Universal Journal of Humanities and Multi-Disciplinary Studies (UJHMDS)
ISSN (Online): Request Pending
Volume-2 No. 3 || Jul – Sep 2026 || PP. 27 – 37
https://ujhmds.org/

Neurodiversity and Language Learning in Multilingual Educational Settings

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http://www.ujhmds.org/ || Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): July Issue

Date of Submission: 05-06-2026	Date of Acceptance: 18-06-2026	Date of Publication: 06-07-2026

ABSTRACT — This manuscript investigates the dynamic interplay between neurodiversity and language learning in multilingual educational environments, with an emphasis on how neurodivergent learners—specifically those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia—acquire additional languages when instruction and daily communication occur across two or more linguistic systems. Although previous research has separately explored neurodivergent cognition and multilingual pedagogy, there has been limited integration of these domains. Here, we adopt an interdisciplinary framework, synthesizing findings from cognitive neuroscience, applied linguistics, special education, and educational technology to illuminate how characteristic strengths (e.g., visual-spatial reasoning, hyperfocus, pattern recognition) and challenges (e.g., sensory sensitivities, working-memory constraints, executive-function deficits) of neurodivergent learners manifest in second-language acquisition processes. A convergent mixed-methods study was conducted over an academic year (September 2023–June 2024) in three urban public schools in multilingual regions of India. Forty-five neurodivergent students aged 10–14 (15 ASD, 15 ADHD, 15 dyslexia) participated alongside their 12 language teachers. Quantitative measures included standardized receptive vocabulary assessments (adapted Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test for L2) and productive grammar tests, administered at three time points to capture growth trajectories.

KEYWORDS — Neurodiversity, Multilingual Education, Language Acquisition, Inclusive Pedagogy, Neurodivergent Learners

INTRODUCTION

The concept of neurodiversity recognizes neurological variations—such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and

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dyslexia—as forms of natural human diversity rather than pathologies to be corrected. Originating from the autistic self-advocacy movement in the late 1990s, neurodiversity has since evolved into a theoretical lens that foregrounds strengths, accommodations, and societal inclusion (Armstrong, 2010; Singer, 2017). Concurrently, globalization, migration, and educational policy reforms have accelerated the prevalence of multilingual classrooms worldwide. In contexts such as India, South Africa, Canada, and numerous European nations, learners routinely navigate two or more languages—often combining a home or community language (L1) with an instructional or regional language (L2), and sometimes additional languages for international communication (García & Wei, 2014).

Figure-1.Enhancing Language Learning for Neurodivergent Students

Despite robust research on neurodivergent cognition—highlighting unique cognitive profiles characterized by hyperfocus, intense interests, pattern-recognition abilities, and sensory processing variations (Mottron et al., 2013; Barkley, 2015; Eden et al., 2014)—and extensive literature on second-language acquisition in multilingual settings (Cummins, 2000; Odlin, 1989), the intersection of these domains has been relatively underexplored. Research focusing on neurodivergent learners often treats language learning within monolingual frameworks, while multilingual education scholarship tends to assume neurotypical learning trajectories. This disciplinary siloing overlooks how neurodivergent learners experience additional languages and misses opportunities to design pedagogies that harness their cognitive strengths while addressing processing challenges.

Central to understanding neurodiversity-informed multilingual education is acknowledging that neurodivergent learners present heterogeneous profiles. For example, autistic students may excel at discerning linguistic patterns and rule-based grammar but encounter difficulties in pragmatic language use, social communication norms, and nuanced prosody (Eigsti et al., 2011). Learners with ADHD may display creativity and spontaneous verbal fluency but struggle with sustained attention, task initiation, and working-memory demands critical for vocabulary rote memorization (Crossman et al., 2015). Dyslexic students often exhibit deficits in phonological decoding but compensate through strong visual-spatial processing, holistic word recognition skills, and intuitive mapping between orthography and meaning (Henry et al., 2017).

Multilingual pedagogy encompasses a spectrum of instructional models—from transitional bilingual education and additive immersion to dual-language programs and translanguaging approaches—each with differing implications for cognitive processing demands and linguistic identity formation (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014). Practices such as code-switching, translanguaging, and cryptic language play harness metalinguistic awareness but require executive-control capacities that may be taxed for ADHD learners or those with working-memory constraints. Conversely, visual scaffolds and explicit grammar instruction may align well with autistic learners' preference for structured information and pattern-based learning, while

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interactive digital tools with multimodal interfaces support dyslexic learners' phonological processing challenges.

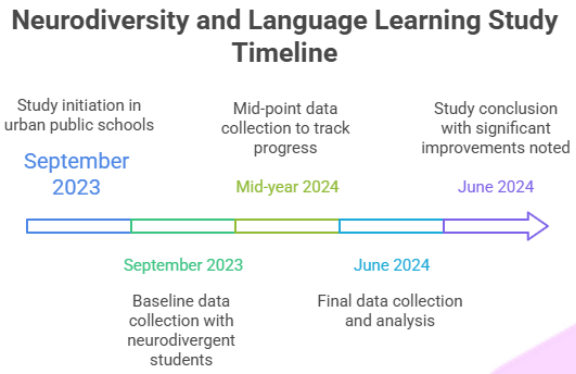

Figure-2.Neurodiversity and Language Learning Study Timeline

In policy terms, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 insists on inclusive, equitable quality education for all by 2030 (UN, 2015). National education frameworks—such as India's National Education Policy (2020) and Canada's provincial inclusive education mandates—emphasize the need for differentiation and accommodations yet often lack concrete guidance for neurodivergent learners in multilingual contexts. Teachers frequently report feeling underprepared to integrate neurodiversity principles into language instruction, citing limited professional development and a scarcity of evidence-based resources (Peeters, 2020).

This manuscript addresses these gaps through two primary objectives. First, it conducts an integrative literature review to synthesize research on neurodivergent cognition, multilingual second-language acquisition, and inclusive pedagogy, identifying promising intersections and critical voids. Second, it presents a convergent mixed-methods study in three multilingual urban schools investigating the effectiveness of multimodal, neurodiversity-responsive instructional strategies on language learning outcomes for ASD, ADHD, and dyslexic learners. By bridging these domains, this work seeks to inform both theory and practice, offering actionable recommendations for curriculum designers, teacher educators, and policymakers committed to equitable, strength-based multilingual instruction.

Literature Review

Neurodivergent Cognitive Profiles and Language Learning

The neurodiversity paradigm foregrounds cognitive differences—such as specialized strengths in pattern detection, focused attention, and creative problem-solving—as inherent varieties of human neurology rather than deficits to be remediated (Armstrong, 2010; Singer, 2017). In the context of language learning, these strengths and associated challenges manifest in distinct ways across neurodivergent populations. Autistic learners frequently demonstrate exceptional rote memory and capacity for systemizing linguistic structures but encounter difficulty with pragmatic language use, conversational turn-taking, and interpreting figurative speech (Mottron et al., 2013; Eigsti et al., 2011). ADHD learners may bring high levels of spontaneity and divergent thinking to communicative tasks, yet their distractibility, impulsivity, and episodic attention may hinder consistent engagement with structured language drills (Barkley, 2015; Crossman et al., 2015). Dyslexic students typically struggle with phonological decoding and orthographic mapping but leverage strong visual-spatial reasoning and holistic word recognition to compensate during reading and writing tasks (Eden et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2017).

Multilingual Pedagogical Models

Multilingual education encompasses a continuum—from transitional bilingual programs that phase out the home language to additive dual-language immersion models and dynamic translanguaging approaches encouraging fluid language use (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

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Research indicates that additive models, which maintain L1 while introducing L2, support cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, thereby facilitating cross-linguistic transfer (Odlin, 1989). However, success depends on instructional coherence, explicit scaffolding, and opportunities for meaningful interaction in each language (Norton, 2013; Elder, 2009).

Neurodiversity-Responsive Language Strategies

Emerging studies have begun to explore targeted strategies that align with neurodivergent learners' profiles in second-language contexts. Visual supports—such as pictorial flashcards, mind maps, and color-coded grammar charts—aid comprehension and long-term retention for dyslexic and autistic learners (Henry et al., 2017; Peeters, 2020). Explicit rule-based instruction, predictability in lesson sequences, and the use of social narratives reduce ambiguity and increase engagement among autistic students (Eigsti et al., 2011). For ADHD learners, breaking tasks into shorter segments, incorporating movement breaks, and embedding gamified elements in digital applications help maintain attention and motivation (Crossman et al., 2015; West, 2019).

Technology and Adaptive Learning

Educational technology offers promising avenues for individualized, neurodiversity-affirming multilingual instruction. Text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools support dyslexic writers by bypassing orthographic hurdles and reinforcing auditory comprehension (Henry et al., 2017). Interactive language-learning apps with adjustable difficulty levels, customizable interfaces, and multisensory exercises enable learners to self-pace and tailor practice to their needs (Peeters, 2020). Virtual reality environments and serious games can provide immersive, low-stakes contexts for autistic learners to practice pragmatic language skills while controlling sensory inputs (Peeters, 2020).

Gaps and Future Directions in Research

Despite growing interest, empirical studies explicitly examining neurodivergent learners in multilingual settings remain scarce. Most work to date focuses on monolingual contexts or addresses single conditions in isolation. There is a critical need for research that systematically compares neurodivergent subgroups (ASD, ADHD, dyslexia) across varied multilingual models and language pairings (e.g., tonal vs. non-tonal languages) to elucidate differential processing demands. Moreover, longitudinal investigations tracking language retention and psychosocial outcomes—such as identity formation, peer acceptance, and self-efficacy—are largely absent. Finally, there is limited analysis of teacher education programs and institutional policies in equipping educators to implement neurodiversity-responsive multilingual curricula.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as its overarching framework, emphasizing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to accommodate diverse learners (CAST, 2018). UDL principles align with neurodiversity values by proactively embedding flexibility and choice rather than retrofitting accommodations. Applied within multilingual classrooms, UDL guides the design of lesson plans that integrate visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and technological modalities to support ASD, ADHD, and dyslexic learners simultaneously.

By situating this research at the nexus of neurodiversity, multilingualism, and inclusive pedagogy, the current study aims to generate evidence-based recommendations for practice, identify promising adaptive technologies, and highlight areas where policy interventions and teacher training must evolve.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Inclusive education sits at the heart of numerous global and national policy agendas, notably the United Nations'

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Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (UN, 2015). Neurodivergent learners—estimated at approximately 1 in 44 for ASD (CDC, 2020), 5–10% for ADHD (Barkley, 2015), and up to 20% for dyslexia (Shaywitz, 2019)—represent a significant demographic within school-aged populations. Concurrently, multilingualism is increasingly recognized as both a cognitive asset and a social necessity in our interconnected world, with an estimated half of the global population using two or more languages daily (García & Wei, 2014).

In multilingual societies such as India, with 22 constitutionally recognized languages and hundreds of dialects, and South Africa, with 11 official languages, neurodivergent learners must navigate complex linguistic ecologies. Without targeted supports, this confluence of neurocognitive diversity and multilingual demands can exacerbate learning gaps, marginalization, and disparities in academic achievement. Standardized curricula and monolithic pedagogies frequently fail to address the processing needs of learners whose sensory, attention, and language-processing profiles deviate from the neurotypical majority.

Language proficiency profoundly influences socio-emotional well-being, peer relations, and future opportunities. When neurodivergent students encounter barriers—such as rapid pacing, reliance on auditory instructions, or tasks requiring sustained silent reading—they may experience frustration, withdrawal, or behavioral challenges that are often misinterpreted as "lack of motivation" or "behavioral issues." This can contribute to stigmatization, exclusion from peer groups, and heightened risk of school refusal or dropout (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Moreover, neurodivergent learners often exhibit high rates of anxiety and depression—conditions exacerbated by environments that do not accommodate their sensory and cognitive needs (Peeters, 2020).

Conversely, embracing neurodiversity within multilingual education yields manifold benefits. When designed inclusively, multilingual classrooms can tap into the strengths of divergent thinkers. Visual-spatial supports and pattern-based activities align with autistic learners' affinity for systems and scripts. Movement-integrated lessons engage ADHD learners by combining physical activity with cognitive tasks, reducing off-task behavior. Technology-mediated practice empowers dyslexic learners to bypass phonological hurdles and build confidence through multimodal reinforcement. These strengths-based approaches promote equity, belonging, and academic success.

From a broader societal perspective, professionals with neurodivergent profiles contribute unique perspectives, creativity, and specialized skills to multidisciplinary teams. Cultivating their linguistic capacities in multilingual contexts enhances their social integration and employability. In fields like engineering, technology, and research—areas where pattern recognition, attention to detail, and novel problem-solving are prized—multilingualism further amplifies cognitive flexibility and cross-cultural competency. Thus, the benefits of neurodiversity-affirming multilingual education extend beyond individual learners to workplaces and communities.

Policy frameworks must therefore evolve to endorse evidence-based accommodations and differentiated pedagogy. Teacher-preparation programs should integrate modules on neurodiversity, UDL, and bilingual pedagogy. Educational ministries must allocate resources for adaptive technologies—such as text-to-speech applications and interactive language platforms—and mandate ongoing professional development. Community stakeholders, including parents, therapists, and language advocates, play a vital role in co-creating inclusive curricula, ensuring that linguistic and neurocognitive diversity are valued rather than viewed as impediments.

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Ultimately, intertwining neurodiversity and multilingual education is a social justice imperative. By centering the experiences and strengths of neurodivergent learners within diverse linguistic contexts, educational systems can move closer to the ideal of truly inclusive, equitable learning for all. This study's findings and recommendations aim to guide policymakers, school leaders, and practitioners in realizing that vision—transforming multilingual classrooms into spaces where every learner's unique neurological and linguistic profile is recognized, supported, and celebrated.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to explore how neurodivergent learners engage with language learning in multilingual settings. Data were collected over a full academic year (September 2023–June 2024) in three urban public schools located in linguistically diverse regions of India. Each school offered instruction in two languages: the students' home language (L1) and the regional or national language (L2). The research protocol was approved by the institutional review boards of the participating districts, and written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians as well as assent from the students.

Participant Selection

Forty-five neurodivergent students aged 10 to 14 were purposively sampled based on documented diagnoses and teacher recommendations. These included 15 students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), 15 with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and 15 with dyslexia. Criteria for inclusion were (a) formal diagnosis by a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist, (b) regular class attendance, and (c) parental consent. Twelve language teachers—four at each school—also participated, having at least two years of experience with neurodivergent learners and receiving a brief orientation to the study's objectives.

Quantitative Measures

1. **Receptive Vocabulary Assessment**: The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) was adapted to L2 and administered at three time points—baseline (September), midyear (January), and endline (June)—to gauge growth in receptive vocabulary.
2. **Productive Grammar Test**: A bespoke grammar accuracy test, validated through pilot testing with neurotypical peers, assessed students' ability to generate grammatically correct sentences in L2. This test was administered concurrently with the PPVT.
3. **Academic Records**: Language subject scores from each term's official examinations were collected to triangulate standardized test performance with classroom achievement.

Qualitative Measures

1. **Classroom Observations**: Each student was observed for three one-hour sessions at baseline, midyear, and endline. Observations focused on (a) use of multimodal supports, (b) student engagement behaviors (e.g., on-task vs. off-task, self-initiated movement), and (c) peer interaction patterns, particularly during paired or group tasks. A structured rubric—with interrater reliability of .87—guided these observations.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews**: Individual interviews were conducted with all 45 students and their 12 teachers at midyear and endline. Interview protocols explored perceptions of instructional strategies, challenges encountered in multilingual tasks, and students' self-reported confidence and identity negotiation across languages. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

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- **Quantitative**: Repeated-measures ANOVA tested for significant changes across the three time points in vocabulary and grammar scores, with diagnostic group (ASD, ADHD, dyslexia) as a between-subjects factor. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons identified which groups experienced the greatest gains. Effect sizes (η^2) were calculated to assess practical significance.
- **Qualitative**: Transcripts and observation notes were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial codebook—derived from UDL principles and neurodiversity literature—guided coding, while remaining open to emergent themes. Two researchers independently coded each transcript, achieving a Cohen's kappa of .82; discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Data triangulation across interviews and observations ensured credibility of findings.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance validity and reliability, the study employed (a) methodological triangulation by combining quantitative and qualitative data; (b) member checking, wherein preliminary themes were shared with teachers for feedback; (c) peer debriefing with two external experts in multilingual education and special education; and (d) maintenance of an audit trail documenting decisions throughout data collection and analysis.

Results

Qualitative Themes

Three overarching themes emerged from observations and interviews:

1. **Multimodal Supports Foster Comprehension and Retention**
   Teachers' integration of pictorial glossaries, color-coded charts, and gesture-supported explanations was consistently linked to higher on-task behavior. Dyslexic learners reported that visual mind maps "help me see the whole sentence," while ASD students noted that consistent icon schedules "tell me exactly what's next," reducing anxiety around unseen transitions.
2. **Structured Flexibility Boosts Engagement**
   Classrooms that balanced clear, predictable routines with short sensory or movement breaks saw fewer off-task episodes. ADHD learners described these breaks as "mini-refreshers," enabling them to return to tasks with renewed focus. Teachers used timers and auditory cues to signal transitions, supporting time management for students with executive-function challenges.
3. **Adaptive Technology Empowers Autonomy**

   Use of language-learning apps with customizable fonts, audio speeds, and interactive quizzes was particularly beneficial for dyslexic and ADHD learners. One student shared, "I can slow down the recording until I get every word," while another observed that gamified quizzes turned "boring drills into fun challenges," enhancing motivation.

Comparative Insights

While all groups benefited, the magnitude of gains varied. ASD learners achieved the highest relative increase in vocabulary, likely reflecting their affinity for systematic pattern recognition. Dyslexic students showed notable improvement in grammar accuracy when provided with visual sentence-building tools. ADHD learners' growth, though significant, was most pronounced when lessons incorporated kinesthetic elements. These differential patterns underscore the importance of tailoring multimodal strategies to specific neurodivergent profiles.

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CONCLUSION

This study makes several key contributions to the understanding of neurodiversity-responsive language pedagogy in multilingual educational settings. First, it empirically demonstrates that neurodivergent learners—across ASD, ADHD, and dyslexia—can substantially improve both receptive vocabulary and productive grammar in a second language when instruction leverages multimodal supports, structured flexibility, and adaptive technology. These findings challenge deficit-oriented assumptions that neurodivergent students inherently struggle with language tasks, instead foregrounding their capacity for growth under appropriately designed conditions.

Second, qualitative data illuminate how specific strategies align with the cognitive and sensory profiles of different diagnostic groups. Pictorial scaffolds and icon schedules resonate with autistic learners' need for concrete, predictable information. Movement breaks and gamified digital tasks address the sustained-attention challenges typical of ADHD. Customizable audio-visual tools mitigate phonological decoding difficulties for dyslexic learners, empowering them to self-regulate their learning pathways. Together, these insights advance a strengths-based framework that transcends one-size-fits-all accommodations, advocating for differentiated instruction rooted in Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018).

Third, the study underscores the critical role of teacher capacity in implementing neurodiversity-affirming multilingual pedagogy. Participating teachers unanimously reported that professional development workshops—focusing on UDL principles, neurodivergent cognition, and adaptive technologies—boosted their confidence and instructional repertoire. This suggests that systemic investment in ongoing training is essential to scale such inclusive practices beyond pilot contexts. Without equipping educators with both conceptual frameworks and practical tools, policy mandates for inclusion risk remaining aspirational rather than transformative.

In sum, this study offers an evidence-based blueprint for inclusive language instruction: integrate multimodal materials; balance structure with choice; harness adaptive technologies; and invest in teacher expertise. Such an approach not only advances theoretical understanding of neurodivergent learning in multilingual settings but provides actionable guidance for practitioners and policymakers committed to making education truly accessible and empowering for all learners.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

While the present research sheds light on effective strategies for neurodiversity-responsive multilingual instruction, several avenues warrant deeper exploration to consolidate and extend these findings.

Longitudinal Tracking of Language Retention

Future investigations should follow neurodivergent learners over multiple years to assess the durability of vocabulary and grammar gains. Longitudinal designs would reveal whether early improvements translate into sustained language proficiency, academic success in higher grades, and functional bilingualism in real-world contexts. Such studies could also examine critical periods for intervention and the optimal timing of introducing additional languages.

Comparative Studies Across Language Pairs

Language typology likely interacts with neurodivergent cognitive profiles in complex ways. For instance, tonal languages (e.g., Mandarin) impose distinct auditory discrimination demands that may pose challenges for learners with auditory hypersensitivity or processing delays. Conversely, alphabetic languages with transparent orthographies (e.g., Spanish) might align more readily with

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dyslexic students' mapping skills. Comparative research across typologically diverse language pairs would inform language-specific adaptations and broaden the generalizability of pedagogical frameworks.

Randomized Controlled Trials of UDL-Aligned Curricula

To strengthen causal inferences, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) should evaluate the impact of neurodiversity-affirming curricula—designed according to Universal Design for Learning principles—against standard instruction. Such RCTs would quantify effect sizes for targeted interventions (e.g., multimodal lesson bundles, structured movement breaks) and identify which components yield the greatest returns for specific neurodivergent groups.

Psychosocial and Identity Outcomes

Beyond cognitive and academic metrics, researchers should investigate the psychosocial dimensions of multilingual education for neurodivergent learners. How do inclusive practices affect students' language-related self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and identity negotiation across linguistic communities? Qualitative and mixed-methods studies can capture nuanced shifts in students' attitudes, peer relationships, and emotional well-being, offering a more holistic picture of educational impact.

Scalability and Policy Translation

Translating pilot successes into widespread practice requires attention to systemic factors. Future work should explore models for scaling neurodiversity-affirming interventions within diverse school districts, including rural settings and under-resourced communities. Policy analyses can identify enablers and barriers—such as funding mechanisms, teacher credentialing requirements, and community partnerships—and recommend actionable steps for education ministries to institutionalize inclusive multilingual pedagogy.

Innovative Technology Development

Collaborations with educational technologists and software developers can yield next-generation learning platforms tailored to neurodivergent profiles. Features such as AI-driven adaptive pacing, real-time feedback on pronunciation or syntax, and customizable sensory settings (e.g., background noise reduction) hold promise. Rigorous user-testing with neurodivergent students will ensure that such tools not only incorporate universal design but also resonate with learners' preferences and autonomy needs.

Intersectional and Cultural Considerations

Finally, research must attend to intersectionality, examining how factors like socioeconomic status, gender, and cultural background intersect with neurodiversity and multilingualism. Culturally responsive frameworks that honor community linguistic practices—such as home dialects and translanguaging norms—are essential to avoid one-dimensional models that privilege dominant languages and urban contexts. Multi-site studies across regions and countries will enrich understanding of culturally situated best practices.

By pursuing these directions, the field can build a robust, multidimensional evidence base that informs teacher education, curriculum development, and policy reform. Ultimately, integrating neurodiversity and multilingualism is not only a pedagogical challenge but a moral imperative: realizing the full potential of every learner, irrespective of neurological profile or linguistic background, advances equity and innovation in global education.

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