

## NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO COMMUNITY AND EDUCATION EQUALITY

CHELSEA WALLIS  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

---

**M**y contribution takes the form of a poem exploring the affective experience of belonging and alienation within the education system. I am a late-diagnosed Autistic woman, and I have been engaged in research on the pressure for neurodivergent children to be integrated within mainstream schooling, rather than being provided with opportunities and spaces for community building and pride amongst fellow neurodivergent young people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 (in particular, General Comment No 4) is premised on the belief that integrated schooling offers children the best educational experience, despite the vast majority of schools being under-resourced and under-trained in neurodivergent children's needs (eg sensory differences that make many classrooms a hostile space for these young people).

Furthermore, within mainstream schools the neurodivergent children who are most likely to be overlooked are those who face intersectional oppression, as these are the groups most susceptible to "masking" their neurodivergent traits in order to assimilate with their peers (including girls and non-binary children, people of colour, those with other disabilities, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). Masking takes a tremendous toll, as cognitive energy is spent on concealing oneself rather than engaging in learning.

My poem addresses the subjective experiences of neurodivergent children within the classroom, integrating a chorus of voices derived from my interviews with fellow neurodivergent adults reflecting on these formative years.

## The unfurrowing

Sing to me your people  
and I will sing you mine

Here in this hall so empty, so  
Full of echoes, footfalls low  
and growing distant, rooms  
of sharpened lead teeth:

It is a place of safety  
You say. It is a place  
for young, for growth—  
The fear, you leave unsaid.

A cell of sound and light it was  
Their eyes all biting mine

I drifted on your rigid  
tides, I tried to float on

parcelled hours and  
the rules of mimicry,

I wore your masks as  
easily as a chain around

my febrile mind  
grasped by iron vice—

Such clay we are to your  
Will: the kiln is fired.

In the quiet I bide when  
it sings, the clear call of

Green— crisp as the linnet  
and lithe as morning,  
  
she thrills the loam and  
wakes that enclosed living thing:  
  
Following, we soften, elastic—  
Dance in rhapsodic stride  
  
to know ourselves again:  
taste the salt of deliverance.



### **About the author**

**Chelsea Wallis** is completing a DPhil in Law, focusing on feminist jurisprudence, human rights and domestic abuse in the context of First Nations Australians and women with disabilities. She is Managing Editor of the Oxford Human Rights Hub and teaches in the Faculty of Law and at University College. As a former teacher and an Autistic and chronically ill person, Chelsea also publishes widely on neurodiversity, disability, and the right to educational equality. Her poetry and prose writing has been featured in *The Turl*, *Cultivate*, *Womankind* and *Storyboard*, and her collection *Apricity* received the DL Chapman prize in 2021.

Email: [chelsea.wallis@law.ox.ac.uk](mailto:chelsea.wallis@law.ox.ac.uk).

## Legislation, Regulations and Rules

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities  
2006