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INCLUSION, DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING OF NEUROATYPICAL INDIVIDUALS THROUGH ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES: A BOON OR A BANE? A NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:
This article investigates the potential of alternative educational approaches, such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, unschooling, forest schools, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), to support the inclusion, development, and well-being of neuroatypical learners, particularly autistic and ADHD children, within Francophone education systems. Based on a narrative literature review methodology, the study explores theoretical foundations in developmental psychology, identifies key educational challenges faced by neuroatypical students, and examines how these pedagogies address their cognitive and developmental diversity. Findings reveal that while these alternative pedagogies offer promising pathways for fostering autonomy, social participation, and emotional regulation, they remain under-researched, particularly in French-speaking contexts. Most available studies are situated in Anglophone environments, limiting their transferability. Moreover, educational systems in France, Switzerland, and Québec often frame inclusion as a secondary measure rather than a foundational principle, contributing to systemic barriers such as discrimination, stigmatization, exclusion, and inadequate support. The article calls for a paradigm shift toward inclusive education as a structural commitment and emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary empirical research to evaluate the real impact of these pedagogical models. It concludes by advocating for a deeper societal understanding of cognitive diversity and the implementation of education policies grounded in human rights, child development, and xenosophy, a deep knowledge of the Other.

Keywords: cognitive diversity, alternative education, Autism, ADHD, developmental psychology, neurodiversity, xenosophy, inclusion

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1. Introduction

The concepts of alterity (A) (Corbey & Leerssen, 1991; Wulf, 2016) and neurodiversity (N) are situated within a multidisciplinary field encompassing diverse definitions, debates, and practical perspectives. This field builds upon disciplines such as education, neurology, psychiatry, (evolutionary, cognitive and developmental) psychology, anthropology, and sociology. As such, several paradigms coexist, notably the medical model of disability, the social model, and the cognitive diversity (Horn, 1989; Stich, 1988) model (see Figure 1).

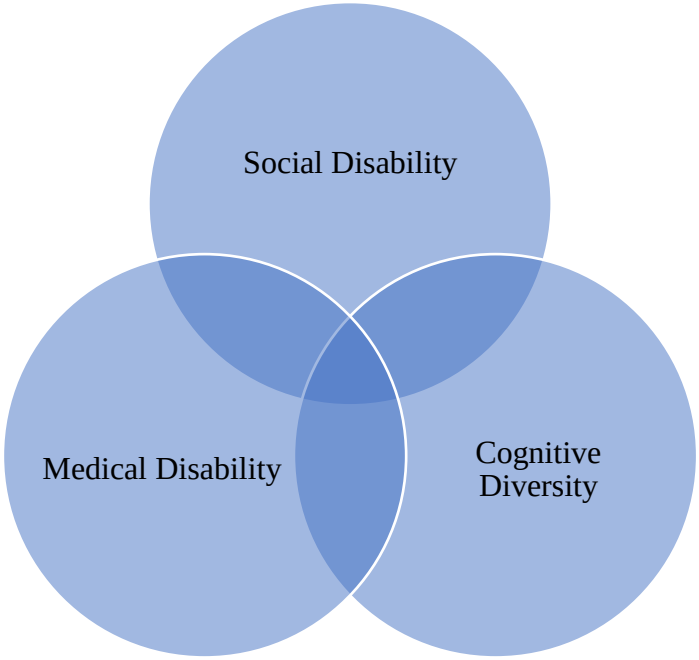

Figure 1: Key paradigms in the field of alterity (A) and neurodiversity research (N)

The concept of neurodiversity, coined and popularized by Judy Singer in her sociology thesis (1998), was not initially intended as a scientific term, but rather as a means to illuminate sociopolitical dynamics and the lived experiences of minority groups, particularly autistic individuals. By adopting the social model of disability, as formalized by the WHO in 2001, Singer challenged the dominant medical model, which associates disability with individual impairments requiring correction. In contrast, the social model locates the responsibility for inclusion within society and policy, even if this model retains the principle of individual impairments.

The definition of neurodiversity oscillates between neurobiological and anthropological approaches, describing a plurality of cognitive processes (e.g., language, perception, creativity) (Rebecchi, 2023), and a sociopolitical lens, which values neurocognitive human diversity and strengthens understanding of disability (Singer, 2019). For instance, autism is increasingly viewed as a developmental difference rather than a deficit (Rebecchi, 2022; Baron-Cohen, 2017; Mottron, 2024). This complementarity underscores the challenges and stakes involved in recognizing both the rights of disabled

individuals and the identification and validation of human neurobiological differences beyond the scope of disability.

These issues extend into the educational domain, raising questions about the integration of students in mainstream versus specialized settings, as well as political and scientific aspects related to employment (e.g., hiring discrimination, unemployment) and mental health (e.g., stigmatization, psychological distress, rejection), factors often interlinked with educational challenges. In Francophone educational contexts, specifically in Québec, the Canton of Vaud (Switzerland), and France, the education of neuroatypical individuals reveals multiple dimensions.

In Québec, the education of students considered at-risk, struggling, or disabled is tailored to their specific needs. At-risk students require rapid interventions to prevent academic or social failure. Students with learning difficulties, despite remedial measures, often struggle in core subjects such as language and mathematics. Those with behavioural disorders face significant adaptive challenges and require specialized support. Depending on individual needs, students may be placed in regular classrooms with support, in special classes, or in specialized schools providing targeted services (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2007).

In the Canton of Vaud, the schooling of students with disorders or impairments is governed by the Special Education Act (as of September 1, 2015). When a diagnosed disorder permanently impedes learning and conventional measures (e.g., academic support, accommodations) prove insufficient, the student may receive specialized instruction from trained teachers. Based upon decisions by the school or the General Directorate of Compulsory Education, this instruction may take place in either mainstream or specialized schools. Multidisciplinary teams develop individualized projects, including tailored programs and specific goals. Enhanced measures may also be implemented at home, in hospitals, or in transitional settings for vocational training (Canton de Vaud, 2015).

In France, the schooling of students with disabilities aims to ensure equitable access to quality education tailored to individual needs. These students may be integrated into mainstream classrooms with individualized support or into specialized programs outlined in a Personalized Education Plan developed by a multidisciplinary team, including representatives from the Departmental House for Persons with Disabilities. Specific training helps teachers manage diversity in the classroom and adapt their pedagogical practices. Among the available provisions are teaching units dedicated to children with particular needs (e.g., autism, sensory or motor impairments), offering appropriate support and resources to promote inclusion. Regulatory mechanisms, including strategies based on self-regulation and tailored accommodations, address the needs of children with behavioural disorders. Finally, Local Inclusion Support Centers coordinate with mainstream schools to provide individualized and adequate assistance (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2020).

In conclusion, the diversity of educational approaches for neuroatypical individuals in Francophone contexts such as Québec, the Canton of Vaud, and France

reflects the richness of efforts aimed at addressing their specific needs. These initiatives form part of a broader movement toward recognizing neurodiversity within society. Nevertheless, despite progress in inclusive educational policies and programs, challenges remain, particularly regarding access to resources, professional training, educational choice diversity, and public awareness. How, then, can alternative pedagogies be optimized and integrated into Francophone education systems to enhance inclusion and foster the development of neuroatypical individuals? This article hypothesizes that such educational approaches could play a key role in supporting the learning, well-being, and development of neuroatypical individuals, while promoting non-discrimination, personal development, and the best interests of the child, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), as well as the advancement of psychosocial and transversal competencies.

2. Material and Methods

This article seeks to address both the knowledge gap and knowledge void (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2014) within the field, that is, the notable scarcity, or even absence, of identified studies specifically examining alternative pedagogies as applied to neuroatypical individuals, particularly children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The exploration of alternative pedagogical models and their impact on the inclusion, development, and well-being of neuroatypical individuals represents a clear scientific void, necessitating an open and interdisciplinary methodological approach.

In response to this issue, I adopted a narrative literature review methodology, in line with the principles outlined by Grant and Booth (2009). Unlike systematic reviews, which rely on rigorous criteria for exhaustiveness, the narrative review allows for a flexible synthesis of theoretical and empirical insights gathered from diverse bodies of literature. This approach was chosen to accommodate the emerging and underexplored nature of the field and to integrate both developmental psychology theories and empirical research on the educational and cognitive trajectories of neuroatypical individuals.

2.1. Source identification and text selection

The sources consulted in this article were primarily identified using Google Scholar, by combining search queries tailored to the themes under investigation. Selection criteria included: direct relevance to ASD and/or ADHD; a focus on cognitive profiles, educational challenges, and alternative pedagogies; representation of varied geographic and cultural contexts; and the inclusion of diverse source types (peer-reviewed articles as well as master's and doctoral theses) to ensure a large perspective.

To ensure relevant and diverse coverage, several sets of keywords were used at different stages of the research process. For the section on cognitive and developmental diversity: *"ASD developmental trajectories"*, *"ADHD developmental trajectories"*, *"ASD*

cognitive profiles", and *"ADHD cognitive profiles"*. For the section on educational challenges faced by neuroatypical individuals: *"ASD + bullying"*, *"ASD + stigmatization"*, *"ASD + school experience"*, *"ADHD + discrimination"*, and other similar terms. For the section on alternative pedagogies: *"ASD + Montessori"*, *"ASD + Reggio Emilia"*, *"ADHD + universal design for learning"*, *"ASD + forest schools"*, *"ASD + outdoor education"*, among others.
These searches yielded a wide range of sources, each of which was reviewed for relevance to the research questions posed in this article.

2.2. Structure of the analysis

The analysis is organized into three main sections. In Section 3, I provide an overview of classical and contemporary theories in developmental psychology (Section 3.1) in order to contextualize the atypical trajectories of individuals with ASD and ADHD (Section 3.2). Information was extracted from the selected texts and used to highlight the variability of developmental and cognitive pathways.

The following section (Section 4) examines two distinct sub-themes: the school experiences of autistic students (Section 4.1), and ADHD students (Section 4.2). Section 5 explores specific educational approaches, differentiating between pedagogies initially developed for neuroatypical children (e.g., Montessori, Decroly, and outdoor education) (Section 5.1), and those conceived from the outset as universally inclusive (e.g., Reggio Emilia, unschooling, and Universal Design for Learning) (Section 5.2).

2.3. Methodological limitations and justification

Given the limited number of empirical studies in this area, I opted for an exploratory and cross-disciplinary approach that combines theoretical and empirical elements. This methodology lays the groundwork for deeper inquiry and encourages future research. The flexibility of the narrative review proved especially appropriate in avoiding the exclusion of pioneering or marginal studies within this emerging field.

By synthesizing these findings, this article aims to highlight the potential of alternative pedagogies as tools for inclusion and development for neuroatypical individuals. It is situated within a critical perspective, seeking to demonstrate both the promise of these approaches in contemporary educational settings and the methodological limitations inherent in the current paucity of empirical research on the topic.

3. The diversity of cognitive and developmental profiles

This section is included to emphasize that neuroatypical individuals often exhibit cognitive profiles and developmental trajectories that differ significantly from those of neurotypical individuals, and from one another. For example, some autistic children may learn to read at the age of three, while others may not speak until the age of nine.

3.1. Overview of human development theories

In the study of human development, multiple theories coexist, sometimes in competition, but often in complementarity. For the purposes of this analysis, I focus briefly on two major theoretical frameworks: Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes a model of triadic reciprocal causation, highlighting the interactions and interdependencies among personal (cognitive, biological, emotional), environmental, and behavioral factors in individual development (Bandura, 1986). Bandura underscores the importance of social interaction and the individual's environment in shaping cognitive and behavioral development.

Conversely, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory offers a holistic perspective on development, considering the dynamic interplay between the growing individual and their environment. Bronfenbrenner defines human development as a process through which individuals acquire differentiated understanding of their environment and engage in activities that reveal, sustain, or restructure that environment across increasing levels of complexity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This ecological framework examines multiple nested systems, from the microsystem (immediate context) to the macrosystem (larger cultural and societal context), including the mesosystem (interactions among microsystems), the exosystem (indirect external influences), and the chronosystem (changes and continuities over time) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

These two theories provide complementary lenses through which to understand the diversity of cognitive and developmental profiles, particularly among individuals with ASD and ADHD. Bandura's model foregrounds the influence of social and environmental interactions in the development of cognitive and social skills, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach highlights how multiple contextual systems (and their interactions) shape human development over time. Together, these frameworks may serve as interesting tools for understanding developmental variability and identifying promising avenues for research and support tailored to autistic and ADHD individuals, accounting for the dynamic interplay between the individual and their sociocultural environment.

3.2. Cognitive and developmental diversity in autistic and ADHD individuals

Malhi and Singhi (2005) compared developmental profiles of autistic children with those of children experiencing developmental delays. Their findings revealed significant differences in motor and social skills, emphasizing the importance of appropriate tools to assess developmental stages. Similarly, Fernell *et al.* (2010) highlighted the wide variability in developmental patterns among young autistic children, underlining the need for personalized support. Barbaro and Dissanayake (2012), in a prospective study, confirmed this heterogeneity and advocated for individualized intervention approaches. Kantzer *et al.* (2013) observed differences in developmental outcomes based on pre-DSM-5 diagnostic categories (autistic disorder, atypical autism, and Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified) following community-based screenings. Joseph *et al.*

(2002) demonstrated significant variability in cognitive abilities among autistic children, with distinct associations between cognitive profiles and socio-communicative symptoms. Flor *et al.* (2017) further distinguished between "complex" autistic children (those with microcephaly and/or dysmorphology) and "essential" autistic children (without such characteristics), noting meaningful differences in cognitive functioning and medical comorbidities, emphasizing the relevance of such distinctions in educational assessment and support.

In the case of children with ADHD, Ahmadi *et al.* (2014) identified substantial differences among subtypes with regard to executive functions, particularly perseveration and response inhibition. Chhabildas *et al.* (2001) similarly linked inattentive symptoms to specific neuropsychological deficits, reinforcing the need to distinguish ADHD subtypes based upon cognitive profiles. Roberts *et al.* (2016) proposed the existence of distinct executive dysfunction subtypes within ADHD populations, illustrating the cognitive heterogeneity of the condition. Lastly, Salgado *et al.* (2009) found correlations between inattention and hyperactivity dimensions and different personality profiles, highlighting the complexity of cognitive and behavioral patterns in children with ADHD.

The diversity of cognitive and developmental profiles in individuals with ASD and ADHD underscores the importance of appropriate conceptual frameworks for effective support. These findings advocate for the need to move beyond generalized approaches in favor of individualized and context-sensitive strategies. The following section will address the educational challenges faced by autistic and ADHD individuals, and demonstrate how such knowledge can inform inclusive and personalized educational practices that enable neuroatypical learners to navigate within academic and social settings.

4. Educational challenges faced by neuroatypical individuals

This section highlights the fact that school curricula are often designed based on developmental psychology models tailored to neurotypical children. As a result, neuroatypical children are either relegated to special education programs (segregation) or expected to conform to traditional educational methods (integration), which can have harmful consequences such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

4.1. Autistic students

Saggers (2015) identifies several obstacles faced by autistic students, including excessive workload, stressful environments, inflexible teaching, lack of specialized support, and social stigma, all of which negatively impact their well-being and participation in school. Hodges *et al.* (2020) observe that school culture, low academic expectations, and inadequate support undermine both the inclusion and well-being of autistic students.

They also highlight issues related to insufficient teacher training and the contradictory pressures teachers often face.

Sproston *et al.* (2017) report learning, communication, and socialization challenges, which are exacerbated by negative attitudes and a lack of autism-specific training. They identify school transitions as critical periods, often leading to social exclusion and diminished self-esteem. Feldman *et al.* (2022) found that 51.9% of autistic students experience social rejection during one or more school years. Lilley (2013) and Aubé and colleagues (2020) point to the widespread stigmatization of autistic children and their mothers.

McLeod *et al.* (2019) describe the difficulties faced by autistic students in higher education, including elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and bullying, as well as challenges with social integration and finding appropriate employment. Nistor and Dumitru (2021) report high levels of stress and exclusion among autistic children but note that anti-discrimination programs can be effective in building inclusive school communities. Morris *et al.* (2020, 2021) confirm the positive impact of such interventions on reducing stigma.

Low *et al.* (2017) found that pre-service special education teachers are less supportive of full inclusion for autistic students in mainstream settings. Zhang and Chen (2021) and Maïano *et al.* (2015) document a heightened risk of school victimization, particularly verbal bullying. Chen and Schwartz (2012) report that teachers perceive higher levels of bullying than students or their parents do. Humphrey and Hebron (2015) emphasize that autistic children are significantly more likely to be bullied than their peers. Ochi *et al.* (2020) show a strong link between bullying and school refusal among autistic students. Finally, Eroglu and Kilic (2020) find that autistic children or those with intellectual disabilities are more frequently victims of verbal and emotional bullying.

4.2. ADHD students

O'Driscoll *et al.* (2012) found that students with depressive traits or ADHD are subject to increased stigma, while Karabekiroğlu *et al.* (2009) note that misconceptions about ADHD and autism are often amplified by unreliable sources of information. Kowalski and Fedina (2011) report high rates of traditional and cyberbullying among autistic and ADHD youth, with substantial impacts on physical and psychological health.

Zedarski *et al.* (2020) demonstrate that adolescents with ADHD who have poor social skills or working memory difficulties are especially vulnerable to peer victimization. Ewe (2019) highlights more conflictual and less cooperative relationships between teachers and students with ADHD, which can increase peer rejection, academic failure, loneliness, and low self-esteem.

Tiikkaja and Tindberg (2021) identify adolescents with ADHD as particularly vulnerable within school settings, facing a higher risk of distress. Huh *et al.* (2019) report greater exposure to bullying, while Winters *et al.* (2018) associate bullying with levels of inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity. Kent *et al.* (2010) reveal that adolescents with ADHD are up to eight times more likely to drop out of school.

John *et al.* (2021) and Parker *et al.* (2014) also report higher rates of school absenteeism, exclusion, and dropout among students with ADHD compared to their peers. O'Regan (2010) emphasizes that students with special educational needs are more likely to face permanent exclusion, and Parker *et al.* (2018) show that children with ADHD are at greater risk of exclusion than those in other groups.

Fleming *et al.* (2017) document poorer outcomes for students with ADHD in multiple domains, including education and health. Kendall (2016) confirms their persistent difficulties in educational contexts, while Sherman *et al.* (2007) demonstrate that patient and empathetic teachers can positively influence their academic success.

This narrative literature review reveals several systemic barriers frequently encountered by autistic and ADHD students, including stigma, bullying, exclusion, and environments ill-suited to their needs. Current educational systems, which often approach inclusion as a secondary adjustment rather than a foundational principle, still fall short in addressing the cognitive and developmental diversity of neuroatypical learners.

5. Alternative pedagogies and neuroatypical development

This section explores the historical and conceptual underpinnings of alternative pedagogical approaches, many of which were originally developed by physicians and psychologists to support children considered at the time to be "sick," "feebleminded," "irregular," "abnormal," or "disabled." Over time, these approaches, such as Montessori, Decroly, and outdoor education, were generalized for all children. Conversely, other alternative educational frameworks, including Reggio Emilia, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and unschooling, were designed from the outset to be inclusive of all children, emphasizing participation, respect, and the child's voice.

5.1. Pedagogical approaches initially designed for neuroatypical children

5.1.1. Montessori, Decroly, and outdoor education

Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, initially worked with children classified as mentally impaired, developing educational methods centered on individuality, autonomy, and sensory development. Inspired by the work of Séguin, Itard, and Fröbel, she designed an educational program aimed at activating the latent capacities of these children, ultimately demonstrating their ability to pass standard school examinations (Kramer, 2017). These methods, later adapted for neurotypical children, became the foundation of the Montessori method.

Research has shown significant benefits of Montessori education for neuroatypical children. Yildirim Dogru (2015) and Crow Lail (2017) found improvements in attention and concentration among children with ADHD. Epstein *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that the Montessori approach develops independence and nurtures peer relationships in autistic children. Kee (2007) and Cipta *et al.* (2022) showed that Montessori materials can effectively teach complex mathematical concepts to autistic children. Joslof (2024), in a

survey of Montessori teachers, highlighted the method's relevance in addressing the specific needs of children with ADHD, particularly through the prepared environment, the autonomy granted, and its underlying inclusive philosophy. The author also advocates for enhanced teacher training to fully leverage the method's potential for neuroatypical inclusion.

Eşi (2024), in a comparative study based on parental perceptions, reported significant advantages of the Montessori model over traditional education for children with ADHD in terms of academic performance, behavior, and social integration, although smaller differences were observed in emotional self-regulation. Nehring Massie (2017) and Naguib *et al.* (2022) confirmed overall benefits of Montessori pedagogy, while calling for further methodological studies.

Simultaneously, Dr. Ovide Decroly in Belgium developed an educational model centered on children's interests, initially aimed at what he called "irregular" children and later extended to all learners (Besse, 1989; Decroly, 1905; Decroly & Boon, 1946; Hamaïde, 1966). However, there is a notable lack of recent empirical research on its specific outcomes.

Outdoor schools, first introduced in Germany in 1904 by Bendix and Neufert for children with tuberculosis, were subsequently adapted in Europe for children with mental and physical disabilities, and were later popularized in the 1920s through the New Education movement (Chatelet *et al.*, 2003). Forest schools, in particular, gained popularity in Denmark starting in the 1950s (Bentsen *et al.*, 2009; Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012), and by 2003, they represented around 10% of Danish kindergartens (Ejbye-Ernst, 2018).

Recent studies illustrate the benefits of nature-based education for children with ASD and ADHD. Friedman and Morrison (2021) and Friedman *et al.* (2022) found that these environments develop autonomy, motor and social skills, and psychological well-being, though challenges such as escape behaviors and conflicts were also reported. Bradley and Male (2017) observed positive learning outcomes and improved sociability, while van den Berg and van den Berg (2010) found improved concentration and behavioral outcomes among children with ADHD in natural settings.

Garden (2021) emphasized the importance of nature schools in addressing emotional, social, and behavioral needs, advocating for inclusive education policies supporting appropriate learning environments. More recently, Haque (2024) showed through a field study that redesigning a playground into a nature-based space promoted sensory exploration, STEM-related activities, and social interaction among autistic children. Zubrick (2024) proposed a professional training program for environmental educators to enhance the inclusivity of these spaces, demonstrating that adapting pedagogical practices can significantly support autistic children's participation.

Singh *et al.* (2024), in an observational study in Poland, identified a positive correlation between natural elements (trees, gardens, water) around the home and improved attention among children, particularly those with ADHD, while the effects of grass exposure were less consistent. Szabo-Hemmings (2024), through a participatory

study in a Forest School setting, found that children with ADHD perceived these spaces as calming and empowering, fostering choice, experiential learning, and connection, qualities often lacking in traditional classrooms.

Abdullah *et al.* (2025), in a systematic review, stressed the importance of well-designed outdoor learning environments for autistic children and called for more inclusive, design-informed educational policies. Jacobsen and Fiskum (2015) showed that outdoor education could reduce unpleasant arousal in children with reading difficulties, often a trigger for disruptive behaviors. Lastly, Natalini and Savastano (2024), through a systematic review, demonstrated that outdoor education promotes the integration of children with ADHD and learning disorders by providing sensory-rich experiences, positive social interactions, and active tasks that enhance concentration and engagement

Montessori education and nature-based schooling both show significant potential for improving the social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as the inclusion and well-being, of children with ASD and ADHD. However, further empirical research is needed to deepen our understanding of these pedagogical approaches and optimize their implementation for neuroatypical learners.

5.2. Pedagogical approaches universally designed for all learners from inception

5.2.1. Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach (Hewett, 2021), developed in northern Italy, offers an innovative educational model for children aged from three months to six years. It is grounded in a pluralistic and eclectic philosophy based on multiple educational and philosophical traditions. Central to the Reggio Emilia method is a collaborative relationship among children, educators, families, and the broader community. Children are seen as curious and capable individuals, endowed with rights and diverse competencies. Teachers do not act merely as transmitters of knowledge, but as co-learners and facilitators, creating a stimulating environment where children can express themselves through what Loris Malaguzzi called the "hundred languages", varied artistic and symbolic forms of expression. This approach may be particularly suitable for autistic children, as its recognition of diverse modes of expression (what Malaguzzi called the "hundred languages") could align with the specific communicative ways observed in autism (Rebecchi, 2025). Parents actively participate in the educational process, contributing to a vibrant and inclusive learning community. Each Reggio Emilia institution assigns a specific teacher to support children with special rights, a socio-cultural concept that extends beyond the recognition of special educational needs to include environmental, material, and temporal accommodations. This allows authentic inclusion, allowing all children to participate fully in school life without stigmatization. Each child has an individual portfolio, and educators adapt tools and learning environments to ensure equity and non-discrimination in educational experiences.

5.2.2. Unschooling

Unschooling, popularized by John Holt in the 1970s (Holt, 1977), is an educational approach that involves withdrawing children from formal schooling to allow them to learn autonomously, guided by their own interests and natural rhythms. This model emphasizes informal learning, which emerges organically in everyday life rather than through a pre-structured curriculum.

Thomas (1999) highlights the essential distinction between formal and informal learning, while Bennett (2012) defines informal learning as encompassing experiences rooted in daily life, with varying levels of intentionality and awareness. Thomas and Pattison (2007) note that unschooling is often referred to as "autonomous learning" in the UK and "natural learning" in Australia and New Zealand.

For children with ASD and ADHD, unschooling can offer a flexible framework that adapts to their specific needs. By granting learners control over content and pace, this approach may reduce stress and anxiety commonly experienced in traditional school settings, while promoting natural, interest-driven exploration and learning (Riley, 2023).

5.2.3. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an instructional framework aimed at proactively integrating individual differences by diversifying modes of expression, action, learning, and engagement (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008; CAST, 2008; Rose & Meyer, 2002; Rose *et al.*, 2006; CAST, 2018). UDL seeks to ensure that all learners, regardless of cognitive profile, can fully access education without relying on retrofitted accommodations.

In the domain of engagement, UDL emphasizes strategies to spark learners' interest, sustain effort and persistence, and build emotional and motivational self-regulation. It offers flexible options tailored to individual preferences and needs. In terms of representation, UDL advocates for presenting information in multiple, accessible formats (e.g., text, audio, visuals), ensuring that learners with diverse cognitive styles can comprehend core concepts.

Regarding action and expression, UDL acknowledges that students demonstrate understanding in different ways. It encourages the use of varied modalities for articulating knowledge, supports executive function development, and promotes strategies for planning, monitoring, and adapting learning processes.

While UDL is widely endorsed in inclusive education theory, most empirical research has focused on its application to university students and adults in workplace settings (Barrera & García, 2023; Beck Wells, 2022; Cole *et al.*, 2024; Kotzer, 2024).

The UDL framework offers an intrinsically accessible approach to education that is particularly suited to the needs of learners with ASD and ADHD. By offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, UDL enhances participation and supports the acquisition of skills in genuinely inclusive environments.

6. Conclusion

Despite significant progress in inclusive education across Francophone contexts, this article highlights the persistent challenges faced by neuroatypical students globally. These include discrimination, stigmatization, bullying, lack of appropriate support, and rigid educational environments that struggle to accommodate their specific needs. Such shortcomings, evident in various educational systems, including those in France, Switzerland, and Québec, create barriers at every stage of life, from the home to school and, ultimately, to the workplace. Criticism from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2022 and 2023 directed at Switzerland and France reinforces these concerns, citing a lack of inclusive mechanisms and insufficient policies to ensure non-discriminatory access to education.

In light of these findings, it is imperative to reframe school inclusion not as a secondary or compensatory measure, but as a foundational principle embedded in educational structures. This requires not only the recognition of each individual's needs, strengths, and developmental specificities but also the creation of adapted learning environments. Alternative pedagogical practices, such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Decroly, forest schools (or nature/outdoor education), unschooling, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), offer promising examples. By valuing individuality, autonomy, and learner well-being, these approaches align with the rights of the child as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). They may also support initiatives such as the French National Strategy for the Development of Psychosocial Skills (2022–2037) and strengthen cross-cutting skills development in educational systems in Romandy and Québec.

However, the analysis presented in this article is based on an exploratory approach, combining theoretical insights with a narrative literature review. While this methodology highlights diverse and meaningful perspectives, it also entails certain limitations. The scarcity of empirical data directly examining the effects of alternative pedagogies on neuroatypical students limits the generalizability of conclusions. Furthermore, the contextual specificity of many referenced studies (often conducted in Anglophone settings) may restrict their applicability to Francophone school systems. To address these limitations, future research should focus on the empirical, comparative, and interdisciplinary evaluation of these approaches, investigating their impact on the development and overall well-being of neuroatypical learners.

Moreover, the successful implementation of such pedagogies in conventional educational settings requires greater awareness and engagement among parents, teachers, researchers, and policymakers. This effort could be understood within the scope of xenosophy, defined as "*a deep understanding of the other*" (Sternberg, 2023, p. 179). Adequate training, along with investment in appropriate resources and infrastructure, will be essential to ensuring high-quality education for all learners.

Ultimately, the adoption of education policies that respect the rights of neuroatypical individuals, and the fight against segregation and stigmatization, must be

prioritized across Francophone education systems. In this regard, this article invites us to rethink how educational systems can genuinely consider neurodiversity as a strength, thereby contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and equitable society.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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