University at Buffalo School of Social Work inSocialWork Podcast Series

Supporting Neurodivergent Students: From Classrooms to Research

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Peter Sobota [00:00:09] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the In Social Work podcast. I'm Peter Sobota. It's good to have you along, everybody. The concept of neurodiversity recognizes and values natural differences in human brain function. This term covers conditions such as autism, ADHD, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, and it's been highlighted in recent educational, medical, political, and social discussion. Given the prevalence and increased identification of these differences, social workers and social work educators would be well-served to learn about and understand how neurodiversity impacts clients, colleagues, and social work students in higher education. On today's show, our guest, Dr. Jennifer Greenfield, will describe what neurodiveristy is how those affected cope and succeed and how knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity can be utilized by social workers and social work educators to support diverse clients and students in the settings in which we interact with them. Dr. Greenfield will argue that for social work professionals, understanding neurodiversity is essential to providing effective and inclusive support for people with varied neurological profiles. And she'll conclude by discussing the impact of current federal policy changes on this population. Jennifer Greenfield, PhD, is associate professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work and the Noble Institute for Healthy Aging. Hi Jen, welcome to In Social Work.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:01:48] Good to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

Peter Sobota [00:01:50] Oh no, our pleasure. Thanks very much. So if we could, and especially for me, could we begin very simply? I don't want to assume anything. When we say the word neurodivergent or use neurodiversions to talk about a person, what exactly are we talking about?

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:02:13] So it's funny that you say that it's not that simple because it's not at all, the word itself itself is pretty complicated. So I'm going to step back and talk first about the word neurodiverse or neurodiversity, which is basically the principle that people are different, right, which we all know, but that our brains are different. And so we all have different types of brain wiring different, you know tendencies. Form our, you know, how we respond in social situations, how we perform cognitively and so on. And so the principle is that there is neurodiversity in the world. There are some kinds of brain structures that are more typical than others. And so, you now neuroscientists will often do brain scans and you know the majority of people have a brain that looks a certain way, right? Or brain components that interact with one another in a certain way. And so then there's another percentage of the population. I've seen some estimates around 20% or so

of brains are different. But how they're different is there's diversity in that, right? And so neurodivergence in its most basic form is really just referring to those brains that are in that 20% rather than the 80%. And so the 80% is often referred to as neuro-typical and then the 20% would be referred to often as neurodivergent. Now, neurodivergence..

Peter Sobota [00:03:52] Even the language is interesting here, isn't it?

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:03:55] It's tough, right? Because Divergent, for some people, has some negative connotations. It can come with some stigma and so on. And so there is a movement among some to kind of reclaim some of this language or to use different language. One of my favorites is NeuroSpicy, which then implies that that 80% maybe is neuro-bland. I don't know, but. At any rate, to really think of it as a way that some folks are different and that they process information differently, that they interact with others differently, and maybe generate thought in different and interesting ways. And with that, then because of those differences, as if we think about activities like education, which is specifically designed to engage us cognitively as well as socially. There are ways in which that neurodivergence then plays out in those educational contexts that I think is important and under examined.

Peter Sobota [00:05:06] Yes, and that's something that we had, you know, you and I had planned to talk about, and we will do that later, thank you. Yeah, it's really interesting because at least for me, you know kind of even the word disability strikes me as kind of like a socially constructed word, right? And I think that would apply to neurodiverse or whatever neuro-typical. So I think- Part of what I'm curious about, and I'm sure we're going to get to this, is how we can kind of reauthor that cultural narrative about what it means to be neurodiverse. Because as you were describing some of the distinguishing features, my reaction, quite frankly, was, those are desirable qualities, you know, I mean.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:05:58] Absolutely. And, you know, I think there is a whole conversation ongoing right now about balancing our understanding of neurodivergence, because among some, there's a tendency to maybe over romanticize and say, Oh, it's superpower, or, you Yes, and. There are also ways in which these things can really become challenging in certain contexts. And as you say, a lot of this is really socially constructed. I have to brag. One of my kids, I am neurodivergent, my children are neurodiversion, it's often quite genetic, but one of my kid's left school one day at age 10, feeling really frustrated with an encounter that he had had. And he said a quote that has really stuck with me, which is, I don't have a learning disability. I learn really well. And that's true, he does. What he said he has, he said, I have a school disability.

Speaker 3 [00:07:13] Ooooooooooooooooo

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:07:14] And I think that that's really profound, right? That for a lot of folks, it's a work disability or a school disability. It's the context that makes being neurodivergent difficult.

Peter Sobota [00:07:29] Yeah, and as a couple of social workers, you know, the person in environment people, right? This should be right up our alley. And I, you know I hope we could get to that later. You know, it's interesting. Yeah, I'm having a bunch of ideas just even talking with you about the playing field here, but. I spent about six years on the school board in my kind of rural community. So this is a relatively small school where, you know, everybody knows everybody. We would have a lot of conversations about special education. Um, there was, there were of course, lots of resources dedicated to that. Um,

parents were not always happy with those and advocated for their children, which is of course what I would do. But what was very interesting at the same time, and again, not to over romanticize, it seemed weird to me that we spent so much time and money talking about, I'm doing air quotes on a podcast, on neurodivergence, but we didn't talk a lot. We didn't have programs for so-called air quotes, again, gifted children.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:08:45] I mean, we could do a whole separate podcast on this alone. I continue to be quite frustrated at the lack of awareness of what we call twice exceptional. Kids, adults, et cetera. So folks who have some kind of identified neurodivergence, learning disability, so on, and also are identified as gifted. And there's. There are many who argue that giftedness actually falls under the umbrella of neurodivergence. And there is research that indicates that brain structures among people who are gifted are different than the brain structures among the neuro-typical. And some of the challenges, some of the characteristics, let me say, of neuro-divergent, it's quite common, for instance, for there to be sensory processing differences. That is also common with giftedness, and it's related to brain structure and how much information is being taken in and how needs to be processed all at once. Gifted brain structures tend to be more complex, have more connections across the different parts of the brain. And so if you can imagine, that can lead to sensory overwhelm quite quickly if all of the synapses are firing at once, processing everything in the environment all at one. That can be really challenging. And the way that that can often express itself is through when there's cognitive testing done, they will often be identified as having slow processing speed, which it may be a reflection of how long it takes to pull the one thought that's relevant to the question you got asked when all the other ones are happening all at once. And you can see how that might be a problem, not just for gifted folks, but also for folks with ADHD who may have a similar challenge in kind of filtering out the one relevant sentence from all the others that may be flying around in their head. And so there are a lot of overlaps between giftedness, ADHD, autism, sometimes OCD. And so I think that this twice exceptional category is, first of all, very underdiagnosed. Um, and then, um, secondly, our systems are, especially our educational and K-12 systems are set up in a way that compartmentalizes people into one or the other. And I will give as an example that one of my kids, the same one who had that quote earlier, was told that he shouldn't take a foreign language in middle school, um because he has learning disabilities, even though he's also identified as gifted. And having ADHD means that having challenging subject matter is really important to keeping a student engaged, right? And so for students who have ADHD and giftedness, even though they may have a slow processing speed, it may be really important to get them into the more challenging educational experiences so that they can stay engaged in the class instead of getting bored and zoning out or hopping around or whatever. So this idea that you either can engage in courses for gifted folks, or you can receive like supports for a learning difference. It's a really, really harmful kind of dichotomy that many of our school systems kind of impose on our kids. And as a result, students either pursue a kind of gifted track and then are thought of as gifted or they pursue. The track that gets them like in classic sports and those kinds of things. And so by high school, we see this divergence of that there are very few people who are identified as 2E and instead you have your special ed kids and you have you're gifted kids and they're seen as different.

Peter Sobota [00:12:51] Wow.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:12:52] It's problematic.

Peter Sobota [00:12:53] There you're right. There is a podcast there. Yeah. Yeah, I, you know, I spent a long time believing that, you know, kind of as per Dewey, that education was the great equalizer in society. And I was disappointed to say the least, at least. And now I know I'm not alone. Okay, that's another podcast someday. Sort of. Yeah so can you talk a little bit if it's even possible, again, in a very broad way, about the social-emotional impacts or features, not impacts, but features, perhaps, of, again a broad definition of neurodivergence. What are the challenges at the social level?

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:13:44] So, you know, it's impossible to give like one defining step, right? And many definitions of neurodivergence include things like, as I've mentioned already, autism, ADHD, OCD, specific learning disorders such as dysgraphia or dyslexia, dyspraxia, et cetera. But then also things like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder. Major depression and a whole cluster of anxiety disorders are often put into that category as well. And there's research that shows that brain structures for some folks with those diagnoses are different than that neurotypical category, I get your quotes, neurotypical. So in terms of, if you think about the social, the ways that those diagnoses show up socially. Between depression and ADHD, they may look absurdly different, right? Depression, a person may retreat inward, may not want to engage socially, may have a kind of down affect when they are out in social circumstances, right. But with ADHD, it could be with some folks. That they're super bubbly and enthusiastic and they've got a ton of energy and that they are like all over the room. And so you might not think of those two things as being related, right? On the other hand, folks with ADHD have a higher tendency to experience depression and anxiety and so there are times when those things may overlap, right. And in both major depression and in ADHD, just using those as examples. Neurotransmitters are implicated, dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, and so on. And so there are actually some underlying kind of chemical similarities, even though they express themselves quite differently. One of the things that can be difficult with some of these diagnoses is that, there can be challenges with emotional regulation. And the amygdala is the brain structure that is most commonly associated with these things. And in many scans of folks with ADHD, autism, major depression, a lot of these things, a smaller amygdale volume is detected. And so, and even in giftedness, sometimes that is true as well. And it is thought that with giftedness, a lot of the information processing actually occurs through the emotional processing features of the brain. And so. Kind of overstressing the amygdala, and then sometimes having a smaller volume of амугдала, even as it's being overstressed, can then cause folks to be impulsive, sometimes to react very strongly to stimuli that a neurotypical brain wouldn't react as strongly to. One of the things that I learned about ADHD that I find really fascinating, and I've really recognized in both myself and in many of my students, is something called rejection sensitivity dysphoria, which is a tendency to take any kind of hint of like negative feedback, even a perceived, somebody rolls their eyes, you think it's about you, and then suddenly you spiral out. Thinking, oh my God, that person hates me. Maybe it's like, oh, the whole faculty, you know? Like, I'm super easy to do in a faculty meeting, right?

Peter Sobota [00:17:36] Exactly. Yes, of course.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:17:38] So, um. It actually has a home in the brain. There's a reason that that occurs. And in many folks who are neurodivergent, it is a form of trauma response. Even though the stimulus that triggered it is not something that a neurotypical person would identify as like, oh my gosh, that person just experienced trauma. For the person with autism or ADHD or major depression or these kinds of things, it may have been the same for them that it was trauma and then their brain is busy processing it that way. And so if you think about what that would look like in a normal classroom setting or a

busy train platform or all the different social settings you might find yourself in, that can make just being out in the world quite exhausting. And can cause folks sometimes to react in ways that a neurotypical world would not expect.

Peter Sobota [00:18:43] Yeah, I think, yeah, and, you know, I'll kind of come clean here. Part of what was behind my original question was an experience I had quite a long time ago with one of my neighbors. One of my neighbors is neurodivergent and, I've known her since she was born. And we used to go to playground in my neighborhood with I have two boys. And there would be kids like on this jungle gym thing, all these various, people are familiar with these. And I was just watching her and she's absolutely adorable. She was playing and running around like everybody else. And then I would watch her engage in proximity with another child who maybe she didn't know. And what was absolutely heartbreaking is half the time I would watch that child slowly figure out a way to get away from her. And I mean that just speaks to I think a lot of the things you just said. But you know those are your early life experiences and it was it's it's heartbreaking. I think to this day.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:20:10] Yeah, and those early experiences can lead some, not everybody, but some folks to learn and adapt quite quickly and engage in what is called masking. And so especially folks with autism, but also with ADHD. Begin to learn. The social norms and it really is studying it like it's a textbook but out in the playground or in the classroom. And sometimes it shows up as like mirroring the behaviors that they see around them, repeating the jokes that they, see on TikTok or whatever, because it got a laugh. And so then it's funny and so then repeating it. But sometimes it's figuring out, Well, what did I say that made that kid? Go away last time, and then I'm never going to say that again, right? And just kind of keeping a catalog of the things that didn't work and then doing something different next time, which again, if you think about it, that's an exhausting way to Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:21:17] And it also puts the burden of self-reflection and change on only one person. It's just, ugh. All right. Well, thank you for that, like, primer. I think that's a great place to maybe move into what we had kind of planned to talk about a little more specifically. And that is given the prevalence of... Um, neurodiversity in the general population, um, I think we have to assume, and I just know this because students tell me routinely, um. We have to, I think, acknowledge that neurodivergent folks will be showing up, um in schools of social work, whether it's a, you know, a bachelor's, master's or doctoral program, quite frankly. In some ways it would make perfect sense they would show up in in those settings for it. I'm probably stealing your thunder there So let's focus there for a bit. Just my first question would be, in your opinion, or you want to combine that with the literature as well, of course, do that. How well or not so well does social work education accommodated neurodivergent students? I know I have some opinions about this, but I'm dying to hear yours.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:22:51] Well, and let me pause and be diplomatic, right? So the first thing I will say, and as you mentioned, I do think that social work is a field that is attractive and well-suited to some folks who are neurodivergent. And we know that, for instance, fields like emergency medicine, firefighting, those kinds of kind of first responder types of fields tend to draw folks who have ADHD. And social work I think is no different in that. I have ADHD, I know that I'm the person who's good in a crisis, right? Because that's when my brain suddenly starts to work. I get flooded with dopamine and I am ready to go. It's all the rest of the time that's not an emergency I experienced some challenges, right? And so in a setting where everything's an emergency, then it's a place where somebody whose

brain really responds well to crisis, to quick deadlines, to variety, those sorts of things. That's where an ADHD brain will flourish, right. Conversely, if you think about, for instance, Autism. Um, where else other than academia, can you do a deep dive into your passion area, learn everything there is to know about it, the more you learn, the more praise you get, and you get invited to go talk about it. Yeah. In a room, just like the real world and roll their eyes. Right. Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:24:41] Yeah, right, right.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:24:42] So, it's like perfect for folks who love to do the deep dive, right? And whether it's ADHD or autism, that's one of the predominant characteristics. And so, it seems like, you know, academia would be a great place, right. And there are sometimes behaviors, tendencies, needs that are not well accommodated in higher Ed? And particularly in social work. And so differences in communication styles, for instance, is one where some folks who are neurodivergent have a tendency to speak very directly, maybe sometimes without like, you know, a layer of diplomacy that we are socialized into in academia. I just used it.

Speaker 3 [00:25:38] Hahaha

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:25:41] And can also speak impulsively and so if you think about the students in the classroom who answer every question or who interrupt when you're in the middle of talking about something to give their example or who maybe take you off on a tangent that isn't where you wanted to go and then you have to reel them back in in order to get back to what you were talking about. I know that as instructors we've all had situations like that. And I've even had situations where a faculty member has come to me and said, I've got a real problem. This student is so aggressive in my classroom. They just won't stop. They keep peppering me with questions or every time I ask a question, they insist on answering it. And so it's framed as a problem, as like negative behavior, as something that needs to be corrected, right? And I've seen it happen where that student in the classroom starts to speak by like week three and everybody else in the room starts to roll their eyes. They start to play with the paper. They shift in their seat. They're giving all of these nonverbal social cues to this person saying, please stop talking, right? And the person who is neurodivergent, who's talking a lot, does not receive those nonveral cues. And then that miscommunication, There's an attempt to communicate that's not received. Then stirs up anger. And so the other people are like, this person is insisting, even though we've told them, air quotes, we've called them not to, and the only communication was nonverbal, then it's not received. And so then that person is the one who is aggressive, you know, intentional in offending people, et cetera.

Peter Sobota [00:27:26] Yeah, challenging, right?

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:27:28] That's it. I see this classrooms all the time.

Peter Sobota [00:27:30] Me too, yeah. I agree.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:27:31] So thinking about ways to reframe that first, you know, as the faculty member in charge of the room, thinking about that student differently, then prompting others to use verbal communication instead of non-verbals. Thinking about ways to channel that student's enthusiasm and often deep knowledge, right? Into ways that can be helpful in the classroom. Those are all things that the faculty members and then other people in the classroom should. Um, spend energy on instead of problematizing

the one person and, you know, forcing them to leave the classroom wondering why everyone hates them, you know? Um, so that's one thing, um, you know, with ADHD, I know we often will also, um I have, you know, colleagues who complain all the time about students who miss assignments, who only, you know, do half the assignment and then the whole other half is missing. Who ghost them, right? They just stopped communicating because they missed an assignment and now all of a sudden they don't answer emails. I've been that student, okay? I know that student really well. And there are reasons that these things occur that have roots often in neurodivergence, but also roots in the fact that the neurod divergence was highly masked and wasn't caught. Until the student reached a point where the coping skills they had developed no longer work or don't work as well.

Speaker 3 [00:29:05] Mm-hmm.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:29:05] Could be as an undergrad that just the volume of freedom that's required kind of makes everything spin out. I've seen it happen in a doctoral program where they they make it all the way through and then they get into a PhD program and I've had neurodivergent students tell me all of the strategies that they had used to get through everything through their masters no longer worked in a PhD Program and if you think about it the way we structured PhD programs is completely different. Than everything that students have done before. And we don't do much, if anything, to prepare students for the different ways they need to work.

Peter Sobota [00:29:45] Yeah, and in a beautiful case scenario, we have supported neurodivergent students all along. We've given them structure. We've made courses accessible. I laugh that in the, I think now, 30 years that I've been teaching, it's syllabus are now like mini books now because we have like I've seen 18 and 19 page syllabus. So and but you know and that's not all bad. Some of it's I think a little weird but some of it is is really helpful but then you get into a doctoral program where you're now expected to take all sorts of initiative right and and it's such a stark change. Right. You it's almost like a setup.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:30:34] Yep, it really does feel like a setup. And the more I've thought about it, the more I realized this is unbelievable, really, what we do. We really set students up to fail. And it's not just neurodivergent students. I think it's a shock to the system for anybody, right? But in particular, for students with neurodiverse, I think that we really are setting them up, if not to fail, to at least struggle and burn out. And so burnout rates are high. And so, another thing is that it is really difficult, even in those programs, you said like in an ideal setting, we've structured everything, we've provided all these supports, but there's even, I just read an article recently that was published last year. It was from the field of occupational therapy, but it was talking about how the framework of universal design for learning isn't completely helpful. They surveyed neurodivergent students in particular and asked about the several different implementations of universal design for learning and discovered that several of them are harmful, not helpful, right? And if you think about it, somebody with autism may really need a lot of structure and specificity. They may need to know exactly what topic to write on or if not what topic. You know, have clearly defined kind of categories to help them choose a really well-structured rubric so that they understand what's being assessed. You know, all of that. And I think our field has moved a lot toward using rubrics and that kind of thing, which can, a well-done rubric can be really helpful. Most of them aren't well done, but a well done one can be helpful. But with somebody with ADHD who really needs to have variety and choice, that level of specificity can feel overwhelming in terms of its rigidity.

Speaker 3 [00:32:40] And

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:32:40] doesn't give them room to thrive in doing the spirit of the assignment, if not following the letter of the assignments, right? Yeah. And so it's really difficult to design things in a classroom setting that work really well for all of the different neuro types, you know? So I think we as faculty are kind of set up to fail too, unfortunately.

Peter Sobota [00:33:04] Yeah, it's it's the nature of Yeah, no, I was kind of thinking while you're talking, I was thinking about, you know, broadly speaking, social work education and even our profession. And we're a reflection of the overall society, which is, I mean, let's talk about, let me talk about social work for a second. We're kind of one of my lover's quarrels with the profession. That I'm proud to be a member of, but we're kind of, our history is kind of ableist. Not kind of. Pretty ableist, you just got finished making the point. You know, we've even had a role historically in the eugenic movement, I mean, for God's sake. So I mean there is lots of room for that kind of self-reflection. And I think I may be oversimplifying it. I don't have the expertise that you do, but adaptations and viewpoints and structural changes that would benefit neurodivergent students. Would benefit all students. It's not like we're doing anything completely benevolent. It would help everybody in many ways.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:34:34] I will use as an example to make a course accessible to students with, for instance, like a visual disability. We should have all of our documents in our learning management system, Canvas or whatever, all of those saved in a way that is accessible for the text reading apps, right? So whether it's a PDF or a website or whatever it is, you know, a video with caption, like it all needs to be accessible for those like screen reader things, right? Well, having done that in courses, I've had students who have a long commute, who say thank you so much because they have their articles that they need to read read to them while they drive in, you know Denver traffic. To get to their destinations, students who are in internships who have to drive all over the town or whatever, they can use that in their car. So a lot of the things that we implement with a universal design for learning framework, the whole point is that they're universally beneficial, right? Yeah. And so I see sometimes some resistance to implementing the changes that are needed. Sometimes, you know, because they are time consuming, we as faculty are seriously overstressed in terms of how much work we have to get done. And so taking the time to like redo all the PDFs, put captions and transcripts in for videos, et cetera, can be challenging. But if we think about the fact that it's not for one student, you now, and that it gonna facilitate success for many of our students across many years, right? Then I think that the value of that time increases. And so I know that I've become more willing to do those things as I've learned how beneficial it can be for a variety of different reasons.

Peter Sobota [00:36:42] Yeah, and I will not claim to be, you know. Great at this. I've learned over the years and am still learning. I had a blind student in an online course and I didn't know it until about two or three weeks before the course began and it was a major heavy lift and I'd be lying if I said I found it time-consuming and frustrating, but that's my and our fault, right? It's not, and, but, so pretty much I had to do everything to make the proper accommodations. The student taught me how to do it better, which again goes back to that point of your point earlier about, you know, we've implemented this stuff and the neurodivergent students give us feedback. It never occurs to us rarely, at least, to ask them before we develop them because they have the expertise. This student taught me a ton of things and the, I guess, neuro-typical students in the course loved the changes that were made. And so there's your real life example of just how this works, but some of the real obstacles in the environment that we find ourselves. So, yeah, so you've covered

some of the obstacles that are inherent and in place already, and you've kind of touched, I think, on what What social work education would look like if it was evaluated and implemented through a neurodivergent lens? But would you like to say more about that? What, I guess my question is, besides what you've already said, are there other ways that, you know, if we put on a lens that would inform everything we see, would it How would things look? How would they be different?

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:39:05] Like I said, I think that it's difficult to identify any one size fits all changes. But one thing that I have learned is that starting each class with curiosity...

Speaker 3 [00:39:20] Hmm

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:39:21] is an essential first step. Not assume who's in the room with you, and instead ask, right? And so instead of saying, oh, I think my students are all gonna really benefit from having a lot of choice in all of the assignments that they do without realizing that for some percentage of students, that's actually gonna increase.

Speaker 3 [00:39:46] They're inside.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:39:48] Well, for some, it will be really a beautiful thing. Yeah, you know? So ask, right? Do a little survey at the beginning of the quarter, get to know you kind of thing, and ask, do you benefit from being able to choose different modes of communicating when completing an assignment? Do you prefer group work or do you prefer to work by yourself? Those kinds of questions, I think, can really help you to understand who's in the room. And you may have some students, for instance, for whom fluorescent lights trigger migraines, right? But other students who really feel the need to have bright light. And it may be difficult to accommodate both needs, but it's important to know that you have both needs in the room, so that if there are times when you can have the lights off, that's gonna help the students who need it off, but you'll know that it may be increasing anxiety for others. If you need to have the lights on all the time, know that some folks may have to step away because the lights are triggering migraines. And so you'll understand why students are leaving. And maybe you can provide alternative ways for them to consume some of the content so that they don't have to sit under fluorescent lights for three hours, right? It's things like that. Direct communication is one where I think that we all could benefit and it's so ironic that in social work.

Speaker 3 [00:41:21] That's why I'm laughing.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:41:25] Delivering critical feedback in a way that's direct and kind requires skill and nuance, but it I think is a bare minimum that we should be able to ask of instructors. We have to be willing to tell students when their work is not meeting expectations and we have to willing to deliver that information in a way. Is kind, isn't gonna trigger a downward spiral and they're suddenly gonna disappear, but also is, and I'm gonna use my favorite social work word, operationalizable, right? That instead of saying, well, the grammar in this is terrible, help them understand which parts of the grammar could really use some work and direct them to a resource to get assistance with that, right. I had a student that I worked with a few years ago, who love to use semicolons in places where maybe a semicolon didn't belong. Well, say that, you know, let's review commas and semicolon. This is something that many people get wrong. There's nothing wrong with needing a refresher on it. Let's talk about it. And then, you in the process, you may learn that the person grew up in a household where English wasn't the language spoken at home. You know, there's all kinds of reasons. And so don't bring assumptions into the

conversation, including don't assume that a student isn't willing to receive the feedback, right? So I think having some clear communication, I always start a class by saying, I tend to be very direct in my communication and I never mean to be unkind. If you ever receive something and you're worried that I'm thinking badly about you because of the way I delivered my feedback, just tell me. Because I've been there and I've been the student who spiraled out of control because I thought my professor hated me, right? And so just sort of naming and normalizing, these things happen.

Peter Sobota [00:43:28] And modeling it, yeah. I mean, I've learned my lesson. I have tried to do many, I have implemented many of the things that you've suggested, but not after not doing that for quite a while. I mean I've had to chase, fortunately this was a while ago, I've have to stop my class to chase a, not chase, but follow a student who has left the room because I was worried about their welfare. And, and now when a student gets up, we have an understanding, and they are more apt to communicate on their way out. They'll just turn to me and say, I got this up. And it just is so much easier. If you just give people the opportunities to kind of is normalize. I guess I'm not sure that's the greatest word, but normalize the unique needs that students have. So, you know, while you were talking, we were focusing on students, but as you've made very clear, those of us who are on faculties or interacting with faculty and staff, we're working with neurodivergent folks too. So I also wondered to what degree neurodivergence gets played out. In faculty relationships and interactions, and is not helpful. Let's put it that way, lack of knowledge. I don't know if you wanted to comment on that, but that was a thought that I had while you were talking because I'm going through the Rolodex in my head of all the mistakes that I have made.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:45:18] I think that it's really important and it is something we should be talking about more. We know that historically ADHD, autism, OCD, you know, a lot of these things have been significantly under diagnosed, under assessed. We are now seeing rapid increases in diagnoses among adults. It is only with this last version of the DSM, that it was possible to have a diagnosis of autism and ADHD. It used to be you could only have one. Right. And so we are suddenly seeing assessments and clinical understandings catch up to maybe better reflect the human experience, though certainly not.

Peter Sobota [00:46:09] Even though it was right in front of us for decades, you mean?

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:46:12] The other thing is that we are now understanding more about kind of the hormonal roots of some of the challenges that come. And so for instance, a thing that doesn't get talked about a lot is that perimenopause is a time when ADHD symptoms show up in ways that they hadn't before. And so we now see a phenomenon where people of a certain age. Experiencing hormonal changes, may suddenly seem to be falling apart. Like all of a sudden they're not as organized as they used to be, or they're having trouble finding the word in a faculty meeting or things like that. And that may very well be related to some underlying variations in neurotransmitters that's occurring. And so that's leading to more diagnoses, but it's also, I think, a lot of people haven't even heard about it yet. And so they may be unaware that this is what's going on. So I think we, I have noticed that in higher ed among faculty, that there is a tendency to do what I described earlier that we do with students, which is to sort of assign negative intent. To behaviors that we deem as diverging from the norm. Instead of seeing like, huh, that person communicates really directly. I wonder what that's about, right? Or that person like interrupts a lot in faculty meetings. I wonder, what's going on there? One of the things that I haven't mentioned yet that's common with autism ADHD and giftedness is justice sensitivity. And so that's another reason you may find a lot of neurodivergence in social

work. We're like social justice advocates, right? That's what we're supposed to be. But you see folks sometimes in the field of social work who are focused on a justice issue almost to the exclusion of everything else, right. And are talking about it ad nauseam and are really critical of, you know, what's happening elsewhere. Like, you we're all living in this time of cognitive dissonance, right? Like, you know our democracy is falling apart, right. The world is like literally on fire and I still have to figure out what to cook for dinner.

Speaker 3 [00:49:07] Right.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:49:09] And somehow as a social worker, as a human who cares about the world, I have to make an ethical choice about where to purchase the ingredients for the dinner with kids who are super particular about what they're going to eat, right? Often like brand specific about what food choices they make. And so living in a world like that, where justice is driving most of our actions can in and of itself be exhausting and also infuriating, right? And can lead to a sense of like, I don't feel like I can take any action or can lead to a since that I must take action always. So I see sometimes people who engage in constant doom scrolling, right. We know from the research that social media can trigger dopamine hits, right? There's an instant gratification. And so folks with ADHD have a tendency to really lean on social media and like, you know, their phones and stuff. And then if they've got this justice sensitivity, and they're really focused on the injustices in the world, it can be a preoccupying thing that really makes it difficult to get to the business of the school. Right, or the business of the home. And so these are challenges, I think in the field of social work that often go unnamed and we often don't link these behaviors with underlying neurodivergence. And instead we think about like, oh, that's the faculty member who always talks about XYZ and maybe not realizing like, oh, that may be an expression of the trauma that they're experiencing because there's this. That's making their amygdala go nuts.

Peter Sobota [00:51:11] Yeah, it's amazing that you said that because as I've been listening to you speak, I was thinking about this kind of sensitivity that you're talking about or acknowledgement is really, there are many many parallels to a trauma-informed perspective. So we're not asking for, we're not reinventing the wheel here in many ways by asking people to be accommodating and acknowledging. So we're kind of bumping up against our time. And I don't wanna miss this opportunity for you and I to end up on a list if we're not on one already. And speaking of exhausting and infuriating, are you ready? I'm ready. All right. What would be your take if you accept the challenge? To talk about how the, The Trump administration policies have impacted neurodivergent folks.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:52:16] One thing that must be said immediately is. I worried about even coming on the podcast and naming that I am neurodivergent because that does potentially literally put me on a list. You mentioned eugenics earlier and there is a lot of fear that the registry that this administration has proposed making and may actually be trying to make by reaching out to pharmaceutical companies or pharmacies, medical practices, so on Tick, tick. You know, get lists of people who take certain medications that are sometimes useful. So if that list is being compiled or if it's about to be, what do they then do with it? Does it mean that folks with certain diagnoses don't get access to medical care?

Speaker 3 [00:53:13] Mm-hmm.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:53:13] Can't access student loans or, you know, like what does it mean, right? So that's one thing that I worry.

Peter Sobota [00:53:22] Yeah, well, they're dismantling the Department of Education. They're the funders of special ed.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:53:34] And not just the funders, but also the enforcers, right? So, you know, in being a parent of kids who are in K-12 public schools, they have certain rights and protections that sometimes get violated. And what is my recourse, right. I've literally had to think about if I were to pursue some kind of complaint. I live in a state of Colorado where I feel fairly confident that our state administration would uphold, you know, requirements. But if it got to the federal level, would there be any enforcement of, you know, the 504, you you know, requirements. I don't know. Absolutely. So, and If there is some kind of like rollback or dismantling of those supports for neurodivergent kids, then what does that mean for the undergrads that we'll get in 10 or 15 years, right? Will they have gone through an educational system where their needs aren't met? Will they essentially be gate kept? Like, will we not see as many students because they didn't get the supports they needed? As young kids and so they don't have the GPA in high school to get into the schools, you know, those sorts of things.

Peter Sobota [00:55:07] It's it just it's like peeling open an onion of just impact after impact. Yeah, one of the things that I've been thinking about is if. And I could have this wrong if I do, please correct me. But if if if the Department of Education and the services they've historically provided are going to get dismantled or more likely subsumed under health and human services. My fear is under health and human services, the response is gonna be medication, not accommodation, differentiation, and understanding.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:55:48] Well, and it can go both ways too, because then I've also seen people who say that, for instance, like Ritalin and Adderall are overprescribed and that, I mean, they're controlled substances because there's this terrible fear that they're being, and I do think they sometimes get abused and misused. There is a stroke though, that for folks who genuinely have ADHD, remembering to take the pills, getting the new prescription, picking it up, all of those are executive function challenges that really demonstrate that it's not addictive. Can't remember, don't pick it up. So, are there gonna be shortages or inability to get those prescriptions, which for some people are life-changing and even life-saving medicines, right?

Peter Sobota [00:56:42] Exactly.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:56:43] And if you just try to medicate the behaviors without providing the other supports, it really is missing the mark because so much of the stuff, so many of the reasons that neurodivergent folks run up against barriers in our social systems, in education, workplaces, and so on, is not about, something you can medicate, right? It's about a mismatch of communication.

Peter Sobota [00:57:17] It's that environment again.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:57:18] Environment needs, you know, all those things. And so if we are medicalizing this too much, then we're gonna miss all of the other ways that we could adapt and change our systems to make them a place where neurodivergent folks can thrive, sorry. So yeah, I mean, these are concerns that I have. That some of those changes that we were talking about, like different ways of approaching the classrooms, different ways, understanding our colleagues, all of those are things that happen outside of policy, right?

Peter Sobota [00:57:58] Mm-hmm.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:57:58] Um, and if we change and adapt the way that we interact with one another and, you know, it's a fundamental thing, but sort of approach each other with grace and curiosity. Instead of being so quick to assign ill-intent, um, then maybe we don't need to rely as much on those federal policies that really are inadequate anyway. The accommodations process, you know, we could do a whole podcast on how that works, right? And so why not just try to make our classrooms better? And that affects everybody, you know, benefits everybody. And it's not... .

Peter Sobota [00:58:46] Including us. Yeah. Absolutely!

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:58:47] Right, and definitely us. And it makes it more fun to teach. Be real, you know, you're relational, you really get to know your students well, that kind of thing. And we don't need to have that dictated by the federal government.

Peter Sobota [00:58:57] Exactly. Jennifer Greenfield, thank you very much for joining us. It was extraordinarily helpful.

Jennifer Greenfiel [00:59:05] Thank you so much. I'm delighted that you're taking on this topic and I really appreciate the time to talk with you.

Peter Sobota [00:59:11] Thanks again to Jennifer Greenfield for taking the time to talk with us today. The In Social Work podcast team is comprised of the diverse skills and personalities possessed by Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant, guest coordinator and content contributor. Say hi, Ryan. (Ryan: Hello). And me, Peter Sobota. Thanks for joining us and we'll see you next time, everybody.