

Towards neurodiversity-affirming practice in ABA schools

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Abstract

Purpose – *In recent years, growing recognition of neurodivergence has prompted a substantive reorientation in educational theory and practice. This paper aims to examine how some applied behaviour analysis (ABA) schools in the UK are beginning to position themselves within this wider shift towards educational approaches that affirm and accommodate neurodiversity.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Longstanding components of the ABA model are identified that align closely with neurodiversity-affirming principles. In addition, more recent refinements are described, including increased attention to the recognition of assent withdrawal behaviours, adaptations to early instructional programming, a deeper understanding of self-regulatory behaviours and a strengthened emphasis on the use of less intrusive prompting strategies.*

Findings – *This reflective paper summarises changes that have been made to practice in recent years, along with recommended strategies to ensure these changes are embedded and sustained within the school culture. These recommendations include the revision of school policies, a comprehensive review of the staff training programme and the creation of guidance documents to accompany published resources that are not fully neuro-affirming. It is noted that the process of embedding neurodiversity-affirming practice in an ABA school is a continuous and evolving process.*

Originality/value – *It is essential for all educational settings to critically reflect on their practice and identify where adjustments are required to ensure provision affirms neurodiversity and effectively supports the diverse learners within the school community.*

Keywords Behaviour analysis in schools, Neuro-affirming practice, Inclusion, Neurodiversity, Compassionate ABA, Reflective practice

Paper type General review

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Introduction

Author positionality

The first author is Director of Education and Co-Headteacher of Jigsaw CABAS School, an applied behaviour analysis (ABA) specialist school in Surrey for 80 autistic children who also have a moderate to severe learning disability and significant language and communication needs. She also serves as Chair of the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis Special Interest Group “Behaviour Analysis in Schools”. The second author is the Chief Executive Officer of the Jigsaw Trust and a Board Member of the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis. Both authors hold senior leadership roles within an ABA school and are actively involved with the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis. They therefore write from a practitioner-leadership perspective.

Affirming neurodiversity

In recent years, educational practice has undergone a notable shift as understanding of neurodivergence has deepened and become more widely accepted. Researchers have increasingly highlighted the importance of designing school environments that actively

support neurodivergent learners (e.g. [Rajotte et al., 2025](#)). This shift is evident across mainstream and special settings alike, where there is growing emphasis on individualised provision, authentic inclusion and the recognition of learner strengths rather than attempts to remediate differences. In the UK specifically, this broader cultural movement is reflected in the [UK Society for Behaviour Analysis, 2024 UK Society for Behaviour Analysis \(2024\)](#), which states that “Registrants respect and value neurodivergent identities. Registrants advocate for acceptance and understanding of neurodiversity” (p. 5). Such guidance underscores the profession’s commitment to practice that affirms neurodivergent identities and promotes environments in which all learners thrive.

While this paper adopts a deliberately constructive and practical focus, it is important to acknowledge that ABA has been the subject of much criticism from neurodivergent self-advocates and academics, particularly in relation to historical practices that prioritised normalisation, compliance and behaviour suppression over well-being and autonomy ([Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020](#); [Kenny et al., 2016](#)). These critiques are not solely historical, but continue to inform contemporary debates surrounding the ethical application of ABA-based approaches within education. As [Mathur et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasise, affirming neurodiversity within ABA requires ongoing reflection, adaptation and openness to change. Efforts to embed neuro-affirming practice within ABA schools in the UK must be recognised as incomplete and continually evolving. This is an ongoing process of reflection, adaptation and cultural change, requiring sustained commitment, transparency and willingness to revise practice in response to emerging evidence and lived experience. The intention of this paper is therefore not to present ABA schools in the UK as inherently or automatically neuro-affirming, but to describe specific areas in which some ABA schools are actively working to align practice with neurodiversity-affirming principles, alongside recognition that this work remains complex and evolving.

Within ABA schools, there are longstanding components which already align closely with practices that affirm neurodiversity. Each learner receives an individualised curriculum based on a comprehensive assessment. Behaviour reduction is conceptualised as a natural outcome of effective, developmentally appropriate teaching, rather than a primary objective in itself. Additional refinements have been introduced more recently to ensure teaching practice explicitly affirms neurodivergent identities, while it remains evidence-based. These refinements need to be systematically embedded within school policies and staff training programmes to promote consistency, sustainability and meaningful cultural change across each organisation. As research accumulates, the ABA schooling model continues to organically evolve, ensuring that practice remains aligned with emerging empirical findings and that recommendations from the literature can meaningfully shape system-wide developments. A central message of this paper is that all recommendations presented are subject to ongoing evaluation, with learner data determining whether they are effective in practice. What proves successful for one learner may not necessarily be effective for another, and this principle underpins the adaptive and individualised nature of the model. This theme is revisited throughout the paper. The paper begins with an overview of the established components of the ABA schooling model that affirm neurodiversity, followed by a description of the additional refinements implemented more recently in some ABA schools in the UK.

Established components

Individualised curriculum

Each learner within an ABA school setting has an individualised curriculum and additional behaviour support plans which are informed by a comprehensive assessment [e.g. the assessment of basic language and learning skills-revised (ABLLS-revised) ([Partington, 2008](#)); the early learner curriculum and achievement record (ELCAR) ([Greer et al., 2023](#))]. This ensures that instructional targets are tailored to each learner’s unique learning history, strengths, interests and needs. Data-driven decisions are made when planning curriculum, and teaching programmes are designed not only to increase academic and functional skills

but also to build on strengths and promote well-being, confidence and self-esteem. There is emphasis on ensuring that individualised targets are appropriately calibrated to each learner's current level of attainment. When targets are both ambitious and attainable, they promote successful outcomes and enable consistent access to positive reinforcement, thereby strengthening engagement and supporting sustained learning. This focus on the individual is a significant neuro-affirming and inclusive aspect of the ABA schooling model. A more detailed consideration of the individualised curriculum and how it is measured falls beyond the scope of this paper [see [Hawkins and Grant \(2026\)](#) for further discussion in one ABA school].

Supporting behaviours that challenge

It was stated earlier that in ABA schools, behaviour reduction is conceptualised as a natural outcome of effective, developmentally appropriate teaching, rather than a primary objective in itself. This represents a neuro-affirming aspect of the model and aligns with other support models including the multi-element behaviour support model (MEBS; [LaVigna and Willis, 2005](#)). While not widely implemented within ABA schools, the MEBS model provides a useful conceptual comparison. MEBS is a structured, formal and comprehensive framework for delivering positive behaviour support. The primary objective of the MEBS model is to increase quality of life with behaviour reduction viewed as a by-product of the application of the MEBS model. The goal and focus of MEBS is not on reducing behaviours, but instead it sees the whole person and what is important to them personally from a broad quality of life-based perspective. The same argument stands true for ABA schools. The ABA schooling model does not focus on behaviour reduction, but on teaching and curriculum design. If the curriculum is set at the right level for individual learners and they are coming into contact with positive reinforcement for learning then a reduction in behaviours that challenge is simply a by-product of the model.

More recent refinements

The refinements described in this section are informed by a combination of published literature and professional dialogue with the UK ABA community. Many of the ABA schools in the UK conduct research and share findings either at conferences or in publications (e.g. [Hawkins et al., 2011](#); [Hewett and Hawkins, 2023](#); [Locke and Fennell, 2024](#); [Reeder and Wilkinson, 2026](#); [Rizos et al., 2025](#); [Vostanis et al., 2021](#)). Research findings support with how practice within ABA schools evolves in response to emerging evidence and shifts in professional practice. Most research projects use single case experimental designs to evaluate the effects of specific instructional tactics on individual learner's rate of learning. Some studies use more rigorous experimental designs, such as multiple baseline or changing criterion designs. This research-driven approach enables staff to make meaningful contributions to the ongoing development of the ABA schooling model as educational practice continues to evolve. It also provides teachers with the flexibility to implement a range of behaviour analytic tactics using moment-to-moment data to evaluate their impact and make timely adaptations. Teachers work within multidisciplinary teams and routinely assess the effectiveness of non-behaviour analytic strategies or newer conceptual strategies. In this way, the teaching practice and delivery model continue to be adapted. Over the past few years, this has included updates to the terminology used within some schools, the incorporation of assent-based learning and related strategies, a review of the school's early instructional programming, how self-regulatory behaviour is addressed in some settings and an evaluation of the use of physical prompting.

Terminology

[Mathur et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasised the importance of practitioners using accurate and respectful language when describing the individuals they support, and the different strategies used to assist them. In line with research indicating that identity-first language (e.g. "autistic child") is

generally preferred over person-first language (e.g. “child with autism;” [Kenny et al., 2016](#)), it is recommended that all organisational documentation is updated to reflect identity-first terminology. Furthermore, it would be beneficial if this guidance forms a core component of the staff induction programme, ensuring that all staff understand how to talk about and write about individuals in a manner that aligns with neuro-affirming principles.

Alongside this, it is recommended that staff receive training on broader terminology considerations, such as referring to a tactic or strategy as an intervention rather than a treatment. A school's staff induction programme should include information about the social model versus medical model of disability ([Oliver, 1983](#)). This supports a shared understanding of why language matters and how it shapes perceptions. Emphasis is placed on describing differences rather than deficits, and encouraging staff to adopt a strengths-based perspective when discussing learners. This shift is accompanied by a move away from describing behaviours as appropriate or inappropriate, instead focusing on context, function and learner well-being.

It is recommended that rationales are provided throughout training to ensure staff understand the significance of neuro-affirming terminology. For example, [Bottema-Beutel et al. \(2020\)](#) highlight that identity-first language helps avoid ableist framing and influences how society conceptualises autism. Organisations therefore need to recognise their responsibility to model language that promotes acceptance and supports a more inclusive societal narrative. This includes adopting terminology preferred by the neurodivergent community, such as using the term “focused interests” rather than “special interests”, a subtle, but meaningful shift. Learner, parent/carer and staff preference should be considered to support with the decisions around terminology, along with research outcomes. While change to language alone cannot transform practice, it represents an important early step in creating a culture that genuinely affirms neurodiversity.

The school environment

[Rajotte et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that many neurodivergent children experience barriers in school that affect their engagement and general participation in the school environment. They outline nine desirable features of a school environment that contribute to a neuro-inclusive educational setting. Reviewing these features provides a valuable starting point for schools seeking to create environments that affirm and support neurodivergent learners. [Table 1](#) summarises each recommendation alongside practical examples of implementation, with particular consideration given to the needs of specialist settings. It is recommended that embedding these features within teacher observations, environmental audits and wider quality assurance processes helps ensure that neuro-inclusive practices are consistently maintained and meaningfully integrated across the school.

Assent-based learning and assent withdrawal behaviours

There has been an increased focus on the importance of assent-based learning, and this forms a significant component of the staff training programme within many ABA schools. This is reflected in the UK context with the UK Society's Code of Ethical and Professional Conduct stating that “Registrants prioritise client assent” and “Registrants continuously monitor assent for procedures, and make changes when clients communicate, verbally or otherwise, that they do not assent to a procedure” (p. 7). Many of the practical recommendations incorporated into current practice in many ABA schools are drawn from [Breux and Smith \(2023\)](#). These recommendations can be included within organisational policies, such as those related to behaviour management, as well as within the staff training programme. Staff need to be supported to develop a clear understanding of behaviours that indicate assent (for example, smiling, looking, active engagement, reaching for the teacher, ready cooperation) and those that indicate assent withdrawal (for example, physical behaviours that challenge,

Table 1 Nine desirable features of a neuro-inclusive school environment to ensure it is neuro-inclusive (Rajotte *et al.*, 2025) with observable practice examples

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Observable example in practice</i>
Celebrate neurodiversity	■ Integrate neurodiversity-affirming content into curriculum planning by identifying at least one explicit learning objective per term that addresses neurodiversity (e.g. identifying different communication methods or different learning styles) ■ Embed neurodiversity awareness within staff training programme by including a minimum of one neurodiversity-focused training session per academic year, with attendance recorded and training materials shared and archived
Provide a safe and caring space	■ Maintain high staff-to-learner ratios, as per the learner's EHCP, with consistent staff assigned to learners ■ Provide learners with scheduled opportunities at least once per month to express preferences or concerns to ensure learners feel confident about sharing their thoughts and ideas with staff ■ Provide established structured opportunities for learner voice (e.g. agenda-led school council meetings with minutes shared and archived) ■ Deliver emotional literacy support by trained ELSAs; document sessions and learner outcomes in intervention logs
Ensure the environment is free from excessive stimuli	■ Maintain tidy and organised classrooms by providing classrooms with a standardised organisation checklist, reviewed weekly, specifying location of materials and storage ■ Reduce unnecessary visual stimuli on desks and walls by limiting to curriculum-relevant materials currently in use ■ Ensure availability of at least one designated low-arousal area per classroom or key stage, defined by reduced lighting, minimal visual displays and limited noise
Provide appropriate visual supports	■ Ensure use of visual transition supports (e.g. now and next boards) during every scheduled transition and ensure they are visually updated as required ■ Display daily visual timetables at learner eye level and modify immediately when changes to routine occurs
Have clearly defined spaces	■ Physically mark classroom areas (e.g. reading corner, computer suite) using consistent visual boundaries (e.g. mats, shelving, floor markings), with each area labelled using text and symbols
Harness passions and strengths	■ Identify individual learner interests via preference assessments conducted at least monthly ■ Reference identified interests in written lesson plans and incorporate into teaching materials or task themes at least once per week
Offer a variety of options	■ Conduct preference assessments (to identify objects and activities that may function as reinforcement and to select interventions) at intake and review at least monthly, with results documented ■ Offer learners a minimum of two choices (e.g. task order, materials, seating) during instructional sessions, with choices recorded in session data
Create a predictable and structured environment	■ Display daily schedules and ensure they are followed with documented routines for each activity ■ Ensure staff assignments remain consistent across the week, with changes communicated to learners in advance using visual and/or verbal prompts ■ Ensure routine adherence is monitored through fidelity checklists completed at least monthly
Incorporate stimulating and restorative activities	■ Include scheduled movement and quiet activities on timetables at predefined intervals (e.g. every 45–90 min) ■ Teach learners an explicit communication method (e.g. written text, AAC icon, verbal request) to request movement or quiet breaks; ensure requests are honoured and logged according to individual plans

verbal behaviours that challenge, self-injurious behaviour, leaving the table/classroom, turning away, pushing materials away, crying, inattention, grumbling). This content should form a key part of induction training which is revisited regularly through scheduled class meetings to ensure that information remains current within learner behaviour support plans and is continually reviewed with the staff team. Recognising and responding to assent withdrawal behaviours requires high levels of professional judgement and consistency and remains an area where implementation fidelity can vary across staff and settings. A continuous review of behaviour support plans with staff teams is recommended to help address this issue.

With regard to assent-based learning, staff need to be taught to recognise when escape-maintained behaviour is acting as communication, how to replace behaviours using functional communication training and how to adapt the learning environment and contingencies to elicit more assent behaviours. This process needs to be monitored so that escape-maintained

behaviours are ultimately replaced with a request of some kind and not just reinforced. Several approaches from the literature have been adapted for inclusion in the staff training programme, including kind extinction ([Tarbox et al., 2023](#)), strategic capitulation ([LaVigna and Willis, 2005](#)) and more neuro-affirming applications of ignoring strategies ([Lloveras et al., 2023](#)).

[Tarbox et al. \(2023\)](#) discussed the use of extinction and questioned whether an extinction burst is ethical for the learner due to the increased upset and trauma caused. They highlighted the need for practitioners to prioritise least restrictive procedures and consider excluding extinction from behavioural intervention packages where possible. In situations where a behaviour presents a risk of harm and extinction cannot be fully avoided, adaptations to the procedure are recommended. Within the staff training programme in many ABA schools, it is recommended that if extinction does not need to be included in a behavioural intervention package, then it should not be included. If extinction is required, however, then an adaptation to the procedure, known as kind extinction ([Tarbox et al., 2023](#)), is recommended. Kind extinction involves offering authentic comfort and positive regard to the learner while still implementing extinction. Many staff training programmes include textbook descriptions of extinction (e.g. [Cooper et al., 2020](#)), so it is important that [Tarbox et al. \(2023\)](#) is also included as reading material to ensure staff are aware of the adapted kind extinction approach. This ensures the staff team are knowledgeable about both traditional and adapted approaches and are equipped to make ethically informed decisions in practice.

Strategic capitulation is a non-aversive reactive strategy for crisis management ([LaVigna and Willis, 2005](#)). It involves the provision of an identified reinforcer to prevent an escalation in behaviours that challenge. It is counter-intuitive to “give in” and give the learner what they want, but the function is to reduce episodic severity in the moment. As with kind extinction, strategic capitulation should be included in the staff training programme as there is little published information about it within the ABA textbooks.

The concept of “ignoring” has been challenged in a recent conceptual paper ([Lloveras et al., 2023](#)) in terms of it not always being the most appropriate strategy to use and, if it is, then to be more specific about what ignoring involves. These recommendations can also be incorporated into an organisation's policies and staff training programme. As with kind extinction, the staff training programme could be updated to include [Lloveras et al. \(2023\)](#) as a required reading.

At present, there is limited published research demonstrating the positive impact of assent-based learning, kind extinction, strategic capitulation, or the recommendations surrounding the use of ignoring. While these recommended changes in practice are motivated by ethical concerns and alignment with neuro-affirming principles, there is a risk to the scientific integrity of the field if such strategies are adopted uncritically or without sufficient procedural specification. Behaviour analytic practice is dependent upon interventions being both technologically defined and empirically validated, and without clear operation definitions, strategies may be implemented inconsistently, or attributed effects that are not reliably demonstrated. Consequently, it is the responsibility of staff to determine the effectiveness of each strategy with individual learners. When a new procedure is implemented, data are collected to determine whether the procedure is impactful. If the data show that it is not effective, the procedure must be adapted accordingly. Reliance on internal evaluation alone is insufficient, however, to advance the field. There remains a clear need for behaviour analysts to disseminate findings through conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications, ensuring that emerging practices are described in sufficient technological detail to allow replication and empirical scrutiny across settings. In this way, ethically motivated refinements to practice can be safeguarded against drift and incorporated into the evidence base, supporting their adoption by other organisations while maintaining scientific rigour.

This data-guided decision-making can be illustrated by the recommendations of [Lloveras et al. \(2023\)](#) who emphasise accounting for consumer preference when selecting interventions. For example, a teacher may determine that attention should not be provided following a specific behaviour, whereas a parent may request that a consequence is delivered because they feel it is important to signal that the behaviour is unsafe. Parent preference can be incorporated into a behaviour plan provided that it does not negatively affect the learner. Data should be collected on the frequency of the behaviour. If the behaviour increases, this indicates that providing the consequence is reinforcing the behaviour. If, however, there is no increase in the behaviour then there is no reason why a consequence cannot be implemented as requested by the parent.

Early instructional programming

Many traditional ABA programmes used to focus on prerequisite skills for learning such as eye contact and sitting still. These targets are seen within many assessment tools, including the assessment of basic language and learning skills - revised (ABLLS-R) ([Partington, 2008](#)), the early learner curriculum and achievement record (ELCAR) ([Greer et al., 2023](#)), the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM; [Rogers and Dawson, 2010](#)) and the verbal behavior milestones assessment and placement program (VB-MAPP) ([Sundberg, 2008](#)). A learner needs to be able to look at classroom materials or their teacher or their peers to learn new skills, but eye contact is not essential. There has been a general movement towards accepting that eye contact is not always necessary in a range of situations, such as during interviews and when engaging in conversation. This is because of some individuals reporting that giving eye contact can be uncomfortable. It is no longer considered rude or unprofessional if individuals do not give eye contact. The focus for early instructional programming in many ABA schools has moved towards generalised imitation skills and discrimination skills (ideally listening, but otherwise with the support of visual prompts) instead of eye contact. Rather than not using the assessments listed earlier, as they include some targets that are not neuro-affirming, it is recommended that a guidance document is developed to accompany the assessment and to clarify which targets are and are not addressed in practice. Similar guidance documents can be provided for all assessments in which historical terminology or targets do not reflect neuro-affirming approaches.

Self-regulatory behaviour

Part of the curriculum in some ABA schools focuses on expanding a learner's community of reinforcers. This is related to how learners fill their free time and is an important aspect for developing independence. Research has demonstrated much success in this area using conditioning and conjugate reinforcement to increase engagement with different toys or books (e.g. [Tsai and Greer, 2006](#)). Some of this research has also focused on reducing self-regulatory behaviour as well as increasing engagement with toys or books (e.g. [Nuzzolo-Gomez et al., 2002](#)).

In March 2024, the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis published an updated code of ethical and professional conduct. Section 1.4 of the code states: "Registrants do not support efforts to suppress self-regulatory behaviours except in rare cases when the behaviour poses harm or a significant risk to wellbeing". This updated guidance led to a review of the implementation of programmes designed to expand learners' community of reinforcers within the school setting. Accompanying guidance now clarifies that teachers should focus solely on whether the learner looked at the book or played with the toy (recorded as a simple + or –). If a learner taps the book while looking at it, or rocks occasionally while completing a puzzle, these behaviours are accepted as part of a correct response. Some self-regulatory behaviours may naturally decrease as a by-

product of the process, particularly where they are incompatible with the target behaviour, but this reduction is not the instructional objective.

Use of physical prompting

There is much evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of physical prompting to increase a number of different skills (e.g. playing with toys ([Hanley et al., 2000](#)), using sign language ([Conaghan et al., 1992](#)), using dumbbells to exercise ([Cooper and Browder, 1997](#)), teeth brushing ([Horner and Keilitz, 1975](#)) and learning to leave the home upon hearing the fire alarm ([Bannerman et al., 1991](#))). It is recognised within the behaviour analytic literature (e.g. [Cooper et al., 2020](#)) that physical prompting is more intrusive than other types of prompts such as verbal instructions and providing a teacher model. It is also recognised that it is not a suitable prompt for all learners as some resist physical touch. In many ABA schools, the use of the least restrictive prompt is the main guidance that the staff team are provided with, along with the recommendation that if physical prompting is required then they could use hand under hand prompting rather than hand over hand prompting. Hand under hand prompting is less intrusive and is simply the act of the practitioner placing their hand under the learner's hand to allow the learner more control and influence over their movement. This type of prompting means that the learner can move their hands at will as the prompter is not manipulating the learner's hands. This shift in guidance for the staff team in some ABA schools is based on ethical considerations and a collective decision informed by changing attitudes. Ongoing data collection with individual learners will determine the effectiveness of this type of prompting.

Conclusions

Educational practice does not stand still, and shifting societal perspectives on neurodiversity continue to reshape expectations of what inclusive and ethical provision should look like. This paper has not sought to evaluate outcomes or to promote a single educational model, but rather to offer a reflective, practice-focused account of how some ABA schools in the UK are critically examining and adapting established practices in response to evolving ethical guidance, emerging evidence and neurodivergent perspectives. As opinions evolve, policy frameworks inevitably follow suit. For example, [Ofsted \(2025\)](#) published an updated inspection framework placing a strengthened emphasis on inclusion throughout its inspection criteria. Schools in England are now required to demonstrate that they effectively support learners who face barriers to their learning. The discussion presented in this paper provides substantive evidence aligned with these expectations. The revised framework's recognition of the importance of an individualised curriculum and tailored support plans, informed by comprehensive assessment, represents a significant and welcome development. Furthermore, the explicit endorsement of neuro-affirming practice within education settings signals an important shift in policy. Collectively, these developments have the potential to support schools in taking further steps towards embedding and affirming neurodiversity within their institutional cultures and pedagogical approaches. This shift in direction is strongly supported by the UK Society for Behaviour Analysis. To emphasise this point, there is a new requirement that some of the continuing professional development for maintaining UK Society for Behaviour Analysis qualifications is linked to equality, diversity and inclusion.

In such a dynamic landscape, schools must be prepared to adapt, and systems of practice need to be sufficiently flexible to evolve alongside emerging research and changing expectations. ABA schools are data-driven schools that support this responsiveness by embedding continual learning into staff development. Practitioners are encouraged to remain engaged with contemporary research, and their progression through each school's staff training programme reflects their capacity to integrate new knowledge into daily practice. Senior leaders can further reinforce this adaptability by updating guidance

materials, refreshing training content and ensuring that readings on neurodiversity and neuro-affirming practice reflect current thinking.

A limitation of this paper is the limited availability of published resources supporting the recent refinements in practice described. These developments are informed primarily by anecdotal discussions with other ABA schools and their senior leadership teams. One ABA school provides a more explicit account of updated practice, outlining its neuro-affirming approach on its website ([Step by Step School, 2026](#)); however, many others have yet to do so. Greater transparency in this area would be beneficial for prospective families and other stakeholders. Although a systematic survey of ABA schools in the UK was beyond the scope of this paper, such work represents an important direction for future research. In particular, there is a need both for empirical investigation into the extent of neuro-affirming practice across ABA schools and for schools to more clearly articulate these approaches in publicly available information.

In conclusion, working within an evidence-based model designed to evolve, alongside policy shifts and evolving professional understanding, provides a robust and responsive framework for improving educational outcomes. Neuro-affirming practice requires more than procedural adjustments, however; it demands sustained cultural change, ethical vigilance and a commitment to listening to the neurodivergent community as systems continue to evolve. In this way, affirming neurodiversity within ABA schooling is best understood not as an endpoint, but as an ongoing, data-informed and ethically grounded process of reflection and change.

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