

Leading Differently: Experiences of Neurodivergent Education Leaders and Their Professional Journeys

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences and leadership practices of neurodivergent educational leaders within a UK local authority context. Using a participatory exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, it combined survey data, reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and co-production of the SUSTAIN reflective framework. Across three phases, the research generated a nuanced account of how neurodivergent leaders experience leadership work, navigate organisational contexts shaped by predominantly neurotypical norms, and sustain their leadership over time. Five interrelated themes were identified: values-led leadership shaped by lived neurodivergent experience; wellbeing-centred leadership shaped by prior harm; cognitive intensity and adaptive scaffolding; the competence paradox; belonging, identity and psychologically safe spaces. Together, these themes informed four interconnected conceptual areas: neurodivergent leadership as a distinctive practice; capability and cost; belonging, identity and organisational context; and conditions for sustainable leadership. The findings informed the co-development of the SUSTAIN Leadership Framework (Supporting Understanding, Sustainability and Thriving in Autistic, ADHD and Identity-aware Neurodivergent Educational Leadership), an applied reflective framework designed to support sustainability, agency and ethical leadership. The study contributes to emerging understandings of neurodivergent leadership by proposing a more relational and ecological understanding of competence, belonging, authenticity and wellbeing.

Keywords: neurodiversity, educational leadership, belonging, psychological safety, sustainable leadership

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Introduction

Recent Teacher Tapp survey data reported by Benson (2026) found that 25% of teachers in the UK self-identify as neurodivergent, compared with 17% of educational leaders, raising questions about the experiences and progression of neurodivergent educators within leadership pathways. While research into neurodivergent educators is beginning to emerge, considerably less attention has been given to neurodivergent educational leaders, leaving limited understanding of the factors that support their success, the barriers they encounter and how they experience leadership across their professional journeys (Hewstone, 2024; McKay et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2025).

Although neurodivergent individuals are increasingly visible across education and wider society, research continues to highlight persistent misconceptions, stigma and organisational barriers that can restrict participation and progression (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Kalmanovich-Cohen & Stanton, 2025; Morris et al., 2025; Rosqvist et al., 2020). At the same time, emerging evidence suggests that neurodivergent individuals may bring distinctive strengths to professional practice, including strategic thinking, creativity and problem-solving (Doyle, 2020). However, educational and organisational norms often continue to privilege conventional assumptions about professionalism, communication and leadership, potentially limiting opportunities for neurodivergent leaders to contribute fully and authentically (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Kalmanovich-Cohen & Stanton, 2025; Rosqvist et al., 2020).

These tensions are particularly relevant within educational leadership. Emerging literature suggests that neurodivergent leaders may bring strengths in inclusion, relational practice, innovation and organisational improvement, while simultaneously navigating disclosure concerns, stigma and inconsistent access to support (Hewstone, 2024; Wood et al., 2025). Yet support needs remain poorly understood, and the effort required to sustain successful leadership may remain largely invisible (McKay et al., 2025; The Neurodivergent Coach, 2024).

While competence, belonging and wellbeing have each been associated with positive leadership outcomes and professional flourishing (Allen et al., 2022; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Maslow, 1968), limited attention has been given to how these experiences interact across individual, relational, organisational and wider cultural systems, or how their interplay shapes the sustainability of neurodivergent leadership. Existing studies have often focused on individual traits or needs rather than examining how competence, belonging and wellbeing emerge through relationships between leaders and their environments (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Brown & Leigh, 2020). Understanding these relationships may help identify the conditions that support authentic and sustainable neurodivergent leadership.

This study explores the experiences and professional journeys of neurodivergent educational leaders in the UK through a participatory exploratory mixed-methods design. It examines how competence, belonging and wellbeing are shaped through interactions between neurodivergence and wider relational, organisational and cultural contexts, while also contributing a co-produced reflective framework designed to support sustainable, values-led leadership practice. In doing so, the study contributes to emerging understandings of leadership as relational, contextual and shaped by diverse ways of thinking, being and leading.

Literature Review

Neurodiversity, Leadership and Educational Contexts

The neurodiversity paradigm reframes neurological variation as a dimension of human diversity rather than deficit and recognises lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Singer, 1998).

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) extends these ideas by challenging assumptions that disability or difference reside solely within individuals, arguing instead that experiences of disability are shaped through social, cultural and institutional structures (Goodley, 2017; Shildrick, 2020). Many difficulties experienced by neurodivergent people may therefore arise through environments designed around neurotypical expectations rather than cognitive difference alone (Goodley, 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant to leadership, where assumptions about professionalism, communication and competence may create both opportunities and barriers for neurodivergent individuals (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020).

Both neurodiversity scholarship and CDT question conventional assumptions about competence and professional success, highlighting how such judgements are shaped by social and organisational norms rather than objective measures alone (Goodley, 2017; Rosqvist et al., 2020). Consequently, neurodivergent individuals may be recognised as highly capable whilst simultaneously experiencing significant barriers, unmet support needs or pressure to conceal aspects of their identity (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Kalmanovich-Cohen & Stanton, 2025; Rosqvist et al., 2020).

Researchers increasingly distinguish inclusion from belonging, arguing that participation alone does not guarantee acceptance, authenticity or psychological safety (Allen et al., 2022; Edmondson, 1999). For neurodivergent professionals, belonging may be influenced by disclosure, masking and opportunities for authentic participation (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Brown & Leigh, 2020).

Research examining neurodivergent educators highlights a recurring tension between the strengths they bring and persistent expectations that they adapt to environments shaped around neurotypical norms (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020). Educational environments often privilege physical presence, interpersonal immediacy and fixed routines, creating additional demands for neurodivergent staff (Brown & Leigh, 2020). Consequently, neurodivergent educators frequently report fatigue, sensory overwhelm, fluctuating energy levels and the emotional labour associated with masking, while receiving inconsistent organisational support (Brown & Leigh, 2020).

Alongside these challenges, emerging evidence highlights significant strengths. Wood et al. (2025) found that autistic teachers contribute distinctive perspectives, including attention to detail, consistency and meaningful relationships with neurodivergent and marginalised students. Similarly, Guo et al. (2025) found that autistic educators often develop strong rapport through shared understanding and lived experience whilst simultaneously facing pressure to conform to stereotypical expectations of the “ideal teacher.”

Many neurodivergent educators report concerns about stigma and professional credibility when considering disclosure (Wood et al., 2025). Research highlights the value of psychological safety, organisational flexibility and supportive mentors in facilitating disclosure and

professional development, although such adaptations are often introduced reactively rather than proactively (Guo et al., 2025). Questions of disclosure, support, belonging and professional credibility may therefore be understood not as separate challenges but as interconnected aspects of negotiating authenticity within educational workplaces.

Educational leadership is widely understood as a dynamic and context-dependent endeavour rather than a static set of innate traits (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2006). Contemporary perspectives increasingly emphasise identity, relationships and organisational context in shaping leadership experiences (Day et al., 2020). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights how leadership experiences are influenced by multiple interacting contexts, including relationships, organisational cultures and wider societal expectations. Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs provides a useful lens for considering how safety, belonging and wellbeing may influence leaders' capacity to thrive and sustain their practice over time.

Authentic leadership theory focuses on how leaders understand and express their identities through self-awareness, relational transparency and alignment between personal values and professional practice (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, authenticity may not be equally accessible to all individuals, creating tensions between authentic self-expression and dominant expectations of leadership (Lee, 2021). Similar tensions may affect neurodivergent leaders, who can experience pressure to suppress or mask aspects of their identity to align with neurotypical leadership expectations (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020).

Research specifically focused on neurodivergent leadership remains limited. Roese's (2024) Autism Leadership Scale found that autistic participants reported lower leadership self-efficacy and higher levels of social camouflage than non-autistic participants, despite conceptualising leadership similarly. Roberson et al. (2021) further propose that leadership potential emerges through interactions between neurodivergent characteristics and supportive organisational contexts.

Although emerging accounts suggest neurodivergent educational leaders may bring strengths in systems thinking, creativity, inclusion and problem-solving (Hewstone, 2024; Roberson et al., 2021), they continue to navigate masking, disclosure concerns, stigma and the emotional labour of leadership within systems built around neurotypical norms (Rosberg & McNamer, 2025). The literature therefore highlights a recurring tension between the potential value neurodivergent leaders bring and the extent to which prevailing leadership norms enable those strengths to be recognised and sustained. However, important questions remain regarding competence, belonging, wellbeing and authenticity across the professional journeys of neurodivergent educational leaders.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, informed by an exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2007). Pragmatism was selected because it supports methodological flexibility and focuses on understanding phenomena in ways that are useful for addressing real-world problems. This perspective was particularly relevant when researching neurodivergent educational leaders whose experiences are shaped

through interactions between individual identity, relationships and organisational structures, often within systems aligned to neurotypical norms.

Epistemologically, the study adopted a pragmatist fallibilist position in which knowledge is judged by its usefulness and consequences rather than adherence to a single paradigm (Greene, 2007; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Morgan, 2007). This position was further informed by the double empathy problem, which reframes communication differences between neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent individuals as relational rather than deficit-based (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022). Knowledge was therefore understood as situated, relational and co-constructed. To support meaningful participation, the study drew upon an adapted version of Lundy's Model of Participation (2007), positioning participants as contributors to interpretation and framework development rather than solely sources of data (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Adapted Lundy's Model of Participation Checklist to Support an Adult Professional Context

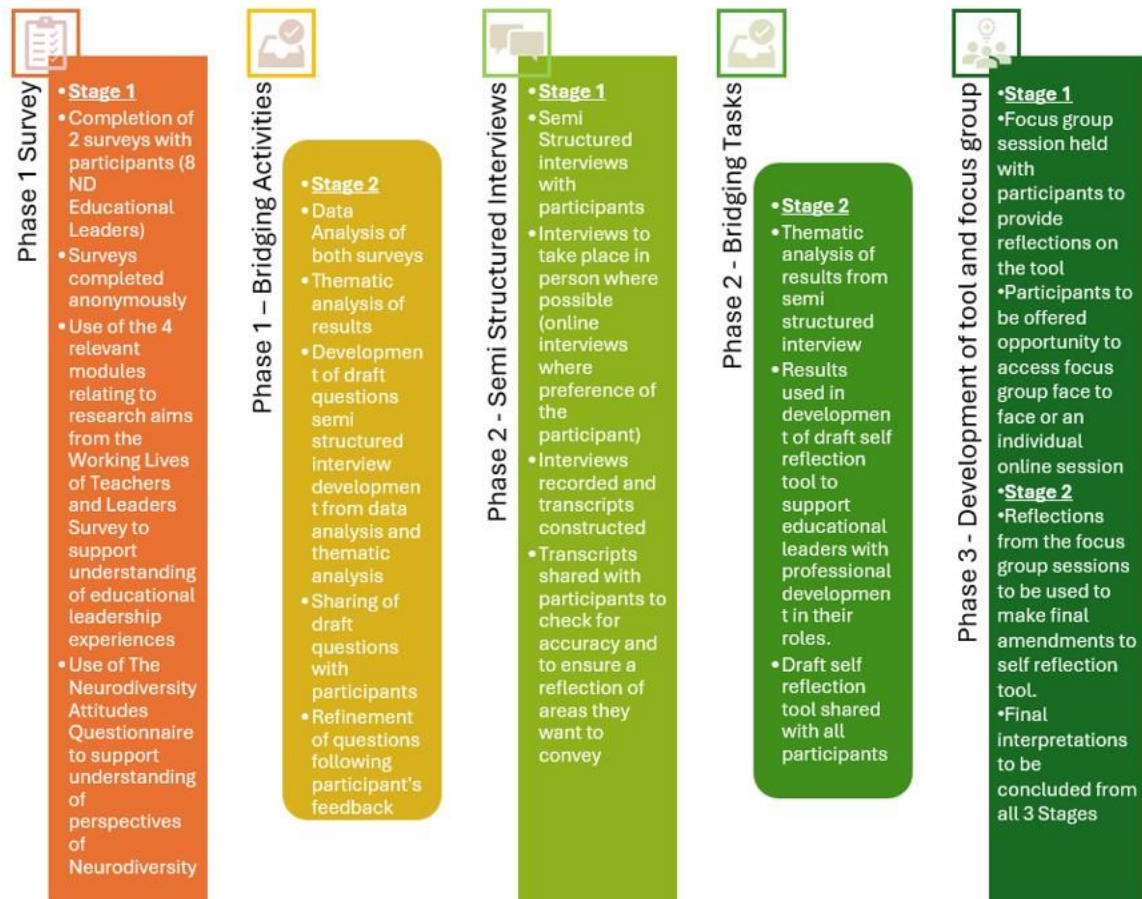


The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design across three interconnected phases (Figure 2). Phase 1 comprised survey data collection and analysis. Findings from this phase informed the development of semi-structured interviews undertaken

during Phase 2. Phase 3 involved participant review and refinement of a draft self-reflection tool derived from the findings, introducing a co-productive element that enabled participants to contribute directly to the applied outcome. This design aligned with the study's pragmatic and neurodiversity-affirmative orientation, supporting movement from breadth to depth and ultimately towards practical application (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Figure 2

Visual Representation of the Three Phases of Exploratory Sequential Design of the Study



Participants, Data Collection and Analysis

Eight neurodivergent educational leaders participated in the study (Table 1). Participants represented a range of educational leadership roles and reflected diversity in neurodivergent identity, including formally diagnosed and self-identified neurodivergence. Analysis focused on lived experience rather than diagnostic labels, recognising the heterogeneity of neurodivergence and the limitations of attributing experiences to specific conditions (Milton, 2012; Nind, 2020; Smith & Noble, 2024). The study aimed to generate in-depth, context-specific insight rather than generalisable findings, making a small purposive sample appropriate for qualitative exploration.

Table 1*Overview of Participant Roles in the Study*

Educational Leadership Role	Number of Participants
Headteacher/Principal	5
Assistant Headteacher	2
Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo)	1

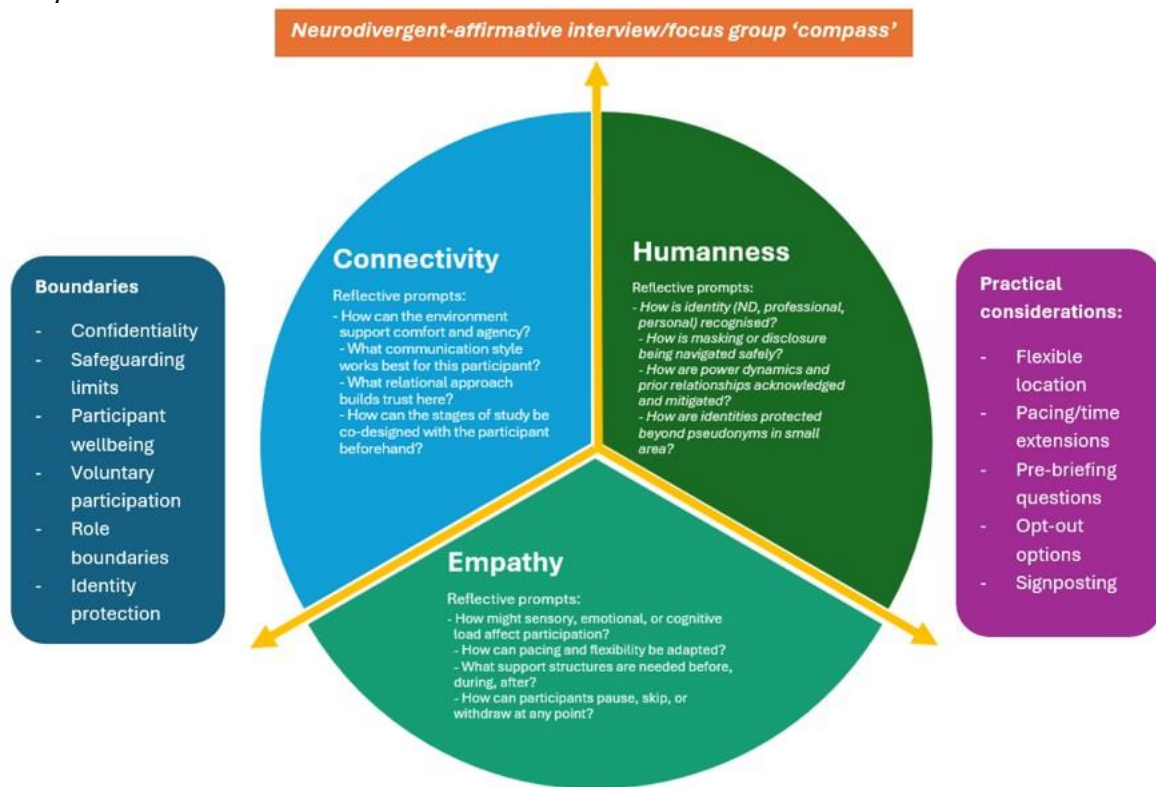
Participants were recruited through local authority education networks. Surveys explored leaders' experiences, wellbeing and perspectives on neurodivergence. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns across participants' experiences. Findings informed development of a self-reflection framework that was reviewed and refined collaboratively with participants during the final phase. This approach enabled participants to contribute not only to data generation but also to interpretation and framework development.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central throughout the study. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Chichester. Approaches to participation, interviewing and framework development were informed by principles of partnership, relational ethics and participant influence. Interviews and focus groups were informed by adapted CHE (Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy) principles that considered communication preferences, sensory environments, masking and disclosure. These principles were operationalised through an adapted reflective compass (Figure 3), guiding decisions regarding engagement, support structures and psychological safety. Ongoing reflexive journaling was used to consider positionality, power dynamics and researcher influence throughout data collection, analysis and framework development. While participant involvement remained bounded by the practical constraints of a small-scale master's study, the research sought to maximise opportunities for participant voice and influence at each stage of the process.

Figure 3

A Neurodivergent-Affirmative Adaptation of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy (CHE) Principles (Brown & Danaher, 2017) Interview Principles Conceptualised as a Reflective Compass



Findings

Survey Findings

Overall, as visualised in Figure 4, the survey data from both surveys indicated a clear pattern of extended working hours and reported stress existing alongside relatively positive self-reported wellbeing and a sense of control over a high workload, highlighting apparent tensions within participants' experiences. The NDAQ findings indicated strong alignment with neurodiversity-affirming perspectives.

Figure 4

Visual Representation of Key Findings Quantitative Findings From Phase 1 Surveys



Semi-structured Interview (SSI) Findings

From the thematic analysis of the SSI, five interconnecting main themes, with supporting subthemes, were identified:

- Values led leadership shaped by lived neurodivergent experience
- Wellbeing centred leadership shaped by prior harm
- Cognitive intensity and adaptive scaffolding
- The competence paradox
- Belonging, identity and psychologically safe spaces

The themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis provide explanatory depth to the survey findings (Figure 5), revealing how participants understood, navigated, and sustained their leadership experiences.

Figure 5
Visual of Integration of Quantitative (Survey) and Qualitative (Semi-structured Interview) Findings

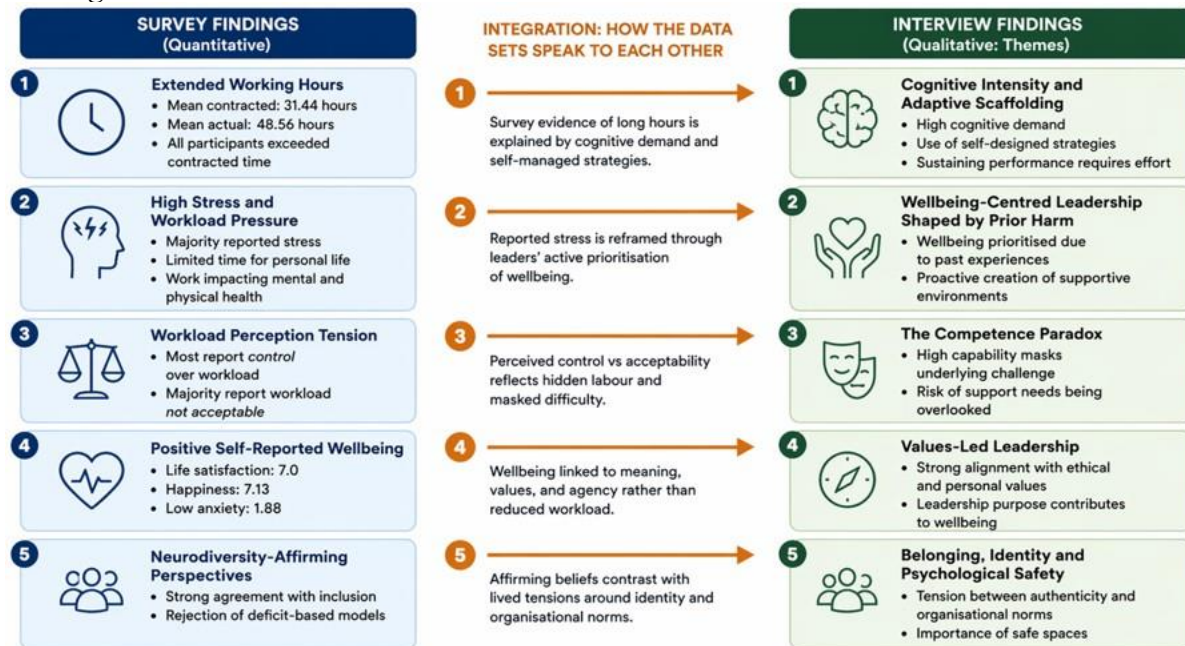
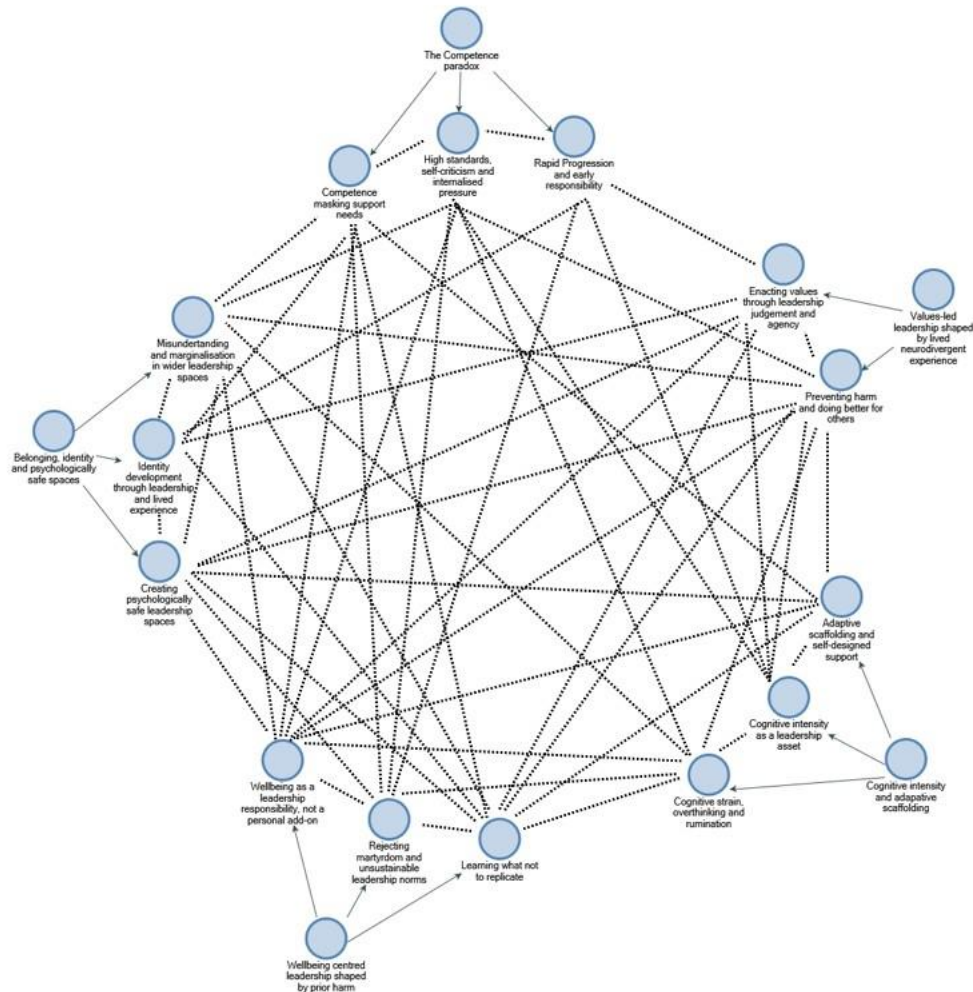


Figure 6 conceptualises the relationships between themes and subthemes identified through reflexive thematic analysis.

Figure 6

Thematic Map Demonstrating the Interconnected Relationships Between Themes and Subthemes in Neurodivergent Educational Leaders' Professional Experiences



Key	
Solid Line	Connection between themes and subtheme
Dashed Line	Connection between subtheme

Theme: Values Led Leadership Shaped by Lived Neurodivergent Experience

Participants consistently described leadership as being shaped by lived experience, personal values and a commitment to creating more inclusive environments for others. Leadership decisions were filtered through the lens of pupil impact, with fairness, integrity and compassion repeatedly emphasised. Many connected these values directly to their educational and neurodivergent histories, describing a determination to ensure others did not experience the barriers they had encountered themselves. Participants frequently articulated a desire to prevent harm and “do better for others,” positioning lived experience as a source of leadership insight rather than limitation.

These values translated directly into leadership practice. Decision-making was often described as instinctive, relational and values driven. Dani reflected that, “sometimes you’ve got to stick your neck above the parapet,” describing a willingness to challenge systems and advocate for individuals whose needs may otherwise be overlooked. Participants described drawing on their

own sensory, emotional and educational experiences when supporting pupils, families and colleagues. Neurodivergent perspectives were viewed as enhancing rather than constraining leadership. Across interviews, participants emphasised advocacy, authenticity and social justice, suggesting that lived experience was central to how they exercised leadership rather than an aspect of identity separate from it. Leadership therefore emerged not simply as a professional role but as an enactment of deeply held values.

Theme: Wellbeing Centred Leadership Shaped by Prior Harm

Wellbeing emerged as one of the most interconnected themes within the study. Participants frequently described how previous experiences of unsustainable expectations, burnout and unhealthy workplace cultures had fundamentally shaped their current leadership approaches. Many reflected not only on what had supported them, but on practices they were determined not to reproduce within their own organisations. Dani described previous environments where it was considered “normal” to respond to work communications late into the evening, experiences that informed a conscious commitment to healthier boundaries and more sustainable leadership practices.

Participants consistently framed wellbeing as a leadership responsibility rather than solely an individual concern. Alex described how being “well in myself” was fundamental to leading others effectively, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between personal wellbeing and organisational culture. Boundary setting, flexibility and work-life balance were viewed as essential rather than optional. Across interviews, participants rejected notions of leadership rooted in sacrifice or martyrdom. Sustainable leadership was associated with recognising limits, modelling healthy behaviours and creating conditions in which others could thrive. Rather than presenting resilience as enduring harm, participants described leadership as creating systems that reduce unnecessary harm. Experiences of prior adversity therefore informed more compassionate and sustainable approaches to leadership, wellbeing and workplace culture, demonstrating how lived experience shaped organisational values and leadership decisions.

Theme: Cognitive Intensity and Adaptive Scaffolding

Participants described cognitive intensity as both a significant leadership strength and a source of challenge. Enhanced pattern recognition, systems thinking and rapid processing were frequently cited as assets within complex educational leadership roles. Participants described being able to “see patterns in data” and simultaneously hold multiple strands of information, enabling strategic thinking and problem solving. However, these strengths were frequently accompanied by cognitive overload, intense rumination and challenges associated with switching off from work-related thinking.

To navigate these demands, participants described developing extensive forms of adaptive scaffolding. These strategies were often highly personalised and developed independently rather than through formal organisational support. Nico explained that “my last hour of the day is always protected,” illustrating intentional approaches to managing cognitive load. Participants described using routines, technology, visual systems and structured reflection to externalise demands that could otherwise become overwhelming. AI tools and personalised organisational systems were frequently identified as valuable supports, with one participant describing that “AI has been an absolute game changer.” Informal networks were equally important. Leadership meetings were described as feeling “like therapy,” providing opportunities for shared understanding and validation. The findings suggest that leadership

effectiveness was not defined by the absence of challenge, but by the extent to which participants could create and maintain scaffolding systems that enabled them to sustain performance whilst managing heightened cognitive and emotional demands.

Theme: The Competence Paradox

A central finding was the emergence of the competence paradox. Participants frequently described being viewed by others as highly capable, dependable and successful while simultaneously experiencing considerable effort, self-doubt and unmet support needs. Visible competence often resulted in greater responsibility and fewer opportunities for support because colleagues assumed that success equated to an absence of difficulty. Participants were therefore frequently recognised for what they achieved whilst the effort required to achieve it remained largely invisible.

Many participants described experiences associated with perfectionism, impostor syndrome and persistent self-criticism. Nico referred to experiencing “crippling impostor syndrome” despite holding a senior leadership position. Participants reported setting exceptionally high standards for themselves and often becoming their own harshest critics. Luca reflected that “perfectionism has helped me succeed, but it’s also exhausting,” highlighting the tension between achievement and sustainability. Participants rarely sought support, sometimes due to concerns about credibility or fears that acknowledging challenges might undermine perceptions of competence. The findings therefore challenge conventional understandings of capability. Rather than representing a fixed individual attribute, competence appeared relational, contextual and closely linked to available support. Visible leadership success frequently concealed hidden labour, emotional effort and substantial self-management, demonstrating that capability and support needs are not contradictory but can coexist within the same leadership experience.

Theme: Belonging, Identity and Psychologically Safe Spaces

Belonging was described as a dynamic and relational experience, shaped by organisational culture, trusted relationships and opportunities for authentic participation. Participants viewed identity development as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. Several explained that leadership had supported greater self-understanding and self-acceptance over time. Nico reflected, “If you'd interviewed me three years ago, I wouldn't have reflected on it this way,” illustrating the evolving relationship between identity, leadership and neurodivergence.

Psychological safety emerged as fundamental to authentic participation. Participants described trusted relationships as enabling openness, vulnerability and professional growth. One participant explained the value of colleagues who could recognise “when I’m about to go into that spiral,” highlighting the importance of relational understanding and anticipatory support. However, participants frequently reported modifying behaviour, masking aspects of identity or making strategic decisions regarding disclosure in less trusted environments. Alex described external leadership spaces as challenging, stating, “In leadership spaces, it’s awful... I constantly feel too much.” Disclosure was therefore rarely straightforward and was often dependent upon trust, context and anticipated consequences. The findings suggest that belonging extends beyond inclusion or representation. Participants emphasised the importance of being accepted, understood and able to contribute without concealing significant aspects of themselves. Belonging, authenticity and psychological safety therefore emerged as closely interconnected conditions influencing both wellbeing and sustainable leadership.

Framework Development and Focus Group Findings

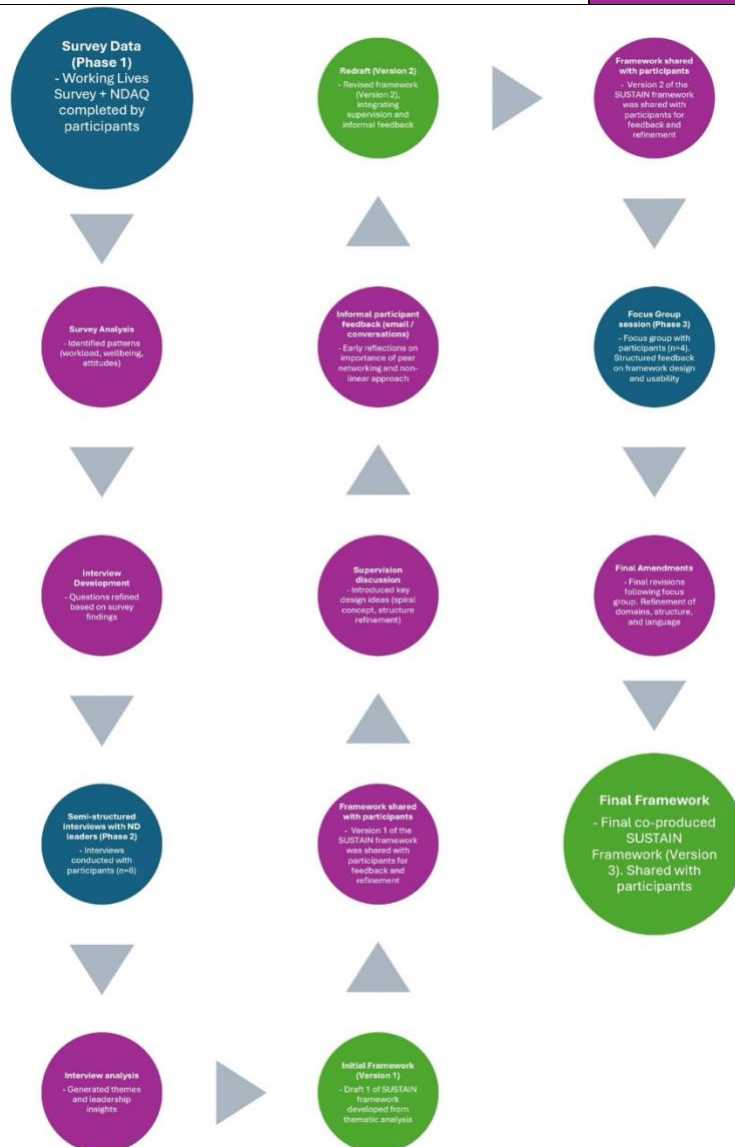
The development of the SUSTAIN (Supporting Understanding, Sustainability and Thriving in Autistic, ADHD and Identity-aware Neurodivergent Educational Leadership) framework sought to synthesise the findings of this study into a conceptual model for understanding sustainable neurodivergent educational leadership (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Flow Chart Illustrating the Development and Decision-Making Process Underpinning the SUSTAIN Framework

Key:

Activity	Colour
Phases of Data Collection	
Versions of SUSTAIN Framework	
Analysis, interpretation, designing	



Feedback highlighted that leadership experiences were rarely experienced as linear or predictable. In response, the framework adopted a spiral representation (Figure 8), reflecting participants' descriptions of fluctuating confidence, wellbeing, agency and access to opportunities over time. Finally, participants valued the practical and reflective nature of the framework, supporting the inclusion of domain-specific prompts intended to encourage self-reflection rather than assessment or evaluation (Figure 9).

Figure 8

Final Design of the SUSTAIN Leadership Spiral From the SUSTAIN Framework

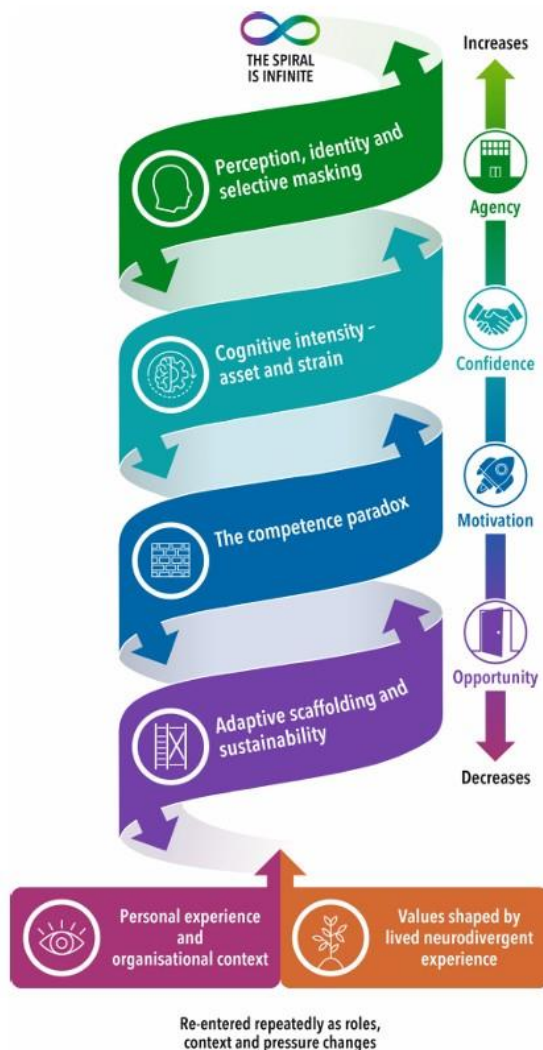


Figure 9

Visual Representation of the SUSTAIN Framework Domains From the SUSTAIN Framework

The SUSTAIN Domains



Discussion

Introduction

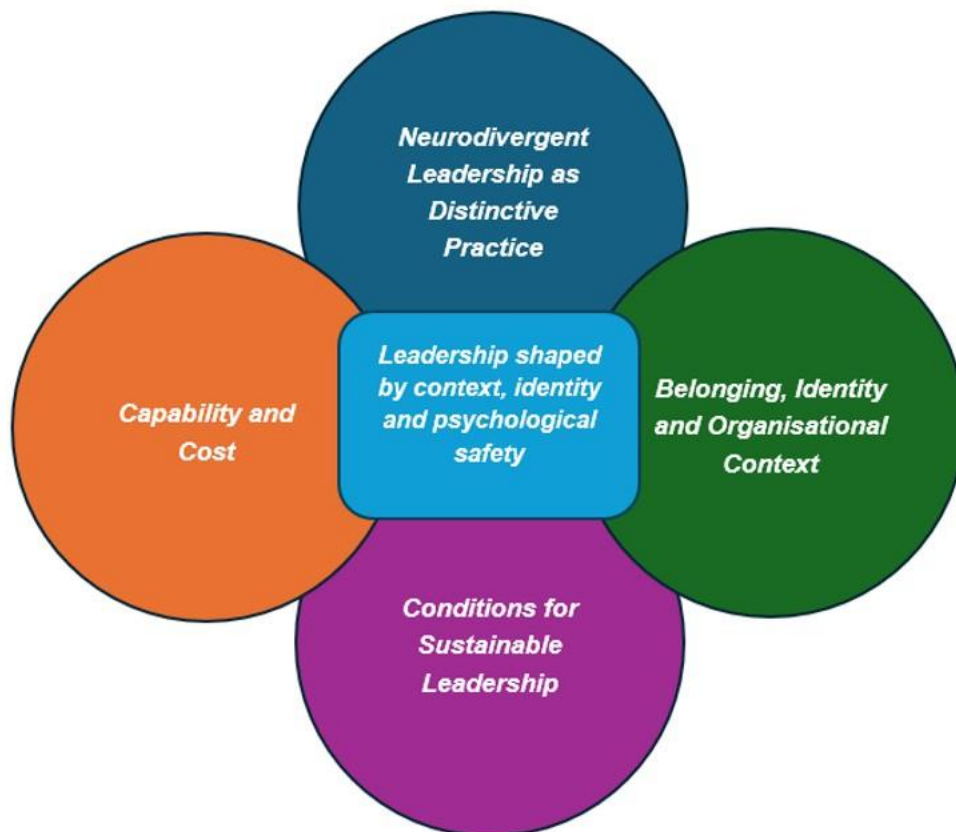
The findings suggest that neurodivergent educational leadership cannot be adequately understood through a simple strengths-versus-challenges narrative. Instead, participants described an ongoing interaction between lived experience, leadership practice, wellbeing, identity and organisational context.

The four interconnected findings presented in Figure 10 demonstrate how values-led leadership, capability and cost, belonging and identity, and conditions for sustainable leadership overlap and influence one another. Together, they suggest that neurodivergent leadership is shaped not

solely by individual characteristics but through interactions between leaders, organisations and wider social expectations. This aligns with ecological understandings of leadership (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and supports neurodiversity and Critical Disability Theory perspectives that locate many opportunities and barriers within environments rather than individuals (Goodley, 2017; Shildrick, 2020).

Figure 10

Conceptual Representation of Neurodivergent Leadership Across Four Overlapping Conceptual Areas



Neurodivergent Leadership as a Distinctive Practice

Participants consistently described leadership as shaped by lived neurodivergent experience, values and identity. Leadership was frequently connected to experiences of exclusion, misunderstanding or unmet need, resulting in a strong commitment to advocacy and inclusion. Participants repeatedly described doing what was right rather than what was easy, focusing on preventing harm and improving outcomes for others. For example, Indigo reflected that neurodivergence had “empowered me to make sure that no other children are forgotten or missed in the way that I was at school,” while Nico described challenging systems “for the one person in the room who that doesn’t work for.”

These findings extend existing literature surrounding authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Rather than authenticity being understood solely as alignment between values and behaviour, participants described leadership itself as being informed by lived experience. Their neurodivergence influenced how they understood barriers, interpreted behaviour and responded to the needs of pupils, families and colleagues. Participants frequently viewed behaviour as communication, emphasised individual circumstances and questioned

assumptions embedded within educational systems. Such findings suggest that neurodivergent leadership may represent a distinctive form of leadership practice shaped by lived experience rather than simply leadership undertaken by neurodivergent individuals.

Capability and Cost

A second finding concerned the relationship between capability and the hidden effort required to sustain leadership. Participants described significant strengths associated with pattern recognition, systems thinking, empathy and problem solving. However, these strengths frequently co-existed with cognitive intensity, perfectionism and substantial emotional labour. Participants often described developing extensive self-generated scaffolding systems to manage workload, sensory demands and cognitive load.

This finding culminated in what is conceptualised as the competence paradox. Participants were often viewed as highly capable leaders while simultaneously experiencing self-doubt, unmet support needs and considerable personal effort. Nico described experiencing “crippling impostor syndrome,” while Luca reflected that “perfectionism has helped me succeed, but it’s also exhausting.” Visible competence frequently reduced opportunities for support because needs became less visible to others.

These findings challenge assumptions that competence can be understood as a stable and observable individual characteristic. Instead, competence appeared relational and context dependent, influenced by available support, expectations and opportunities for adaptation. This finding echoes neurodiversity scholarship questioning conventional understandings of professional capability and highlights how organisational assumptions may overlook hidden labour and support needs (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020).

Belonging, Identity and Organisational Context

Belonging emerged as a central factor shaping participants’ experiences of leadership. Consistent with Allen et al. (2022), participants distinguished between participation and genuine belonging. Holding leadership roles did not necessarily guarantee acceptance, authenticity or psychological safety.

Participants frequently described disclosure as complex, contextual and relational. Decisions to disclose neurodivergence were influenced by trust, organisational culture and anticipated consequences. While some participants experienced environments in which they could participate authentically, others continued to modify behaviour, mask aspects of identity or avoid disclosure. Alex described some leadership spaces as environments where “I constantly feel too much,” highlighting continuing tensions between authenticity and dominant expectations of professionalism.

These findings align with Edmondson’s (1999) concept of psychological safety and support growing evidence that belonging is not achieved solely through inclusion initiatives. Rather, belonging is shaped by whether individuals can participate without concealing important aspects of themselves. The findings therefore suggest that disclosure may be better understood as an outcome of belonging and psychological safety rather than simply an individual choice. This extends existing neurodivergent workplace research by highlighting the continued importance of identity negotiation even among highly successful educational leaders.

Conditions for Sustainable Leadership

The findings suggest that sustainable leadership is not simply a product of individual resilience but emerges through the interaction between leader identity, organisational culture, belonging and psychological safety. Consistent with ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), participants described sustainability as shaped by the environments in which leadership is enacted rather than solely by personal characteristics. Participants frequently rejected leadership models based on sacrifice, overwork and continual availability, instead emphasising sustainability, agency and long-term effectiveness, reflecting principles associated with sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Many participants described previous experiences of burnout, excessive workload and workplace cultures that normalised unsustainable practices. These experiences informed conscious decisions about boundaries, flexibility and wellbeing. Alex reflected that “I’m well in myself so I can lead them well,” while others described the importance of recognising limits, reducing masking and creating conditions in which both staff and leaders could thrive.

The findings also extend authentic leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Participants suggested that authenticity was dependent upon context and was more readily achieved in environments characterised by belonging and psychological safety (Allen et al., 2022; Edmondson, 1999). These findings informed the development of the SUSTAIN framework and suggest that leadership sustainability is best understood not as an individual responsibility, but as a shared organisational endeavour shaped by the extent to which educational environments recognise and accommodate cognitive diversity.

Strengths, Limitations and Recommendations

A key strength of this study is its focus on a relatively under-researched area of educational leadership and its use of a participatory, neurodiversity-affirmative methodology. Consistent with calls for greater inclusion of neurodivergent voices within research, participants were positioned as contributors to interpretation and framework development rather than solely subjects of inquiry (Botha, 2021; Nind, 2020). The exploratory sequential mixed-methods design combined survey findings, reflexive thematic analysis and collaborative framework development, enabling both breadth and depth of understanding whilst supporting the co-production of the SUSTAIN framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2007). This aligns with neurodiversity research advocating approaches that foreground lived experience and examine environments alongside individuals (Hume, 2024; Karcher et al., 2024).

However, the study does not seek statistical generalisation. The findings represent the experiences of eight self-selecting educational leaders and may not capture the full diversity of neurodivergent leadership experiences across educational contexts. Consistent with qualitative and participatory traditions, the intention was to generate context-specific insight rather than universal claims (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). As an insider researcher working within a local authority context, positionality may also have influenced participation and interpretation despite the use of reflexive journaling and strategies designed to increase participant influence and reduce power imbalances (Berger, 2015; Mercer, 2007; Nind, 2020).

Future research should explore neurodivergent leadership across different educational phases and organisational contexts, examine the longer-term applicability of the SUSTAIN framework, and investigate how organisational cultures shape belonging, disclosure and sustainability.

Further research may also help extend understanding of the competence paradox and explore how leadership development programmes can recognise lived neurodivergent experience as a source of professional expertise rather than focusing solely on adjustment or accommodation.

Conclusion

This study explored neurodivergent educational leaders' roles, experiences and wellbeing, while co-developing a reflective tool to support leadership sustainability. The findings suggest that neurodivergence may shape how leadership is enacted, experienced and sustained through distinctive approaches to leadership practice, tensions between capability and cost, experiences of belonging, and conditions for sustainable leadership.

The study demonstrates that neurodivergent educational leaders are not marginal to leadership practice but central to its future development. Leadership emerged as a relational and context-dependent practice shaped by lived experience, values and identity, while strengths associated with neurodivergent cognition, including systems thinking, moral commitment and relational sensitivity, were frequently identified (Bush, 2007; Day et al., 2020; Roberson et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2025).

However, these strengths were not realised independently of context, nor without cost. The competence paradox highlights how visible success can coexist with substantial hidden labour and unmet support needs, suggesting that competence is better understood as relational and context dependent rather than solely an individual characteristic (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Goodley, 2017).

The findings also position belonging, psychological safety and wellbeing as conditions that make sustained leadership participation possible rather than secondary outcomes of effective leadership. In this way, sustainable leadership emerged not from resilience alone, but from the interaction between individual agency and organisational environments that recognise, value and support diverse ways of leading.

The co-produced SUSTAIN framework provides a practical response to these findings. Grounded in neurodiversity-affirmative principles, it conceptualises leadership as dynamic and non-linear, recognising the importance of adaptive scaffolding, reflection and supportive organisational conditions in sustaining leadership over time (Doyle, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020).

The disparity between neurodivergent educators and leaders is not simply an issue of representation, but of systemic design. As increasing numbers of neurodivergent educators progress into leadership roles (Benson, 2026), education systems that fail to recognise neurodivergent leadership risk reinforcing exclusion and overlooking perspectives that may contribute to more inclusive and responsive practice. Conversely, systems that legitimise cognitive diversity, adaptive scaffolding and authentic participation may create more equitable and sustainable leadership cultures.

The findings suggest that the future of educational leadership lies not in asking whether neurodivergent individuals can succeed within existing systems, but in understanding how leadership cultures can evolve to recognise, support and benefit from diverse ways of thinking, leading and being.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Microsoft Copilot was used to support proofreading, language refinement, critical reflection and drafting assistance during manuscript preparation. The author reviewed, edited and took full responsibility for all content. The ideas, design, data collection, analysis, findings and conclusions are the author's own.

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