandings about neurodivergent individuals and stereotypes remain common, and subtle forms of exclusion may also occur. While many participants had some awareness of neurodivergence, participants' understanding varied in depth, and many still struggled to connect neurodivergence to everyday school experiences. Furthermore, participants often described exclusion as unintentional rather than open hostility. Therefore, creating an inclusive environment is about more than just preventing bullying or direct discrimination. In this way, belonging is shaped through ordinary parts of school life, including classes, clubs, lunch, group work, and friendships.

This study has several limitations. The interviews were relatively short, approximately 10–20 minutes each, which limited the depth of follow-up questions and participant reflection. The sample was also all male, which may have limited the range of perspectives. In addition, participants were recruited through convenience sampling within the researcher's school and social circle, so the findings may not represent all high school students. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample, longer interviews, and the perspectives of neurodivergent students themselves.

Overall, this study shows that meaningful inclusion depends on both institutional support and everyday peer behavior. Schools have a responsibility to create structures, programs, and expectations that support an inclusive environment, while students also play an important role in practicing inclusion through the ways they understand, include, and respect one another.

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