

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches in education: A Walker and Avant concept analysis

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Abstract

Neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches are increasingly prominent in educational discourse, reflecting the ongoing evolution of inclusive educational practice. Each concept is subject to its own definitional ambiguity and has attracted a range of critiques. These unresolved issues at the ideational level risk undermining their effective application in practice. For example, theoretical questions concerning whether the two are distinct or overlapping have prompted models for their conceptual integration. Clarifying these relationships is therefore essential to support meaningful and consistent implementation in education. This study reports a Walker and Avant concept analysis for each term, aiming to map and clarify how the concepts are used within educational research. The focus was on exploring modern, contextualised understandings rather than relying solely on reified, original academic definitions. A subsequent comparative analysis of the two concept analyses was then conducted to determine whether systematic research evidence supports previous proposals for integration. The analyses revealed both overlapping and distinct characteristics across concepts, leading to the conclusion that the findings support integration. This is discussed in relation to applied educational practice. The implications of this integration are explored through the development of a reflexive resource for practitioners, designed to support the direct application of the concept analysis findings. This resource aims to ensure that both concepts are applied with precision, enhancing inclusive educational practice.

KEYWORDS

inclusive pedagogy, neurodiversity, positive psychology, reflexive practice, strengths-based approaches, strengths-based assessment, strengths-based intervention

Key points

- The paper clarifies how neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches are defined and used in educational research, supporting greater conceptual precision in research and practice.
- Using Walker and Avant's concept analysis, the study identifies defining attributes, antecedents, consequences and empirical referents for each concept, supporting more systematic and less tokenistic application in research and practice.
- Comparative analysis showed that neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches overlap conceptually without being identical, supporting integration between anti-deficit and strengths-focused practice.

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- The findings are translated into a reflexive practitioner resource, supporting educators to audit and refine inclusive practice using contemporary, evidence-informed conceptualisations.

INTRODUCTION

This study analysed and compared the concepts of neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches in education. The rationale stemmed from their increasing prominence in education (Dawson, 2022; Ylimaki & Brunderman, 2022) and growing conceptual integration (Fung & Doyle, 2021). Little research has explored whether these concepts are overlapping, distinct or interchangeable. Clarification is important, as conceptual confusion can create theoretical and practical difficulties. For example, if interventions are labelled 'neurodiversity-based' for differing reasons, such as strengths-based language or self-advocacy focus, it becomes difficult to synthesise findings across the literature. As relatively recent frameworks gaining influence, systematic exploration is needed to support consistency in research and practice.

Consistent with the Walker and Avant concept analysis method, we offer a concise introduction to orient the reader before proceeding to the procedural steps that establish operational definitions, attributes, antecedents/consequences, model (and contrasting) cases and empirical referents. This avoids replacing the analysis with a narrative literature review and limits front-loaded interpretive bias; key debates are addressed within the findings and supplementary materials.

Neurodiversity

The concept of *neurodiversity* is both influential and subject to debate. Even the minutiae of its origin have been closely scrutinised. Singer (1999) is frequently credited with coining the term, outlining three elements:

1. the need for neurotypical individuals to acknowledge and embrace autistic traits,
2. the framing of challenges faced by autistic individuals as civil rights issues
3. and the development of appropriate support services (as cited in Fung & Doyle, 2021, pp. 3–4)

However, autistic scholars have contested this singular attribution, citing use in online mailing lists as early as 1996 and arguing for recognition as a collectively developed concept (Botha et al., 2024). Doyle (2024) traces the socio-political roots of the concept further back, identifying the industrial revolution and disability rights movements as key influences.

Concept clarification continues to be an issue. Some approach this by acknowledging neurodiversity will always have embedded multiplicity (For example see Chapman's (2020) 'value neutral' model and Runswick-Cole's (2014) critique of the politics of neurodiversity). Others have attempted to reify. For example, Armstrong (2010) who outlined eight principles of neurodiversity as:

1. 'the human brain works more like an ecosystem than a machine',
2. 'human brains exist along continuums of competence',
3. 'human competence is defined by the values of the culture to which you belong',
4. 'whether you are regarded as disabled or gifted depends largely on where and when you were born',
5. 'success in life is based on adapting one's brain to the needs of the surrounding environment',
6. 'success in life also depends on modifying your surrounding environment to the needs of your unique brain (niche construction)',
7. 'niche construction includes careers and lifestyle choices',
8. 'positive niche construction directly modifies the brain, which in turn enhances its ability to adapt to the environment' (Armstrong, 2010, pp. 246–248).

Although often positioned as a progressive concept (Goldberg, 2023; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), neurodiversity has also attracted critique. A strong focus on social influences, at times minimising individual characteristics in disability, has been argued to be controversial (Dwyer, 2022). Another critique is that its neurological focus risks reducing identity to a narrow conception of personhood (Ortega, 2009, as cited in Jones & Orchard, 2024). This speaks to 'variation among scholars as to their intellectual comfort with biology and neuroscience as underpinning knowledge systems' (Jones & Orchard, 2024, p. 457) and may contribute to why concepts such as neurodiversity remain difficult to define and operationalise. These varied critiques reflect conceptual complexity. Evolving definitions, contested origins and divergent critiques contribute to its status as a fluid and sometimes polarising framework.

Strengths-based approaches

Strengths-based approaches are an umbrella term comprising practices, such as strengths-based assessment

and strengths-based intervention. The term has roots in positive psychology and asset-based frameworks, emerging as a proposed paradigm in the 1990s (Seligman et al., 2005). Climie and Henley (2016, p. 110) outline three fundamental beliefs:

1. all students have strengths and skills that, if identified, will lead to heightened motivation;
2. all students have the capacity to learn and demonstrate strengths; failure to demonstrate a particular skill does not indicate deficit, rather it suggests that they require further experience, instruction or opportunity for mastery; and
3. focusing on students' strengths and resources will probably lead them to use these skills.

Strengths-based approaches have also attracted critique, much linked to broader concerns surrounding positive psychology. Of relevance here is the critique that strengths-based perspectives offer limited conceptual novelty and rely on an overly reductive portrayal of 'negative' psychology (Van Zyl et al., 2024). This contributes to a further criticism that positive psychology and strengths-based approaches in education, lack coherent, unifying metatheory (Van Zyl et al., 2024). Additionally, strengths-based approaches have been critiqued for adopting a nomothetic approach to 'individual strengths' through standardised strengths inventories (Climie & Henley, 2016).

In summary, strengths-based approaches have been proposed as an alternative to deficit-based models but remain conceptually broad and subject to critique regarding coherence, novelty and standardised notions of strength.

Concept comparison and integration

Critiqued foundations and conceptual ambiguity surrounding both neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches have influenced attempts at theoretical integration. Fung and Doyle's (2021) Strengths-Based Model of Neurodiversity (SBMN) draws together theories of multiple intelligences, positive psychology, positive psychiatry and developmental theory to align strengths-based thinking with neurodiversity principles. While this model represents an important integration attempt, it has also attracted critique for potentially broadening neurodiversity into an overly diffuse construct with limited practical specificity (Doyle & McDowall, 2022). Similar critiques have previously been levelled at inclusion more broadly, where conceptual breadth has been argued to undermine practical clarity (Norwich, 2014). Recent scholarship has also cautioned against top-down attempts to unify neurodiversity definitions, arguing that such efforts may obscure conceptual distinctions and public understandings (VanDaalen et al., 2025).

Study rationale and aims

Given the growing prominence, yet continued contestation, of both concepts, this study aimed to explore how neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches are defined and understood within educational research. Rather than relying solely on original definitions, the analysis focused on how these concepts are currently used and contextualised within education.

Examining the concepts within educational research literature represents a deliberate narrowing of focus. Academic and advocacy literatures are key sites where concepts emerge, are contested and become shaped into policy and practice frameworks (Botha et al., 2024; Chapman, 2020; Doyle & McDowall, 2022; Ortega, 2009; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; Singer, 1999). The study therefore focused on educational research literature to support conceptual clarity and trace implications for educational policy and practice. Wider public understandings of neurodiversity have already been explored elsewhere (VanDaalen et al., 2025).

A secondary aim was to explore the presumed overlap between the concepts and respond to calls for their integration (Fung & Doyle, 2021). Through comparative analysis, the study aimed to examine whether systematic evidence supported or challenged conceptual integration, contributing to greater conceptual clarity and reducing the risk of misapplication in educational research and practice.

Scope of analysis

This analysis focused specifically on neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches as foundational conceptual framings of learner difference. Related approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (Rose, 2000) and inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2015) were excluded because they function primarily as implementation-oriented pedagogical frameworks rather than epistemic-level concepts. Consistent with Walker and Avant's (2011) methodology, the present study therefore focused on clarifying defining attributes, antecedents and consequences of concepts rather than evaluating pedagogical delivery models.

METHODS

Concept analysis approach

Walker and Avant's (2011) eight-step concept analysis framework was applied to neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches: (1) select the concept, (2) determine the purpose and aim of the analysis, (3) identify all

uses of the concept that can be discovered (within the defined context), (4) determine defining attributes, (5) identify a model case, (6) identify a contrary case and borderline case, (7) identify antecedents and consequences and (8) define empirical referents for the concept.

Data sources

Literature reviews retrieved examples of each concept. The Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database was selected due to its strong focus on education research, ensuring the retrieval of relevant publications for the analysis. The same inclusion/exclusion criteria were used across reviews:

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies and papers that explicitly define or conceptualise either term
- Academic literature from the education field
- Articles from the past 5 years
- Full text
- Peer reviewed

Exclusion Criteria

- Articles that use the terms without defining them
- Studies or papers that do not explicate, define or conceptualise the term.
- Literature that focuses solely on deficits rather than strengths-based perspectives/neurodiversity
- Dissertations etc.

The timeframe for inclusion/exclusion was deliberately limited to the past 5 years to capture contemporary, in-use definitions most relevant to current educational research and practice. Earlier foundational works are acknowledged in the introduction and discussion, but the analysis focused on recent literature to reflect the concepts' evolving and contested nature. To further clarify inclusion/exclusion criteria regarding academic research literature, only peer-reviewed journal articles in education were included. Dissertations, book reviews, editorials and grey literature were excluded. To be eligible, papers had to explicitly define or conceptualise either neurodiversity or strengths-based approaches, rather than merely reference the terms. Only peer-reviewed journal articles in education were included. Dissertations, book reviews, editorials and non-research publications were excluded. To be eligible, studies had to explicitly define or conceptualise either neurodiversity or strengths-based approaches, rather than merely reference the terms. Titles and abstracts were first screened for relevance, after which full texts were reviewed to ensure they met these criteria. Articles mentioning the terms without offering a definition or conceptual framing were excluded.

For the neurodiversity search strategy, Boolean logic was applied using search terms 'neurodiversity' AND 'definition', 'defined as', 'terminology', 'conceptualisation', 'conceptualization', 'meaning', 'term', 'framework', 'concept'. The search yielded 218 articles. After removing duplications, 92 abstracts were read and 69 articles excluded. Each of these was then read in full to ensure they explicitly defined/conceptualised 'neurodiversity', yielding a final sample of 19 articles. Figure 1 is a representation of the PRISMA flow diagram procedure that was followed.

The strengths-based approaches search strategy also employed Boolean logic using the search terms 'strengths-based' AND 'approach', 'assessment', 'teaching', 'inclusion'. The search yielded 673 articles. Once duplicates were removed, 67 abstracts were read and inclusion/exclusion criteria applied, yielding 17. These articles were then read through to make sure strengths-based was explicitly defined; if not, the paper was removed from the sample. 15 articles were included in the final sample. Figure 2 depicts the PRISMA flow diagram for this process.

Data extraction and coding

For both content analyses, authors, publication date, research topic, methodology/methods, text that defined the concept, word length of text that defined the concept, citations used in definition of concept and theories referenced were extracted and tabulated from each article in the sample, using Microsoft Excel. Following Walker and Avant's (2011) Concept Analysis framework, an inductive open coding approach was applied, where initial codes were generated based on recurring patterns and conceptual linkages. To enhance rigour and reliability, coding consistency was reviewed iteratively, ensuring alignment with the research aims while maintaining flexibility for an evolving concept analysis. The codes were then refined and grouped into broader thematic categories, which were subsequently mapped onto Walker and Avant's framework elements: defining attributes, antecedents and consequences for each concept. Once an understanding of these elements had been generated for each concept, a model case, borderline case, contrary case and accompanying empirical referents were developed for each.

For each step, data were coded and categorised directly from the extracted definitions. Defining attributes were identified through iterative review of recurring descriptors. Model, contrary and borderline cases were constructed using examples drawn from the dataset. Antecedents and consequences were mapped by tracing citations and theoretical linkages within each article. Empirical referents were identified through measures, frameworks or assessment tools explicitly referenced by the authors.

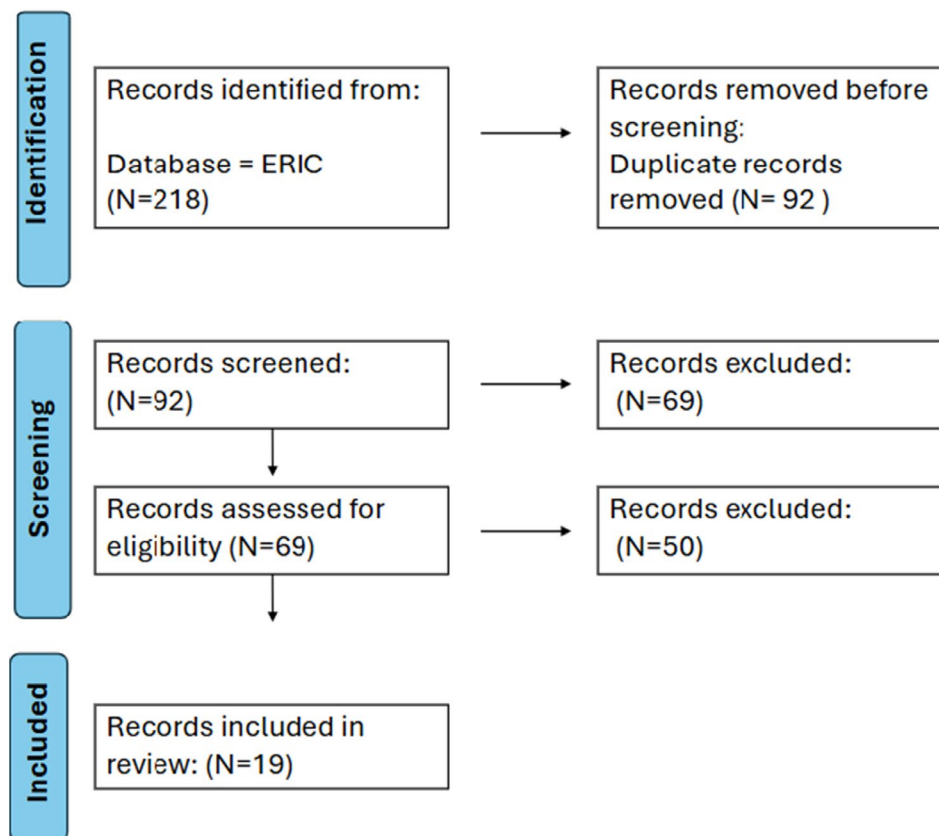


FIGURE 1 PRISMA flow diagram for neurodiversity.

Inter-rater reliability

To strengthen reliability, 30% of the extracted definitional statements from both datasets (extracted neurodiversity and strengths-based assessment definitions) were independently reviewed by a second rater. This check was conducted at the level of the initial linguistic codes, from which defining attributes were subsequently constructed. The second rater was provided with the extracted statements and the coding framework and asked to independently assign codes to each statement. Agreement was calculated on a statement-by-statement basis, with matching code assignments counted as agreements and differing assignments as disagreements. An overall percentage agreement score was then generated. Inter-rater reliability indicated strong consistency. Across the 30% sample of definitional statements independently reviewed, agreement between coders was 100%. This is substantial agreement between coders.

Comparison analytic approach

To compare the concepts systematically, the defining attributes identified in each individual concept analysis were tabulated and examined for convergence and

divergence. Areas of conceptual overlap and distinction were then summarised textually, with converged attributes explicitly referenced as supporting data. For example, attributes relating to contextual variability appeared across both concepts and were coded as convergent, while attributes emphasising neurological variation (neurodiversity) versus personal skill identification (strengths-based) were coded as divergent. These patterns were cross-checked against the extracted data to ensure transparency. Additionally, a thematic-visual representation was created to illustrate these relationships, further informing the development of a proposed joint definition. This process followed guidelines for concept synthesis outlined by Tricco et al. (2016).

Positionality statement

The presence and foregrounding of autistic perspectives in neurodiversity research production is increasingly expounded (Botha, 2021; Milton, 2014). The author possesses lived experience of neurodiversity, complemented by familial relationships with autistic people. Because the study foregrounded academic definitions, there is an inevitable absence of clearly distinct autistic voices, as this was not its primary focus

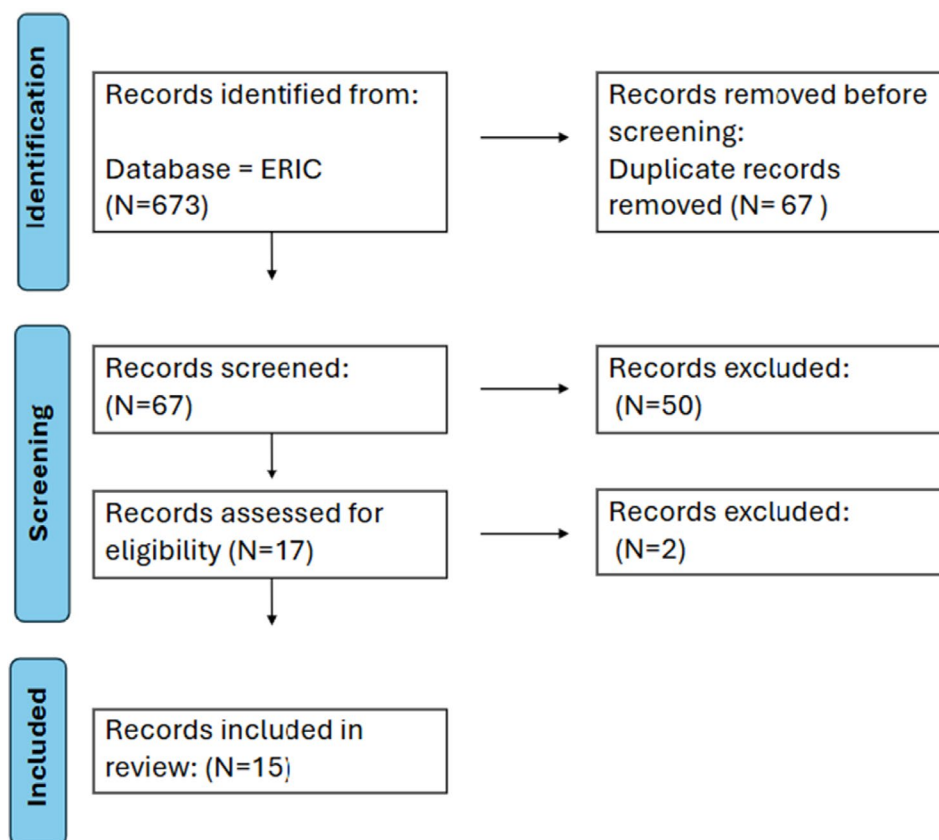


FIGURE 2 PRISMA flow diagram for strengths-based approaches.

(rationale previously made). While some authors may have disclosed themselves as autistic, such positionality was not consistently identifiable across the dataset. Consequently, although autistic perspectives may be present within the sample, they cannot be distinctly traced or systematically represented in this analysis. This highlights a potential need for guidance on when and how positionality and lived experience are to be disclosed within research literature.

RESULTS

The concept analyses are presented separately using Walker and Avant's (2011) framework, followed by a comparative analysis of areas of convergence and divergence and a proposed joint definition.

Neurodiversity conceptual analysis

Selecting a concept determining analytical aim

Neurodiversity was selected due to its growing influence within inclusive education, teacher training and educational research (Dawson, 2022). The analysis aimed to clarify the concept and examine its relationship with strengths-based approaches.

Identifying uses of the concept

The literature search strategy has been previously detailed. Table 1 presents the 19 articles in the final sample used to identify concept usages.

Definition characteristics and citation analysis

Across the 19 definitions of neurodiversity, the average word length was 205 words. The range was 39–643 words, and the median length was 184. This suggests a wide variation in the prominence given to defining the concept. On average, the concept is arguably fully demonstrated in 205 words or so. 71 citations were made across definitions. Singer (1999) was the most frequently cited source, followed by Kapp et al. (2013), while Armstrong (2015), Clouder et al. (2020) and Baker (2011) were each cited twice. The diversity of citations (71) and lack of consistently recurring sources suggest that neurodiversity remains conceptually unsettled rather than supported by a canonical definitional base.

Defined concept attributes

The analysis identified eight defining attributes of the concept, outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 1 Sample for neurodiversity concept analysis.

Authors (Date)	Topic	Methods	Word length
Sewell (2022)	Learning assessment and classroom-based support	Narrative synthesis	151
Schuck et al. (2024)	Neurodiversity attitudes questionnaire	Measure development and validation	310
Shmulskey et al. (2021)	Disability identity of neurodiverse college students	Survey	146
Halder and Bruyere (2022)	Autistic adult's first-person accounts of life trajectories	Qualitative interviews	229
Dawson (2022)	History of neurodiversity and inclusive education	Position paper	643
Izuno-Garcia et al. (2023)	Neurodiversity-affirming care service provision	Practitioner review	190
Clouder et al. (2020)	Neurodiversity in Higher Education practice	Narrative synthesis	249
Schuck et al. (2024)	Comparison and overlap of neurodiversity framework and Naturalistic Developmental Behavioural Interventions	Commentary	127
Coffey and Lovegrove (2023)	Career development for neurodiverse tertiary students	Case study	196
Jellett and Muggleton (2022)	Discussion on the addition of 'clinically significant impairment' to DSM-5 autism diagnostic criteria	Commentary	141
Macdonald (2019)	Review of six sociological frameworks for dyslexia	Position paper	389
Büdy (2021)	Neurodiversity and learner agency	Survey	237
Lambert and Harriss (2020)	Neurodiversity and mathematics	Narrative interviews	41
Hobson et al. (2024)	Developmental language disorder and neurodiversity	Position paper	368
Amador (2024)	Neurodiversity awareness raising using children's literature	Semi-structured interviews	48
Cost et al. (2021)	Parental perspectives on neurodiversity	Longitudinal measures	135
Smith et al. (2021)	Neurodiverse couple's experiences of love	Phenomenological interviews	39
Gaddy and Crow (2023)	Neurodiversity and Speech and Language Therapy services	Primer	178
Prentiss (2021)	Communication centres	Position paper	41

Model case

A model case is an example of the definition in context that involves all the defining attributes. The model case for education is: A UK university has introduced a neurodiversity-inclusive framework that recognises neurological differences as natural variations rather than deficits. The development of the framework was co-produced with a student neurodiversity advocacy group and focused on using inclusive, positive language. For example, an autistic Computer Science student who struggles with verbal presentations is offered flexible assessment options, such as recorded presentations or written reports. The Student Support Office provides quiet spaces, noise-cancelling headsets and executive functioning tools to all students, reducing stigma and bureaucratic barriers. Meanwhile, the Neurodiversity Advocates Group continues to work closely with faculty to embed neurodiverse-friendly teaching practices, driving institutional change.

Borderline case

A borderline case is close to the model example but is missing some of the key defining attributes. The

borderline case for education is: A UK secondary school introduces a neurodiversity inclusion policy with quiet zones, flexible seating and sensory-friendly resources for autistic students. Curriculum delivery and assessment remain tied to neurotypical expectations, including compulsory group work and oral presentations. Social participation remains tied to academic recognition, while co-production is reduced to tokenistic measures such as unacted-upon student surveys.

Contrary case

A contrary case provides an example that eschews all defining attributes of the concept. The contrary case for education is: A university launches a 'Neurodiversity Initiative' centred on awareness campaigns but without meaningful changes to learning environments or assessment. The university retains extensive medical evidence for accommodations. When neurodivergent students struggle, they are directed toward remediation rather than systemic support, positioning them as vulnerable without recognising their strengths and abilities.

TABLE 2 Defined attributes of the neurodiversity concept.

Defining attributes	Explanation
1. Origins and Evolution	Coined by Judy Singer (1999) and influenced by autism advocacy and self-advocacy movements. It gained traction among autistic individuals, parents and activists in the 1990s. Seen as a continuously evolving concept that has gained prominence in education, psychology and clinical fields.
2. Neurodiversity as a Natural and Valuable Human Variation	Neurological differences are as natural as biodiversity and social/cultural diversity. There is no single 'normal' brain, and variation in cognitive functioning is expected across the population. Some use this to argue that everyone is neurodiverse, rejecting dichotomous labels of neurotypical vs. neurodivergent.
3. Identity, Self-Perception and Social Justice	Framed as a political and social identity, alongside class, gender and race. Neurodiversity connects to social justice, advocating for equity, inclusion and anti-ableism.
4. Rejection of the Medical Model and Pathology-Based Framing	Opposes cure-seeking efforts and the pathologisation of difference. Challenges the medical model that frames difference as a disorder, defect or dysfunction requiring treatment. Some proponents argue for the outright rejection of 'disability' and 'impairment' as medical constructs, while others align with the social model of disability.
5. Strengths-Based and Neurodiversity-Affirming Perspectives	A shift from deficit-based perspectives to recognising strengths and assets, with a belief that neurodivergent individuals often display unique cognitive abilities, creativity and alternative problem-solving skills.
6. Environmental Interaction and Institutional Barriers	Disability is not inherent but created by the interaction between individuals and their environment. Societal systems (education, employment, healthcare) are built around neurotypical norms, making it difficult for neurodivergent individuals to thrive, hence calls for environmental accommodations rather than forcing individuals to conform to neurotypical expectations.
7. Applications in Education, Employment and Society	Emphasises educational inclusion and alternative learning approaches to support neurodivergent individuals. Promotes social awareness, acceptance and accommodations instead of interventions focused solely on individual change.
8. Intersectionality and Complexity of Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity is not a single spectrum from neurotypical to neurodivergent, and it exists across multiple dimensions. Neurodivergent individuals may have little in common with each other beyond shared experiences of marginalisation. Experiences of neurodivergence intersect with race, gender, class and cultural factors, influencing how individuals navigate society.

Antecedents and consequences

Antecedents are circumstances that must be present before the concept occurs. The antecedents for neurodiversity were identified as, firstly, recognition of the *natural variation in human neurological differences*. There also needs to be a *pre-existing commitment to structural adaptation*, a willingness to modify systems rather than expect individuals to change. There *also needs to be education and awareness among key stakeholders*, with professionals receiving training. Furthermore, neurodiversity cannot exist as a concept without the presence of *advocacy and self-advocacy networks*; otherwise, performance of the concept becomes tokenistic. Lastly, there must be *flexible and inclusive environments* across physical, social and digital aspects of teaching and learning.

Consequences are the result of the concept. The first consequence of neurodiversity is *increased student engagement and retention* arising from structural accommodations that increase inclusion and learning opportunities. The second is the development of creative *adaptive teaching methods* as teachers shift from a one-size-fits-all to a flexible, student-centred approach. There can also be a *reduction in stigma and deficit-based thinking* where language changes away from 'learning disabilities' toward 'learning

differences'. The concept can also result in *strong self-advocacy skills* in students.

Empirical referents of the concept

The final stage of the concept analysis involves outlining empirical referents. These are observable elements of the concept in practice, facilitating the measurement of its implementation in education. This step is crucial, as it allows the concept's existence to be determined, reinforcing its significance. The first empirical referent for neurodiversity is the *presence of alternative learning structures*, such as flexible assessment methods and alternative forms of communication. Related to this is the second empirical referent of *environmental adaptations* such as sensory-friendly places. Thirdly, there should be *inclusive policies and legal frameworks* which explicitly reference neurodiversity and how it will be achieved in the educational setting(s). A further critical referent is *active neurodiverse representation and leadership* where there is a clear presence of neurodiverse individuals in leadership roles and formal advocacy groups, enhancing co-production. The final referent is an *active reduction in deficit-based language and practices* demonstrable through a shift from 'supporting disabilities' to 'adapting environments to diverse minds'.

Strengths-based approaches conceptual analysis

Selecting a concept and analytical aims

Strengths-based approaches were selected due to established links with neurodiversity in educational research and practice (Fung & Doyle, 2021; Sewell, 2022), alongside broader discussions of conceptual overlap (Quigley et al., 2024). Like neurodiversity, strengths-based approaches reflect a broader shift toward functioning and flourishing within psychology and education (Mendes de Oliveira et al., 2022) and have gained prominence as relatively recent frameworks in the 21st century. As with neurodiversity, the primary aim was to establish a clear conceptual foundation for strengths-based approaches and examine their relationship with neurodiversity.

Identifying uses of the concept

Table 3 presents the 15-article sample used to identify uses of the concept.

Definition characteristics and citation analysis

Across the 15 definitions, average length was 147 words (range=24–381; median=103), indicating substantial

definitional variability and possible conceptual ambiguity. The lower median suggests a small number of lengthy, theory-heavy definitions skewed the mean.

Across definitions, 74 unique citations were identified, with only three sources cited more than once. This suggests strengths-based approaches lack a commonly agreed foundational text and instead draw on diverse theoretical perspectives, contributing to conceptual ambiguity and variation in application.

Defined concept attributes

The analysis identified eight defining attributes of the concept, outlined in Table 4.

Model case

A UK secondary school adopts a strengths-based framework that uses strengths inventories to support students' personal and academic development. Teachers are trained to incorporate student-led learning, real-world application and collaborative problem-solving into lessons. For example, a Year 10 student with dyslexia is supported through oral presentations, project-based tasks and visual storytelling that emphasise strengths rather than remediation, resulting in improved confidence, engagement and well-being.

TABLE 3 Sample for strengths-based approaches concept analysis.

Authors (Date)	Topic	Methods	Word length
Lee et al. (2020)	Parent perceptions of an autism support programme	Longitudinal surveys	35
Wood-Downie et al. (2021)	Transition planning for autistic children	Qualitative review of transition meetings	199
Clark et al. (2023)	Identification of exceptional skills in autistic children	Questionnaires and clinical psychologist assessment	299
Katajisto et al. (2023)	Student perceptions of strength-based guidance	Phenomenological interviews	273
Mason (2019)	First-year HE experiences of strengths-based development programme	Surveys and semi-structured interviews	81
Galloway et al. (2020)	Pedagogical practice	Questionnaires, interviews and document analysis	146
Pashkova-Balkenhol et al. (2019)	First-year undergraduate information literacy skills	Systematic literature review	381
Hugh et al. (2024)	Pre-service special education competencies for early years practitioners	Commentary	97
Lawlis et al. (2024)	Work programmes for disabled students	Case study	109
Hwang et al. (2020)	Perceptions of after-school workforce	Mixed methods	24
Willis and Jennings (2020)	Administrative support in learning and teaching in African Universities	Workshops with feedback	30
Armstrong-Carter (2023)	Exploring relationship between black adolescents support to family and educational outcomes	Survey	68
Sewell and Park (2021)	Pedagogical practice supporting neurodiverse learners	Practice model development/Case examples	215
Robinson and Walker (2024)	University peer mentoring	Evaluation trial	97

TABLE 4 Defined attributes of the strengths-based approaches concept.

Defining attribute	Explanation
1. Shift from Deficit-Based to Strengths-Based Thinking	Rejects deficit-based models that focus on weaknesses, remediation and correction. Instead, encourages identifying and leveraging existing strengths instead of fixing 'deficiencies'.
2. Emphasis on Personal Strengths, Talents and Capacities.	Strengths-based approaches focus on abilities, capacities and personal motivation to drive learning and development.
3. Strengths as a Tool for Growth & Change	Promotes self-actualisation, helping individuals realise their potential and encourages goal setting, aspiration and optimism, shifting from problem-based to solution-oriented mindsets.
4. Structured, Evidence-Based Approaches	Strengths-based approaches are not just philosophical. They involve structured methods and interventions (e.g. Power Zone Model, strengths-based coaching).
5. Application Across Multiple Domains	Used across psychological assessments, educational frameworks and professional development; at the levels of family, school system, classroom.
6. Integration with Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Practices	Strengths-based approaches align with culturally responsive learning and inclusive education as it draws from the social model of disability to challenge ableist perspectives.
7. Positive Psychological Impact & Well-Being	Strengths-based education and work environments increase resilience, mental health and life satisfaction as encouraging thriving rather than just surviving, supports well-being and fulfilment.
8. Interaction Between Strengths & Holistic Development	Strengths-based approaches recognises that multiple strengths work together rather than in isolation. Supports continuous development, where individuals build on existing strengths while developing new ones

Contrary case

A school adopts a loosely defined strengths-based approach that avoids addressing difficulties, resulting in limited support, feedback and opportunities for skill development. Additionally, the model lacks structured, evidence-based implementation and treats strengths as isolated traits rather than part of holistic development. As a result, students may experience frustration and reduced motivation, undermining the intended benefits of strengths-based education.

Borderline case

A secondary school claims to use a strengths-based approach by encouraging students to self-identify their talents and interests. Teachers use positive reinforcement and focus on student-led projects. However, the school's assessment system remains deficit-focused, with grading structures that highlight weaknesses over strengths. Students who struggle in traditional academic subjects, despite excelling in creative or technical fields, continue to receive lower grades, reinforcing a deficit-based view of intelligence.

Antecedents and consequences

For the concept to occur, there first needs to be a *shift from deficit-based thinking*, moving away from solely implementing remedial-based models. There also needs to be access to *frameworks for identifying and utilising strengths*, such as strengths inventories and assessments. At the systemic level, there should be *institutional support* allowing for flexibility in tasks, assessments

and performance evaluations to align with individuals' strengths. Leaders also should seek to develop a *culture of positive reinforcement and growth* that encourages aspiration, goal setting and resilience, rather than just focusing on weaknesses.

Consequence of the concept are positive outcomes such as *increased motivation and engagement* with learning and *improved well-being and confidence* for learners. It is also a route to *greater personalised learning and inclusive pedagogy*. A potential negative consequence is that *skill development in areas of difficulty may be neglected*. There is also the risk of the consequence of the concept being misunderstood as an *ideological stance* rather than a practical approach.

Empirical referents of the concept

Empirical referents for strengths-based approaches can be observed in several key areas. *Individualised strengths assessments* are a central feature, with tools such as the VIA Character Strengths and Gallup StrengthsFinder used in education and workplaces to support self-reflection and personal growth. *Strengths-based teaching and learning strategies* include flexible classroom practices that allow students to demonstrate knowledge in multiple ways, ensuring strengths are leveraged while also addressing weaker areas through targeted support. *Schools that effectively apply strengths-based principles* design roles and learning plans around individual strengths, rather than enforcing rigid expectations, as seen in strengths-based Individualised Education Plans (IEPs). *Integration with well-being and motivation frameworks* further demonstrates effective implementation, with strengths-based approaches linked to increased self-efficacy, engagement and motivation.

Finally, a *balanced approach to strengths and challenges* ensures that strengths are used as a tool for overcoming difficulties, rather than avoiding them, with constructive feedback incorporated alongside strengths recognition.

CONCEPT COMPARISON

Figure 3 visualises areas of overlap and divergence between the concepts, demonstrating substantial conceptual alignment.

Both concepts reject deficit-based perspectives and position human variation as central to development. Each emphasises strengths-based thinking, holistic development and the role of educational environments in shaping learning experiences. Both also recognise that inflexible educational systems can hinder person-centred support and meaningful participation. Neurodiversity arguably places greater emphasis on systemic barriers and self-advocacy, reflecting its activist origins, while strengths-based approaches focus more explicitly on the development of individual strengths within supportive environments.

Both concepts also engage with self-agency and intersectionality, although from different perspectives. Neurodiversity situates self-agency within a social justice framework linked to collective advocacy and resistance to deficit framings (Elliott, 2018). By contrast, strengths-based approaches position self-agency within self-actualisation and individual flourishing, reflecting broader links to positive psychology and related

critiques of neoliberal individualism (Van Zyl et al., 2024). Similarly, while both concepts acknowledge intersectionality, neurodiversity more consistently foregrounds it as central to identity, alongside factors such as race, gender and class, whereas strengths-based approaches primarily engage with it through culturally responsive educational practice (Gay, 2002).

Despite these overlaps, the concepts differ in origin and epistemological orientation. Neurodiversity emerged from autism advocacy and activist epistemologies, whereas strengths-based approaches developed through positive psychology and more traditional expert-led theory construction. This distinction informs further divergence in how intervention and support are conceptualised.

Strengths-based approaches are more closely associated with structured interventions, assessment tools and evidence-based models designed to support individual growth. By contrast, neurodiversity more explicitly rejects intervention frameworks aimed at ‘fixing’ individuals, instead foregrounding lived experience and systemic change. This distinction was reflected in the literature samples, where neurodiversity studies more frequently employed phenomenological methodologies, while strengths-based studies more often evaluated structured interventions such as coaching and skill-development programmes.

These differing orientations are also reflected linguistically. Neurodiversity draws on the language of social justice and accommodation, using terms such as “ableism,” “barriers” and “neurodivergence,” whereas

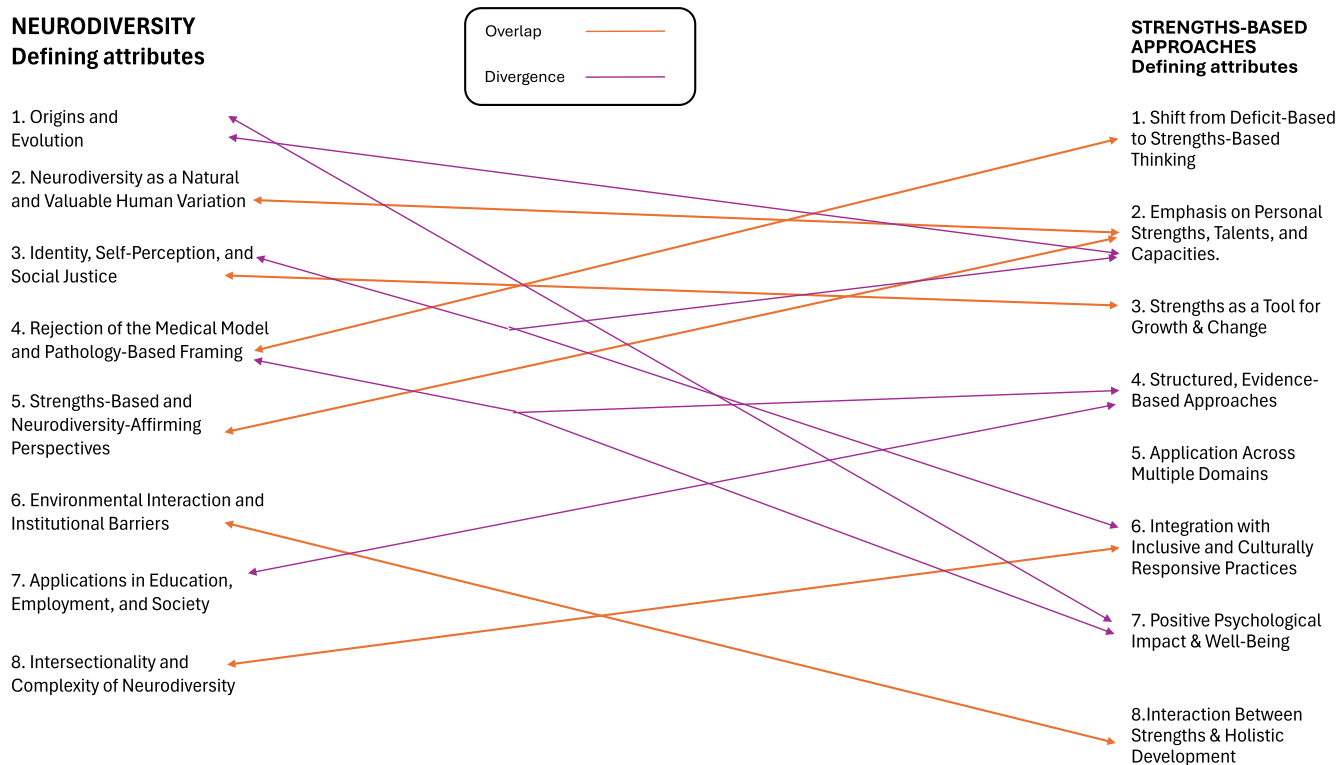


FIGURE 3 Visual representation of concept comparison analysis.

strengths-based approaches employ the language of positive psychology, including “resilience,” “growth” and “potential.” Together, these findings suggest substantial conceptual overlap alongside important epistemological and practical distinctions between the two frameworks.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to conduct two respective concept analyses of *neurodiversity* and *strengths-based approaches*, using the Walker and Avant methodology. These analyses provided insight into how each concept is contextualised within educational research. A comparative analysis was then undertaken, revealing significant areas of overlap alongside key divergences. Together, these findings offer supporting evidence for previous proposals advocating for conceptual integration.

Concept integration

The comparison analysis supports existing proposals to integrate the two concepts (Fung & Doyle, 2021). Strengths-based approaches would address critiques of neurodiversity's emphasis on systemic factors by contributing greater focus on individual growth, agency and development. This integration is supported by both concepts' shared view of human difference as natural variation and development as holistic and individualised. Integration would also address critiques of strengths-based approaches' limited conceptual novelty by situating them within neurodiversity's broader anti-deficit and social-contextual framework. This integration is conceptually feasible, given both concepts' shared rejection of deficit-based thinking. Integration would further allow strengths-based approaches' individualised and psychometric framing of strengths to be enriched by neurodiversity's emphasis on lived experience and collective advocacy. While strengths-based approaches stem largely from expert-led traditions, neurodiversity is grounded in activist, community-led perspectives. An integrated model would therefore offer a more socially grounded and inclusive understanding of strengths.

Implications for education

The findings of this study hold a number of implications for educational practice and educational policy. Our findings map directly onto current England SEND policy levers and accountability. The policy paper ‘Every child achieving and thriving’ (Department for Education, 2026) places a premium on consistent mainstream provision and evidenceable adjustments; integrating neurodiversity's system-change aims with strengths-based classroom tools gives schools a coherent

route from policy intent to day-to-day practice. The revised Area SEND inspections framework (Ofsted/CQC) (2025) requires demonstrable impact across local area arrangements; our attributes and empirical referents (e.g. flexible assessment, sensory/environmental adaptations, co-production) provide concrete practice indicators that align with inspection judgements. The SEND Code of Practice (last updated 12 September 2024) continues to emphasise person-centred, co-produced planning and the graduated response; the integrated framing helps improve EHCP quality and reviews by clarifying constructs and avoiding tokenism.

In practice, the findings support a more holistic and strengths-informed approach to inclusion that recognises learning needs and individual strengths as interdependent rather than separate domains. This may help bridge neurodiversity's emphasis on systemic change with the more practically operationalised tools often associated with strengths-based approaches. The integrated framework also aligns with broader traditions of inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning and rights-based approaches to disability, particularly through its emphasis on flexibility, participation and environmental adaptation (Florian, 2015; Norwich, 2014; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; Rose, 2000).

Limitations and directions for future research

A key limitation of this desk-based study was the absence of co-production with neurodivergent individuals. This is particularly important given the neurodiversity movement's origins within the neurodivergent community. The study should therefore be viewed as part of a wider research agenda focused on the ethical development and co-produced refinement of these concepts.

Caution should be exercised in generalising the findings. Future research should replicate the methodology across other domains, such as healthcare and workplace contexts, to further examine how these concepts are interpreted and operationalised. However, Walker and Avant's concept analysis enabled a more precise examination of defining attributes, antecedents, consequences and conceptual ambiguity than theoretical review alone (De Boeck et al., 2023). Finally, future research should examine how neurodiversity and strengths-based approaches can be more precisely embedded within educational policy to avoid their reduction to broad or tokenistic markers of inclusion.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Alexandra Sewell: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; supervision. **Alice Holloway:** Investigation; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Granted by the University of Worcester ethics panel.

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