SUPPORTING AUTISTIC COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

A Neurodiversity–Affirming Guide for Educators, in Collaboration with Speech–Language Pathologists (SLP), to Support Inclusion for Every Student

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity recognizes natural differences in human neurology, and encompasses a broad range of conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Neurodivergence refers to individuals whose brains work differently from neurotypical norms. The Neurodiversity Perspective emphasizes that differences are not deficits, but a natural and valuable part of human diversity[1].

Autism is a neurotype characterized by variations in social communication, social interaction, behaviour, and emotion[2,3].

Neurological differences found in autism **are not a disorder** in need of fixing, but they can give rise to a **disability** when individuals encounter barriers in their environment[4]. Disability can be understood through two main perspectives:

Social Model

- **Disability** arises from contextual barriers such as society's biased expectations, lack of support, and discrimination[5,6]
- **Aims** to accept and support autistic ways of being[5,6]

Medical Model

- **Disability** is inherent to the disabled person (not to the context)[6]
- **Aims** to cure, fix, and normalize disabled individuals[6]

Why This Matters

→ When there is pressure to meet and comply with **neurotypical expectations**, autistic individuals may engage in *masking* — hiding their authentic selves to avoid negative responses[5]

→ **Masking** increases cognitive demands, causing stress, and has been associated with autistic burnout, anxiety, and depression[5]

COLLABORATION – THE SLP & THE EDUCATOR

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) recognizes that:

✗ **no single professional – including SLPs and teachers – has all the expertise needed to support students effectively**[7]

Inclusive education, which supports students with diverse abilities in mainstream classrooms, makes collaboration essential[7]. This is especially important in autism, where profiles are highly heterogeneous and student and family needs change across the lifespan – **there is no one-size-fits-all approach**[2]
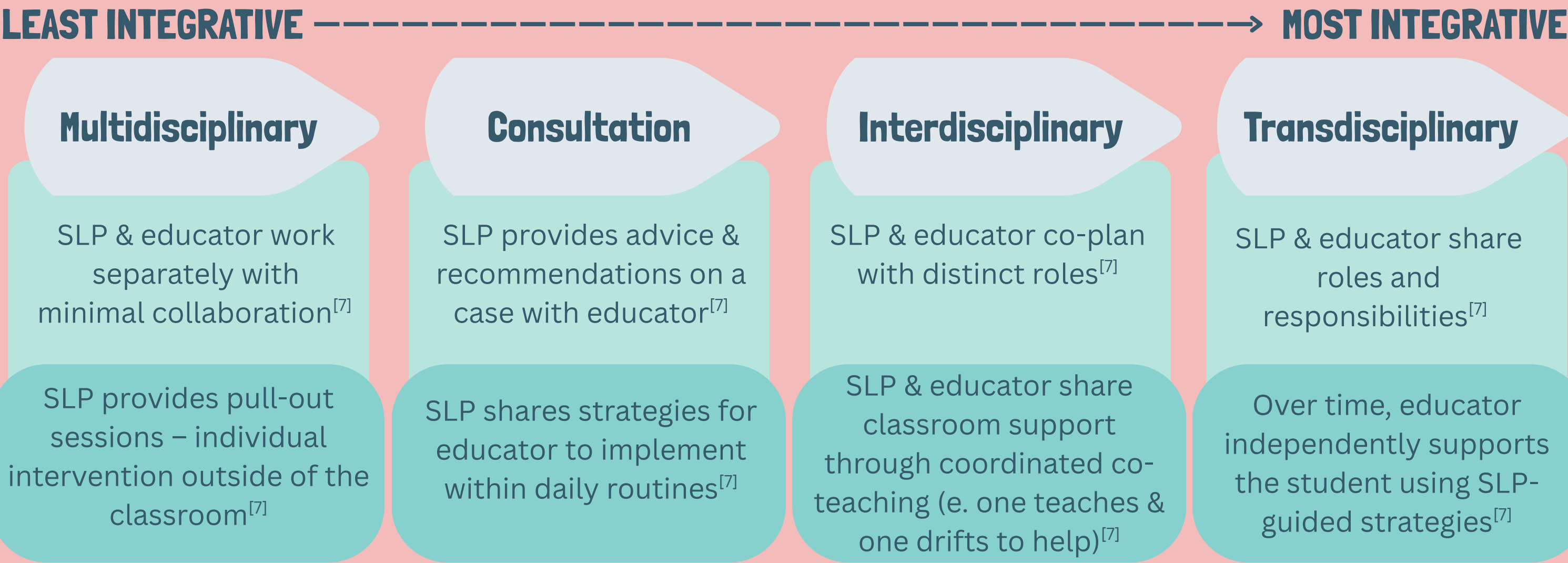
SLP–EDUCATOR COLLABORATION INVOLVES:

Combined expertise: → allows teams to better meet students' needs[8]

Improved outcomes: → through shared responsibility & coordinated support[8]

Strategy carryover: → educators observe & reinforce SLP strategies within daily routines[8]

Functional, classroom-relevant goals: → SLPs align intervention goals with classroom curriculum[8]

Classroom-based service delivery: → allows students to receive support in natural contexts[8]

Greater generalization: → communication skills practiced in real-life contexts are more likely to transfer beyond therapy[8]
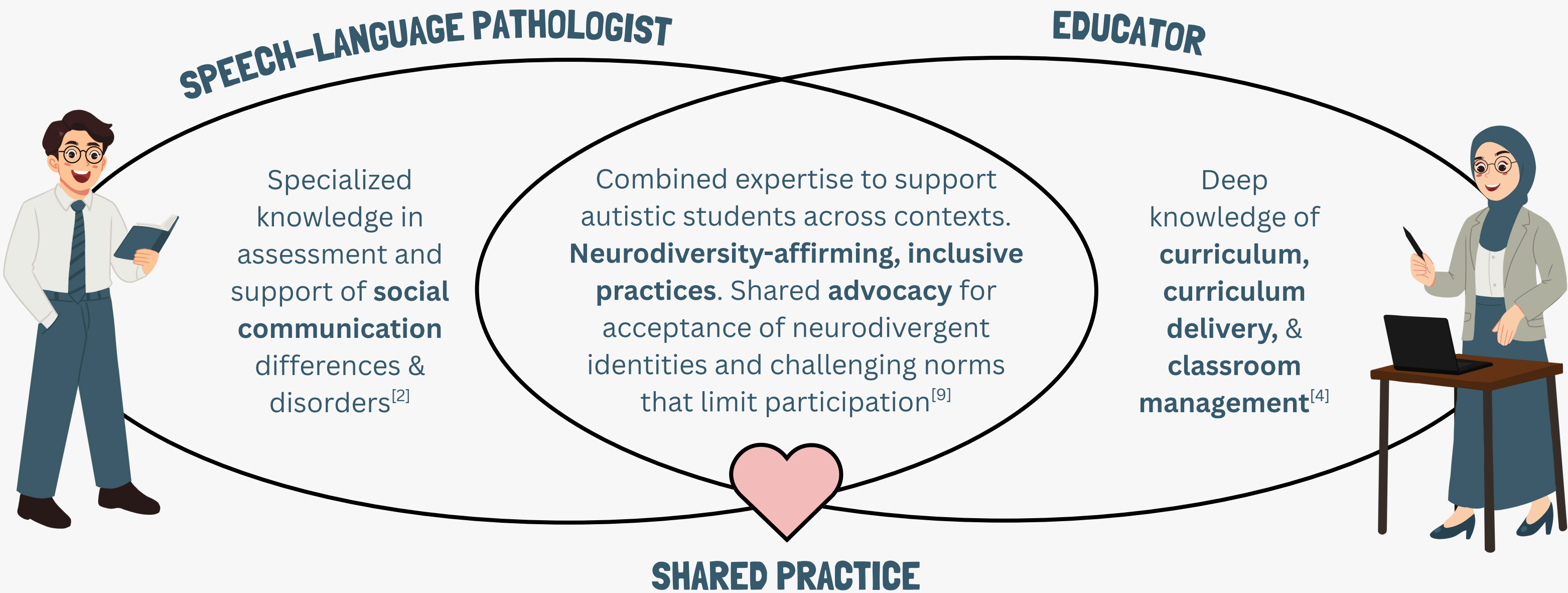
Collaboration = inclusive, effective service delivery[7]

SO WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Collaboration can take many forms, with different models of SLP-educator partnership used to meet student needs.

- Ideally, SLPs and educators plan and implement strategies as partners, though time and resource constraints may limit collaboration[8]
- The chosen service delivery model should fit the student's needs, the classroom context, and adapt as goals and needs change over time[7]

LEAST INTEGRATIVE ----------→ **MOST INTEGRATIVE**

Multidisciplinary

SLP & educator work separately with minimal collaboration[7]

SLP provides pull-out sessions – individual intervention outside of the classroom[7]

Consultation

SLP provides advice & recommendations on a case with educator[7]

SLP shares strategies for educator to implement within daily routines[7]

Interdisciplinary

SLP & educator co-plan with distinct roles[7]

SLP & educator share classroom support through coordinated co-teaching (e. one teaches & one drifts to help)[7]

Transdisciplinary

SLP & educator share roles and responsibilities[7]

Over time, educator independently supports the student using SLP-guided strategies[7]

ROLES IN SUPPORTING AN AUTISTIC STUDENT

SPEECH–LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST

EDUCATOR

Specialized knowledge in assessment and support of **social communication** differences & disorders[2]

Combined expertise to support autistic students across contexts. **Neurodiversity-affirming, inclusive practices**. Shared **advocacy** for acceptance of neurodivergent identities and challenging norms that limit participation[9]

Deep knowledge of **curriculum, curriculum delivery,** & **classroom management**[4]

SHARED PRACTICE

SLPs partner with educators in support of specific children by providing assessment, treatment, education & counselling related to communication, feeding, and swallowing differences & disorders. They do **not** provide 'teaching' or 'training' to educators; instead they engage in **consultation**, **collaboration** & **co-teaching**. Educators have the final say in the classroom![4]
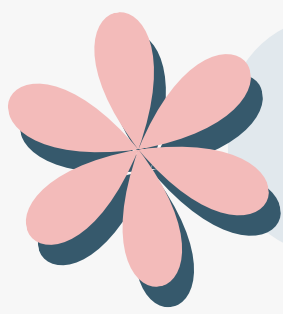
WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY–AFFIRMING PRACTICE?

- Grounded in the **social model of disability**
  - Disability arises from environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers – not individual deficits[5,6]
- Focuses on **adapting** environments, expectations, and interactions
  - Supports participation rather than changing autistic behaviour to fit neurotypical norms[9]
- *Celebrates authentic autistic identity*
  - Autistic clients are welcomed as they are
  - Non-autistic ways of being are not treated as the "gold standard"[9]
- *It involves...*

1 UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION AS RELATIONAL

- Communication breakdowns are **mutual mismatches**, not autistic deficits – a phenomenon known as the *Double Empathy Problem* [10]
  - Differences in communication styles, social expectations, and lived experiences affect both autistic and non-autistic people[11]
- Intervention considers the environment, not just the individual
  - *What environmental factors support or impede success?*
  - *What can be adapted to improve understanding and access?*

2 ASSUMING COMPETENCE & SUPPORTING SELF–DETERMINED PARTICIPATION

- Autistic individuals are **capable decision-makers** with meaningful communication preferences[9]
- They **are included in goal creation**
  - Focus on supports, accommodations, modifications, and strategies they want and need
  - Not what neurotypical standards prioritize[9]
- **Social goals** are guided by the individual's priorities
  - Not wanting to socialize → is accepted
  - Wanting to participate but facing barriers → indicates a need for support[5]
- Non-autistic behaviours may be offered as **optional tools**[5]
  - Skills can be chosen and used strategically
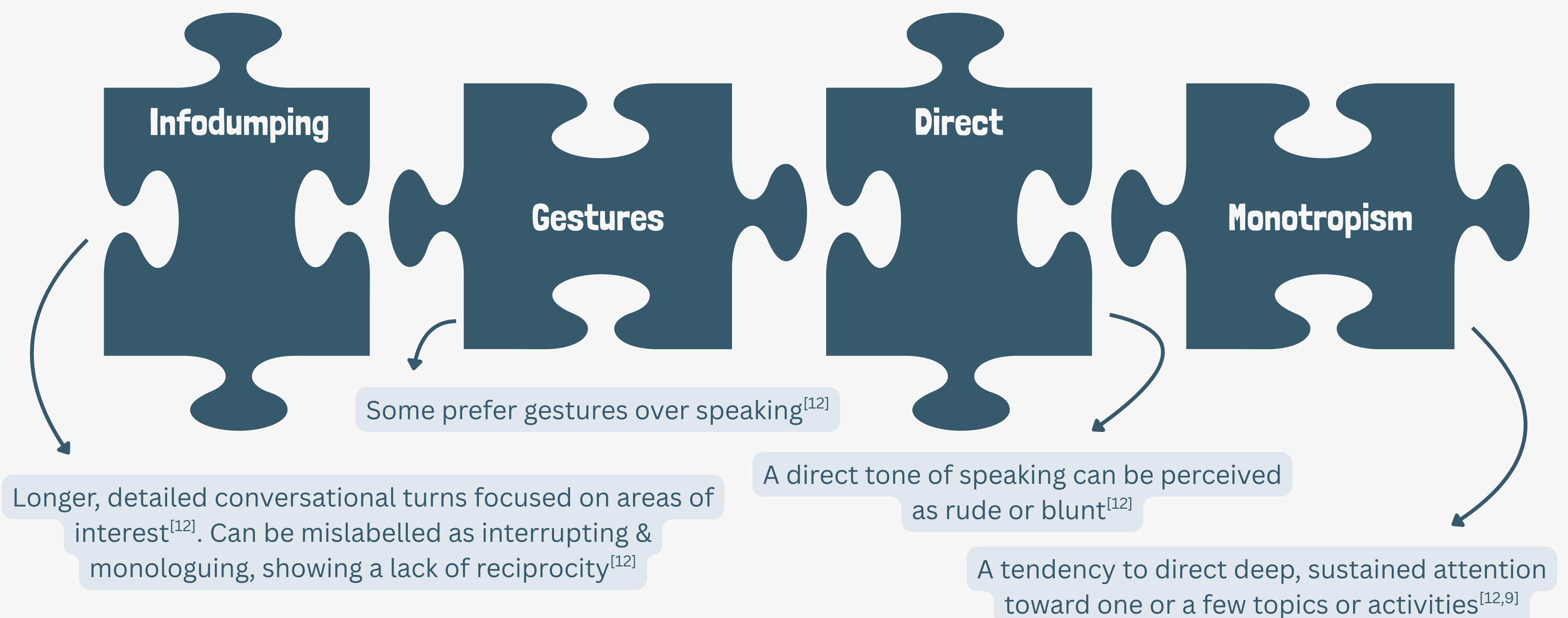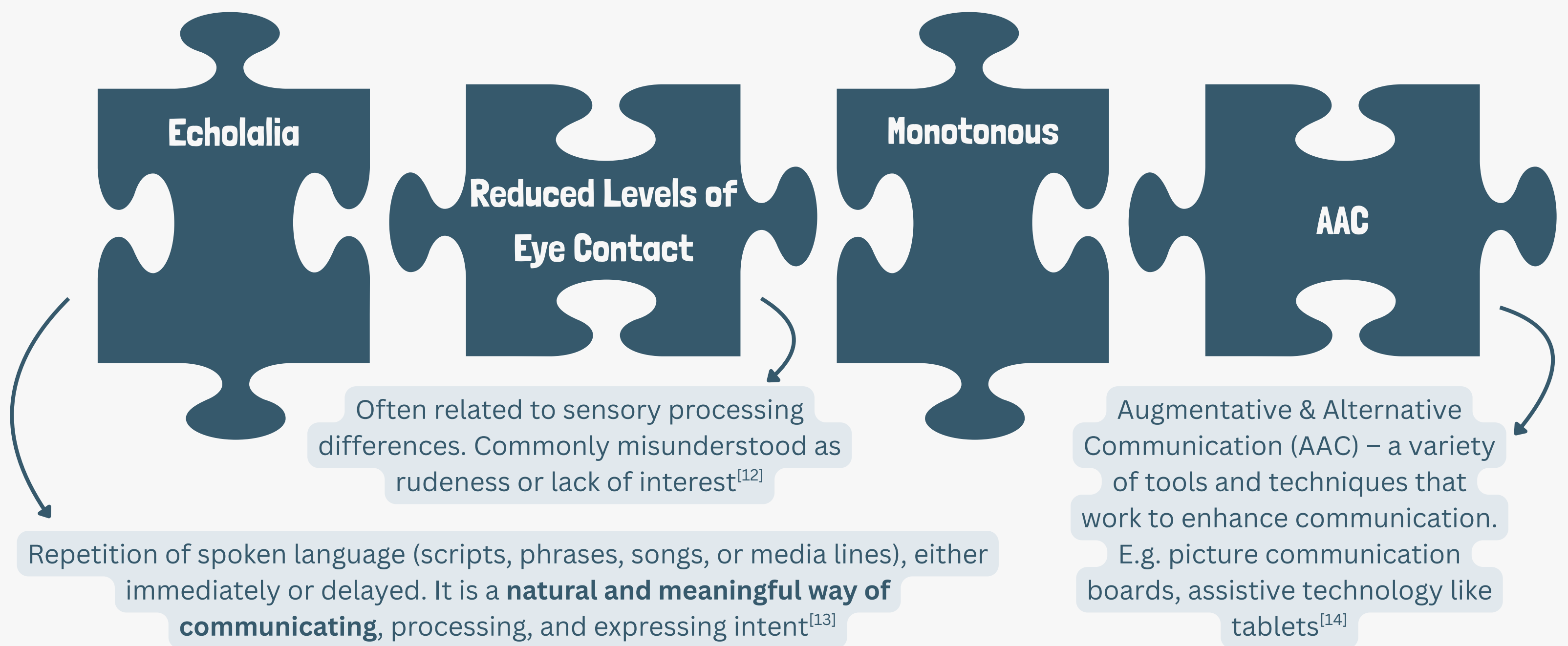
TIPS FOR THE CLASSROOM:
UNDERSTAND & PROMOTE ACCEPTANCE OF NEURODIVERGENT COMMUNICATION

Autistic Styles of Communication

"Communication styles can vary among neurodivergent individuals, so it is important to approach each interaction with openness and flexibility"[12]

Infodumping

Gestures

Direct

Monotropism

Some prefer gestures over speaking[12]

Longer, detailed conversational turns focused on areas of interest[12]. Can be mislabelled as interrupting & monologuing, showing a lack of reciprocity[12]

A direct tone of speaking can be perceived as rude or blunt[12]

A tendency to direct deep, sustained attention toward one or a few topics or activities[12,9]

Echolalia

Reduced Levels of Eye Contact

Monotonous

AAC

Often related to sensory processing differences. Commonly misunderstood as rudeness or lack of interest[12]

Repetition of spoken language (scripts, phrases, songs, or media lines), either immediately or delayed. It is a **natural and meaningful way of communicating**, processing, and expressing intent[13]

Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC) – a variety of tools and techniques that work to enhance communication. E.g. picture communication boards, assistive technology like tablets[14]

How to Affirm Autistic Communication

- Ask students about their **preferred** ways of communicating[13]
- Learn about students through their interests[13]
- Check intent before assuming meaning[13]
- Allow **extra time** for:
  - Processing
  - Responding
  - Participating in conversations[13]
- Respect **multimodal communication**
  - Avoid communication hierarchies that prioritize speech over other forms
  - Do not require oral speech simply because:
    - It is preferred by communication partners
    - A student "can" use it in some contexts[9]
- Accept and **do not suppress** stimming[9]
- **Validate** monotropism as a difference in attention, not rigidity[9]
- Consider sensory needs:
  - Dimming lights, providing fidgets, allowing movement[9]

A Special Note on Stimming

- It is a common & meaningful form of **expression** often described as repetitive behaviours and/or actions[14]
- E.g. hand flapping, snapping, rocking the body, repeating words or phrases[14]
- It serves important **self-regulatory** purposes:
  - to reduce anxiety
  - to cope with sensory overload
  - to soothe or communicate intense emotions or thoughts[14]
- It may seem distracting or disruptive to the neurotypical world[14]

Explicit Teaching & UDL

→ Educators can foster acceptance and access by **explicitly teaching** communication diversity and designing instruction that honours variability[5]
→ This can look like:
- Reading books and materials with topics of autism & neurodiversity
- Discussing autistic and non-autistic communication styles neutrally[13]

This approach aligns with the **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** – an educational framework that highlights:
- Multiple means of representation, action, expression, and engagement in curriculum
- Flexible pathways to **participation**
- An emphasis on **access** rather than conformity[15]

Inclusive design supports communication, belonging, and learning for all students[15]
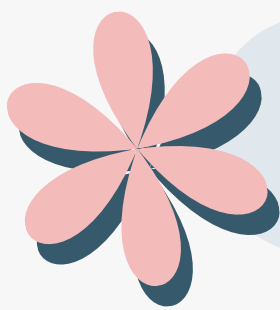
TIPS FOR THE CLASSROOM:

CHOOSE LANGUAGE THAT BUILDS BELONGING

- **Language shapes expectations** → words influence understanding, inclusion, and access[6]
- **Mindset matters** → the language you use reflects how you see students and shapes their sense of belonging[6]
- **Small changes, big impact** → changing how we talk and write about autistic students in reports, IEP goals, emails, and conversations resists normalization and shifts classroom ideology[6]
- **Challenge ableism** → avoid framing differences as deficits; recognize every student's intrinsic value[6]

Examples of Neurodiversity–Affirming Language[5,17,18]

INSTEAD OF THIS	TRY THIS	EXPLANATION
Person-first language "person with autism"	Identity-first language "autistic person"	Recognizes that neurobiological diversity cannot be separated from the person
Poor attention, inattentive	Has attention differences; attends best when interested	Highlights differences without implying deficit; focuses on strengths and context.
Flat affect	Uses neutral facial expressions	Neutral expressions are a natural communication style, not a deficit.
Poor / unusual eye contact	Prefers reduced eye contact	Respects individual communication preferences rather than labeling as "wrong."
Socially awkward, rigid	Has differences in body language and proximity	Describes observable behaviors without pathologizing social style.
On their own agenda	Demonstrates monotropic thinking; strong focus on interests; prefers sameness; may struggle with transitions	Respects individual communication preferences rather than labeling as "wrong."
Ableism / afflicted by autism / suffering from autism	Neurodiverse learner / autistic student	Removes language implying deficiency or suffering; promotes respect and inclusion.
Sensory issues / sensory problems	Sensory differences	Neutral language frames variation as difference, not disorder.
Repetitive behaviors / unusual movements	Stimming	Describes self-regulatory behaviors positively.
Communication deficits	Communication style	Emphasizes diversity rather than deficiency.
Comorbid / suffering from	Co-occurring	Neutral language avoids pathologizing multiple conditions.
Low/high functioning; severe/mild	Describe specific support needs	Functioning varies; focus on supports rather than labeling the person.
Special treatment / extras	Accommodations	Frames interventions as supports, not privileges.
Trying to be normal / good behavior	Masking	Names the behavior accurately without moral judgment.
Special education / special needs	Inclusive education / targeted supports	Avoids euphemisms that imply deficiency.
Narrow, obsessive interests	Very passionate about areas of interest	Reframes traits positively and descriptively.
Rigidity of routine	Preference for sameness and consistency	Shifts language from deficit to difference.

In Summary...

By understanding neurodiversity, honoring autistic communication, and collaborating across disciplines, educators and SLPs can reduce barriers and create classrooms where all students belong and participate meaningfully.

"Everyone has an inherent worth and the right to enjoy inclusion, freedom, and the supports that allow for both"[4]

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