

Review of the Book *Making a Mark! Discovering the Power of Neurodiversity on a Learning Safari*, by K. McElderry & M. Stoddart

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Introduction

This review reflects on the book/learning resource 'Making a Mark' in relation to its relevance to small group discussion and classroom teaching, and also global neurodiversity advocacy.

Neurodiversity is a community-informed term (Botha et al. 2024) that recognises differences of thinking such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD as natural variations of the human genome. Neurodiversity is also an approach that offers an alternative to the medicalised view of neurodevelopmental differences (Dwyer, 2022) with an aim to improve the rights of neurodivergent people (Cheng et al. 2023). There is a vibrant and active community of neurodiversity advocates, who often share inclusive ways of working with neurodivergent children and adults alike.

Book Overview

The suggested readership of *Making a Mark* is 9-14 years old, though I felt the content and concepts discussed are better suited for a lower secondary 11-14 age range. However, as an adult I enjoyed this book as an explorative read, so this text will serve as a learning resource and introduction to neurodiversity related concepts for parents and teachers as well.

Throughout the book, the authors draw from the author Mark's experiences of school as a dyslexic child, the challenges he faced in an unwelcoming classroom and how he overcame these challenges through pursuing his love of animals and art. There are plenty of characters featured in the book, each experiencing a different way of learning, including neuro-traits related to dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Some of the language and teaching methods detailed in the story reflect an historical account of educational experience. Mark's journey into adulthood and reflections on neurodiversity through the theme of a safari provide a wonderful insight into how learning is a journey, with fun, adventure, obstacles, and adversities that must be overcome.

The story offers an opportunity to reflect upon how the school environment must be appropriate for the child, offered through the analogy of the conditions a plant requires to grow. As Mark enters the workplace, he reflects upon some employers requiring specific entry tests that

were not conducive to his way of thinking, and how this encouraged Mark to pursue his love of art and animals to create his own career path, and advocate for dyslexia awareness across the world.

Learning Resources

In addition to the main story, there are also useful learning resources offered at the end of the book that explain the different neuro-types discussed. They also introduce the biological basis for learning, growth mindset and give an introduction to neurodiversity.

Language & Images

The overall presentation of language and images used throughout the book are inclusive, depicting male and female characters from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The paragraphs are short, and overall easy to read, with the language celebratory of neurodivergence. The characters depicted in the story have overexaggerated names that share a characteristic of that person. The explicit linkage made people's roles and how they inform the story clear. However, language and images used at the start of the story, particularly in relation to the leading teachers of Grimly Grammar, are described in relation to stereotypically undesirable physical characteristics. These reminded me of the physical descriptive humour and illustration style akin to Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake and are thus 'of its time'. This should not detract from the overall inclusive ethos of the story.

Considering Mark's Contribution from an Advocacy Perspective

In addition to considering this text as a learning resource, I would like to suggest that this book is also considered as an example of advocacy writing. From my own advocacy work, I often see advocates' desire to pass on what they have learnt from their own experiences to the next generation. Mark shares his journey into adulthood and focuses on the strengths of his neurodivergence, pursuing what he is passionate about, resulting in a very interesting and adventurous life. The advocacy messages in this book are clear and offer an opportunity for neurodivergent young people to reflect on their own

experiences and strengths in relation to their neurodivergence. However, I would also suggest that the book offers an opportunity for supporters of neurodivergent people, be it social workers, teachers or educational psychologists to also reflect on its teachings. It could inform a training exercise on how neurodivergent people are understood and supported across education and work. This book serves both as a story/learning resource and advocacy text detailing the passion, perseverance, and global impact individuals such as Mark have on informing inclusive classroom approaches, making this book both a valuable read and a useful teaching resource.

Acknowledgements

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