

CRITICAL AUTISM STUDIES AS A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION MOVING BEYOND NORMATIVE INCLUSION

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines whether inclusive leadership, while valuable for promoting belonging, uniqueness, and psychological safety, is sufficient to meet the needs of neurodiverse populations in higher education institutions. The central research question asks: Can inclusive leadership paradigms alone create truly neurodiverse-affirming higher education environments, or is a transformative theoretical framework needed? The study adopts a dual theoretical lens—Inclusive Leadership theory and Critical Autism Studies (CAS). Inclusive leadership emphasizes participatory decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and systemic inclusion, yet research reveals its limitations in addressing structural ableism, tokenism, and superficial inclusion. CAS offers a transformative, decolonial, and justice-oriented framework that reframes from autism as a socially and politically constructed identity, centering autistic voices in policy, curriculum, and institutional change. As a conceptual analysis, this paper synthesizes peer-reviewed literature across leadership studies, disability studies, and neurodiversity research, identifying key epistemological gaps and overlaps between the two frameworks. The methodology involves thematic analysis of scholarly sources to compare the capacity of inclusive leadership and Critical Autism Studies to address systemic barriers, stigma, and deficit-based models. Preliminary findings suggest that while inclusive leadership provides a foundation for fostering inclusive climates, it often lacks the critical, emancipatory lens necessary to dismantle entrenched ableist structures. Critical Autism Studies, by contrast, offers actionable pathways for co-produced policy, culturally affirming pedagogy, and institutional transformation. The implications are significant for higher education leaders, policymakers, and educators: integrating CAS into inclusive leadership models may bridge the gap between inclusive rhetoric and authentic neurodiverse affirmation. Such integration can move institutions from reactive accommodation toward proactive cultural change that validates neurodiverse identity, fosters genuine belonging and sustains inclusive ecosystemic transformation.

Keywords

Inclusive leadership, Critical Autism Studies, neurodiversity, higher education, inclusive ecosystemic transformation

1 | Introduction

Is inclusive leadership sufficient in promoting neurodiversity affirming higher education institutions. Inclusive leadership as an epistemological approach offers a paradigm shift towards inclusive cultures and ecosystems, yet is it enough to address the needs of neurodiverse individuals in higher education institutions? Neurodiverse individuals require an epistemological and practical orientation that supports, validates, and uplifts the unique identities, needs, and culture of this marginalized group.

This paper will examine the difficulties that neurodiverse individuals experience in higher education institutions. Afterwards, it will address the theoretical contributions of inclusive leadership philosophies and practices. Then, it will address the issues in current inclusive institutional models including tokenism and superficial inclusivity. Finally, it will introduce Critical Autism Studies as a pathway of inclusive ecosystemic transformation from normative inclusive models to one that sufficiently

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creates a framework for not only theory but most importantly practice in promoting the well-being of neurodiverse individuals.

Neurodiverse individuals experience unique challenges that affect them in a variety of ways which require an unique epistemological and practical paradigm to create and maintain sufficient neurodiverse inclusive environments. It is imperative to listen to the voices of neurodiverse students in creating intervention/support systems institutionally (Zahir et al., 2024). Creating a neurodiverse affirming practice goes beyond student centered approaches but requires that faculty reflect on their own practices (Friedman & Nash-Luckenbach, 2024).

In higher education institutions, there is limited professional development and knowledge about autism which serves as a significant roadblock to inclusive education and support (Pettersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). Furthermore, accommodation plays a role in neurodiverse student success levels and professional development is needed to provide students with individual needs (Johnson et al., 2023). Autistic students experience marginalization and challenges fitting in (Shepherd et al., 2023). It is imperative to listen to autistic students and to move away from the medical model that drives marginalization when creating self-advocacy and intervention programs (Shepherd et al., 2023). Current support services in higher education are not satisfactory, and students feel like advocacy is pointless without cultural change (Lim et al., 2023). A significant barrier for autistic students is stigma which causes masking which manifests the core of the institutional culture (Underhill et al., 2022).

The pervasiveness of stigma in higher educational institutions leads to a shame of disability, significant discrimination, and therein low completion rates (Tan et al., 2024). It is vital to involve autistic students in creating inclusive and support environments (Tan et al., 2024). In higher education institutions, there is inaccessibility of teaching practices which are not designed for neurodiverse students (Pesonen et al., 2020). Students have shared the unavailability of professors, the stigma, and uncomfortable university climate that causes them to mask. Autistic students try to navigate the higher educational environment while having their voices ignored (Shea & Derry, 2022).

How can higher educational institutions alleger their inclusive philosophies when the result is the opposite. The surface level practices and cultural foundations of superficial inclusion are prevalent based on research of neurodiverse students' experiences. What practical and transformative hope does inclusive leadership paradigms offer for neurodiverse individuals in higher educational institutions? The next section will address inclusive leadership frameworks.

2 | The Need for Inclusive Ecosystemic Transformation

Inclusive leadership as a paradigm shift to colonialist models of oppression can be seen as a step in the right direction. A requisite of inclusive leadership is fostering belongingness and uniqueness along with promoting psychological safety, empowerment and group identification (Shore & Chung, 2022). What is inclusive leadership and is it enough to enact and sustain truly inclusive environments for neurodiverse individuals in higher education institutions?

The feeling and being included in the relational environment are signs of an inclusive environment (Wasserman, 2021). The adaptivity issues in this complex world can be resolved by bringing together different perspectives, by including and engaging the marginalized (Wasserman, 2021). Integrating stakeholder engagement is at the core of leadership that supports systemic inclusion (Gassam Asare, n.d.) The epistemological foundation of the necessity of including and engaging the voices of the marginalized is a significant contribution to inclusive leadership approaches but what is it and how do organizations create and foster it?

Research has been conducted to decipher the confusion of the definition of inclusive leadership (Veil Korkmaz et al., 2022). The complex ontological and epistemological facets of leadership have entertained researchers throughout the last century leading to over 200 different definitions, better labeled as a “prolific stew” (Northouse, 2020, Introduction, para.14). The systematic review of the conceptual understanding of inclusive leadership (Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022) provided suggestions for future research including the need for more research from Eastern countries. Thus, the fog around the conceptualization of inclusive leadership invites concerns of epistemological agency for sustainable and

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clear change especially for higher educational institutions where neurodiverse individuals are pathologized, misunderstood and marginalized.

The importance of the creation and upholding of this kind of environment is elucidated by Nishi (2013) findings that in inclusive climates, there is a reduction of conflict and interpersonal bias. Going beyond discovering the definitions and mechanisms of creating inclusive leadership is a more important question, how to sustain inclusive environments (Booyesen, 2014). Further research examined mechanisms of creating inclusive leadership and environments. Roberson (2006) examined the meanings of diversity and inclusion, found that they produce different work environments, and promoted a five-factor model of diversity and inclusion that managers can use to create and identify strategies from creating diverse and/or inclusive organizations (p.233). These mechanisms can serve as a roadmap for transforming institutional cultures and practices.

When creating inclusive leaders and environments, it is vital to ensure that inclusivity is institutionalized in all components of the system and institute it as an “ongoing cycle of collective learning” (Booyesen, 2014, p.5). Furthermore, institutions must ensure that the opportunities and support structures exist for participatory inclusive practices (Chatwani, 2018). This is vital in understanding issues of marginalization and pathologization of unheard and uninvited autistic voices in current educational institutions.

Do neurodiverse inclusive environments start with inclusive leaders? There are evidence-based factors that contribute to inclusive leadership. Primarily, Randel et al. (2017) found that positive leader behaviors that facilitate the perceptions of belongingness are supportive of creating an inclusive environment. Furthermore, they found that “pro-diversity beliefs, humility and cognitive complexity” increase the propensity of inclusive leader behaviors (Randel et al., 2017, p.190).

An inclusive leader challenges outdated norms and the exclusion of groups and emphasizes that an inclusive environment is everyone's responsibility (Zheng et al., 2023). Furthermore, leadership style, organizational climate, and diversity practices are antecedents to inclusion (Shore et al., 2011). This epistemological framework supports the powerful transformation that a leader can enact, which brings hope for institutional change in higher educational institutions.

Is a leader enough and what if there is none to enact cultural and institutional change? The emphasized role of social construction and dialogic change through the empowerment of “co-creating from wherever they are at” (Agger-Gupta & Harris, 2017, p.306) can serve as a precedent for encouraging followers to act in demanding and enacting change. Chatwani (2018) calls for the awakening of systemic thriving and the acceptance that “leadership is everyone’s vocation” (p. 6). This is relevant to the issue of marginalization of neurodiverse individuals due to its epistemological power in eliciting grassroots change.

A promising practical application of inclusive frameworks is the systemic design for curating possibility and call for the “design of interdependent pathways for the collective thriving of people and planet” (Chatwani, 2018, p.8) along with the necessity for inclusive leadership in the VUCA world (Booyesen, 2014). The issue of pathologization and dismissal of autistic individuals in higher educational institutions is complex and can benefit from this epistemological approach not only in deconstructing it but also empowering all stakeholders to accept agency and responsibility for change.

“Are you tapping into the energy of the whole organization through responsible, inclusive, collaborative and shared practice, empowering all?” (Booyesen, 2021, p.11) This change driven call within the design of inclusive leadership calls for transformative practices and cultural changes which can benefit autistic individuals. Creating a culture of trust and belonging which is the opposite of what we have now must not be enacted on only the surface level (Kwantes et al. 2023, p.45).

According to inclusive frameworks, to be able to enact and sustain this change, stakeholders need to tap into the “ways of knowing” which is a priority of holistic organizational cultures (Rego & Gergen, 2017). They need the “ability to speak and hear the truth but to further that with real concrete action” (Rego & Gergen, 2017, p. 46). This framework insists on including the voices of diverse individuals which is a requisite in changing the culture to support the needs of autistic individuals. But is this framework sufficient?

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Williams (2023) explains this issue stating that “implementing inclusive culture is the hardest step because it involves change” (p.204). The three inclusive circle processes of sharing agency, honoring voices and nurturing belongingness (Kligman et al.,2023) need to be at the foundation of sustainable change. Inclusive leaders and organizations must affirm belonging and that all voices matter (Kligman et al., 2023) to have sustainable change.

How can higher education institutions become a “beacon of hope” (Boitano et al., 2017, p.271) for neurodiverse individuals. The time for “business as usual approaches has long passed” (Baker & de Vries, 2017, p.275) and the time has come for a critical leadership framework (Taylor & Brownell, 2017). Autistic individuals need to be involved in deconstructing the systems that oppress them. Although inclusive epistemologies call for including all voices and collective decision making, there is a prevalence of tokenism and superficial inclusion which will be discussed in the next section along with other issues stemming from integrating solely the inclusive leadership approach.

3 | Inclusive Leadership Analysis

Inclusive leadership and ecosystem frameworks provide promising platforms for sustainable change towards inclusivity for neurodiverse individuals. However, research shows prevalent issues employing this structure. This section will examine issues present inclusive epistemological foundations including tokenism and superficial inclusivity in higher educational institutions specifically towards neurodiverse individuals.

Inclusive leadership is vital in creating neurodiverse inclusive environments but there needs to be a shift away from traditional leadership models to truly neuroinclusive models (Kaaria & Karemu, 2024). Current higher educational environments contain check the box tokenistic supports that are not sufficient and maintain neurodiverse students' issues with systemic barriers, higher dropout rates, and insufficient support services (McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024). To truly create sustainable neuroinclusive environments which are not reactive and fragmented requires going beyond current inclusive models (McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024).

Current normative inclusive models implement disability resources based on the medical and deficit models which have significant limitations on true neuro-inclusivity (Dwyer et al. (2023). A requisite move needs to be made establishing disability cultural communities and needs to be driven by neurodiverse leaders to promote cultural, identity based and systemic inclusivity (Dwyer et al. (2023). Even well intentioned higher educational systems have been shown to marginalize neurodiverse students by basing their approaches on normative inclusive models (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Structural reform is vital to go beyond individualized accommodations to promote and value the unique identity and not forcing assimilation (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Present educational models are based on teacher-centered learning instead of student-centered learning which would be more conducive to neurodiverse students (Tang et al., 2024). Furthermore, superficial inclusion and ambiguous DEI policies are present in higher education and require legal, policy driven, pedagogical, and cultural shifts (Tang et al., 2024). Neurodiverse students experience challenges with daily living, sensory overload, disclosure anxiety and mental health which require a revamp of current support systems including proactive and personalized resources and earlier intervention to prevent crises like drop out (Knott & Taylor, 2014).

Although DEI efforts have been increasing, neurodiverse students as a cultural community are overlooked (Hutson & Hutson, 2022). Furthermore, tokenistic practices like sensory days are minimalistic in the range of accommodations and cause segregation (Hutson & Hutson, 2022). A narrative synthesis using 48 studies found that although the higher educational inclusive practices are promising, there are systemic gaps in inclusion and support for neurodiverse students (Clouder et al., 2020). Educational practices were found to fail in understanding that neurodiverse students are all unique and that they require individualized acknowledgement and educational practices (Clouder et al., 2020).

Neurodiversity needs to be seen as a human variation and not a deficit and higher educational institutions need to move away from the pathologized deficit-based models and to embrace and foster inclusive, neurodiverse affirming educational practices (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). The current medical

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deficit models currently employed in higher education attribute educational and societal failures and barriers to individuals which is further damaging to neurodiverse students instead of attributing them to sociocultural creation (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023).

Instead of blaming students for their failures, higher educational institutions can create neuro-centered resources including cognitive behavioral therapy, coaching, time management, and socioemotional learning programs (Kwon et al., 2018). Furthermore, it's vital to create and foster social and institutional awareness of the unique needs and contributions of neurodiverse students (Kwon et al., 2018). Normative leadership and management practices alienate neurodiverse individuals creating a neurodivergent leadership gap (Zener, L. et al., 2024).

Environmental transformation is vital in engaging neurodiverse leaders and reducing the gap by understanding the unique needs and creating universal design for leadership (Zener, L. et al., 2024). This is foundational in integrating and inviting the voices of neurodiverse individuals to the table for truly neuroinclusive decision making, policy and curriculum design and cultural centers.

Research analyzing 30 years of disability policy in Australia's higher educational system found that these practices based on the medical deficit model have perpetuated epistemic injustice and called for significant structural changes (Pitman et al., 2023). Further research examining the experiences of neurodiverse staff in higher education found the existence of the derogatory maintenance of ableism amidst the superficial inclusion (Mellifont, 2023). Higher educational leadership and educator mindsets have been found to be deeply influenced by the deficit model causing tokenism and shallow inclusive practices (Moriña & Carnerero, 2022).

Research critiquing the strengths-based approach interestingly found a gap between institutional rhetoric and actual neurodiverse student needs (Quigley et al., 2024). This extensive research discovered that the existence of superficial inclusion was masked as progressive reform (Quigley et al., 2024). Furthermore, the existing resources are based on the assumptions of neurotypicals instead of listening to autistic individuals and their unique needs and providing sufficient and not superficial accommodations (Quigley et al., 2024).

To authentically promote inclusivity and eliminate tokenism, pedagogical inclusivity needs to be based on relational practice and reflexivity integrating learner agency, individualized support and multimodal instruction (Ker & van Gorp, 2023). Not only is there a gap between institutional design and lived experiences of neurodiverse students but there are significant detrimental psychological effects caused by tokenistic inclusivity and not structural change (Mineo et al., 2022).

Further research found that evidence-based practices can lead to exclusion if not based and integrated with reflexivity (Padden & James, 2023). It is vital to stop over relying on accommodations, instead promote and implement systemic change by incorporating the voices of autistic individuals (Padden & James, 2023). Neurodivergent staff have experienced hostile academic cultures due to superficial inclusion at the institutional level (Pearson & McLaughlin, 2023). Furthermore, current diversity practices have been shown to insufficiently protect staff from discrimination and structural ableism (Pearson & McLaughlin, 2023).

Superficial educational inclusivity practices are affected by semantics, and it is important to understand how language and framing can move practice from superficial and tokenistic to truly inclusive by moving away from deficit-based language and into strength-based semantics (Cierzniewska & Podgórska-Jachnik, 2021). Furthermore, mental and semantic transformations in educator's perspectives and understanding of neurodiverse students is the foundation to eliminating ableism in current educational models (Cierzniewska & Podgórska-Jachnik, 2021).

A study that surveyed 99 universities in the United Kingdom found that institutions were not meeting the legal and ethical standards in supporting neurodiverse students (Chown et al., 2018). This research exemplifies superficial inclusion and tokenism in higher educational institutions by examining structural, pedagogical, institutional and cultural issues in promoting sufficient resources to neurodivergent individuals, acknowledging them and their unique needs and promoting their wellbeing (Chown et al., 2018).

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How can higher education institutions be seen as beacons of hope for inclusive ecosystemic transformation when they are riddled with discrimination, hostility, tokenism and superficial inclusion. This section addressed the many issues within higher educational normative inclusive epistemologies and practices. Perhaps, the inclusive leadership paradigm on its own is insufficient in addressing the unique needs of neurodiverse individuals? The next section will examine Critical Autism Studies as a true beacon of hope for neuroinclusive transformation in higher educational institutions.

4 | Critical Autism Studies Analysis

Beyond inclusive leadership models, what paradigms offer a holistic autism-centered approach in promoting neuro-inclusivity in higher educational institutions? The emergence of the Critical Autism Studies in the 2010's offered a transformative model to change outdated epistemological and practical approaches in supporting, understanding and celebrating neurodiverse individuals. Critical Autism studies is an interdisciplinary approach rejecting the pathologizing medical and deficit models and reframing autism not as a disease but a socially and politically constructed identity that is molded by cultural, institutional and historic factors (O'Dell et al., 2016; Milton, 2016).

Critical Autism Studies examines the "constraints of social environment, structures and cultures" and brings focus to the social construction, norms and factors that affect not only the definition and pathology of autism but the wellbeing of autistic individuals (Milton & Ryan, 2023, p.3). The three main elements of the Critical Autism Studies approach are:

- 1. Careful attention to the ways in which power relations shape the field of autism.*
- 2. Concern to advance new, enabling narratives of autism that challenge the predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy, and popular culture.*
- 3. Commitment to develop new analytical frameworks using inclusive and nonreductive methodological and theoretical approaches to study the nature and culture of autism. The interdisciplinary research required (particularly in the social sciences and humanities) demands sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic complexity of this highly individualized, relational (dis)order (Orsini & Davidson, 2013, p. 12).*

Is this framework more effective in understanding the issues that neurodiverse individuals experience in higher education and can it be used as a blueprint in promoting cultural, curricular, political change to transform higher education environments into truly neuroinclusive spaces? Critical Autism Studies or CAS insists that institutions move beyond normative inclusivity practices like assimilation and instead adopt decolonial, justice-oriented frameworks that demolish ableism (Elmadagli, 2023).

This framework justifies the need for leadership models to prioritize intersectionality and authentic identity and belonging over superficial inclusive check the box practices (Lopez, 2022). Research utilizing Critical Autism Studies demonstrates how the impact of environmental validation supersedes internal traits, rejecting the deficit-based model and calling for the eradication of behavioral normalization (Davies et al., 2024). Further research critiques superficial inclusivity in higher educational settings and insists that inclusive leadership mirrors the complex, lived realities of neurodiverse individuals (Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2021).

It is vital to perceive and celebrate neurodiverse identity as a way of being and not a pathology to correct (Milton, 2016). There are significant issues in top-down inclusive leadership models that not only force neurodiverse individuals to assimilate into neurotypical norms but also blame the neurodiverse individual and not the institutional cultural systems that are truly responsible (Milton, 2016).

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Epistemic justice and the need for neurodiverse individuals to be included in the creation of this framework is at the foundation of Critical Autism Studies (O'Dell et al., 2016). The foundational research of O'Dell et al. (2016) created a framework for institutional transformation in higher education from a deficit model to institutional structural realignment and cultural responsibility.

Further research utilizing CAS found that institutional support services significantly fail short due to neurotypical bias and not including neurodiverse individuals in decision making which shows a pitfall in current inclusive institutions (Lam, 2020). There needs to be a shift beyond current inclusive practices that promotes the supported autonomy that is co-designed with neurodiverse stakeholders to dismantle institutional ableism that is portrayed as empowerment (Arnold, 2019).

Critical Autism Studies is an actionable, community driven model of transformation that institutions need to employ to promote an institutional culture of co-production and to center on neurodiverse individuals' involvement in leadership, academic research and policy changes (Woods et al., 2018). The researchers call for the reformation of CAS to a framework that is co-produced, reflexive, intersectional and actively resisting ableism within the academic institutions (Woods et al., 2018). The advocacy for the co-production of not only this framework, but knowledge is at the center of reframing normative inclusive practices and the original epistemological framework of CAS (Woods et al., 2018).

In higher educational institutions, it is vital to incorporate a participatory and non-tokenistic approach to autistic agency and decision-making (Parsons et al., 2020). The community driven participatory approach which dismisses the deficit medical models calls for the need of social inclusion and understanding of sensory needs (Parsons et al., 2020). Further CAS based research critiques normative neurotypical led epistemologies and demands truly emancipatory research (Beardon et al., 2017). This research insists on the ownership of autism inclusive research by the autistic community and calls for the inclusion of autistic voices and experiences in the formation of paradigms (Beardon et al., 2017).

A review of rhetoric in autism awareness found that there are significant dangers in symbolic inclusion which are not based on real lived experiences and voices of neurodiverse individuals (Nieto et al., 2022). Furthermore, they expose exclusion masked as inclusion and insist on autistic self-representation in places of decision making to enact autism centered changes (Nieto et al., 2022). Critical Autism Studies call for the dismantling of normative inclusive leadership models that reinforce privilege and exclude neurodiverse voices (Nieto et al., 2022).

Critical Autism Studies encourages higher education institutions to enact structural support systems including environments of psychological safety, diversity climate and inclusive hiring processes (Austin & Pisano, 2017). This research reframes leadership paradigms from individual accommodations to institutional transformation while emphasizing the strengths-based approach (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

The research in this section has examined the epistemological foundations of Critical Autism Studies and its capacity to enact transformational change in the lives of neurodiverse individuals in higher educational spaces. The research confounds the applicability and necessity of integrating this paradigm into not only further research but cultural, individual and institutional lenses to create truly inclusive environments for neurodiverse individuals.

5 | Conclusion

This paper examined the many systemic barriers and challenges that neurodiverse individuals face in higher educational institutions. Afterwards, normative inclusive leadership paradigms were investigated in their scope to address the unique needs of neurodiverse individuals. The research suggested that normative inclusive leadership models alone are insufficient to promote and sustain inclusive ecosystemic transformation and are riddled with inherent problems like tokenism and ableism. Afterward, Critical Autism Studies was examined to elucidate its capacity to transform higher educational institutions towards true neuro-inclusivity.

Critical Autism Studies is an emancipatory epistemology which dismantles the normative inclusive approaches in higher educational institutions. It calls for the dismantling of the medical deficit model which spurs exclusion and marginalization through false inclusive practices including tokenism

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and lack of ethical and sufficient support services. This theory calls for a cultural shift in viewing neurodiverse individuals in a strength-based approach instead of blaming neurodiverse individuals for systemic failures. CAS demands the inclusion of autistic individuals in the creation of not only Critical Autism Studies but also research, academic involvement and policy making.

A higher educational ecosystem cannot be truly neuroinclusive if its practices are masked by superficial inclusivity and exclude and marginalize neurodiverse individuals. That is why it is imperative to change the culture of higher educational institutions to have true neuro-inclusivity by creating a neurodiverse culture, psychological safety and belonging and viewing neurodiversity as a human variation and not a disease to be treated. Furthermore, it is vital to celebrate the identity, culture, and contributions of neurodiverse individuals. This paradigm also calls for a deconstruction of colonialist norms entrenched in normative inclusive practices.

Through an anti-oppression lens, it provides a framework to examine ableism, stigma, systemic barriers and the exclusion and marginalization of neurodiverse individuals. Through the research examination, this theory has been found to have a more holistic epistemological and practical capacity to enact inclusive ecosystemic transformation in higher education institutions. Let us deconstruct our own paradigms, how we view neurodiverse individuals, how that reinforces marginalization and take agency in transforming ourselves through this critical lens and engaging in research with neurodiverse individuals to promote true transformation and empowerment of the neurodiverse community.

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