

Relational Design, Non-Judgemental Regulation, and Daily Connection: A Case Study of Re-engaging High-Functioning Autistic Learners in an Alternative NCEA Setting

Bruce H. Knox* 

Independent Scholar, Auckland, New Zealand

*Corresponding Author

Bruce H. Knox, Independent Scholar, Auckland, New Zealand.

Submitted: 2026, Apr 13; **Accepted:** 2026, May 08; **Published:** 2026, May 20

Citation: Knox, B. H. (2026). Relational Design, Non-Judgemental Regulation, and Daily Connection: A Case Study of Re-engaging High-Functioning Autistic Learners in an Alternative NCEA Setting. *Adv Neur Sci*, 9(2), 01-04.

Abstract

Background: High-functioning autistic students frequently disengage within mainstream secondary education due to systemic misalignment with their cognitive, sensory, and emotional regulation needs.

Objective: This paper presents a case study of the Villa Education Trust (Villa NCEA Academy), examining how a relationally grounded, non-judgemental, and flexible educational model—augmented by daily teacher–student contact during COVID-19 lockdowns—enabled full academic re-engagement and successful transition to university.

Methods: A qualitative case study approach was employed, integrating institutional practice with contemporary literature on autism, engagement, trauma-informed education, and self-regulation.

Results: Core mechanisms included (1) daily relational rituals, (2) non-judgemental acceptance of regulation behaviours, (3) flexible structural design, and (4) a “zero invisibility” policy through daily contact. All enrolled students, initially presenting as academically disengaged, progressed to university pathways.

Conclusion: The findings challenge deficit-based models of disengagement, demonstrating that when regulation, connection, and dignity are prioritised, high-functioning autistic learners can achieve at the highest academic levels.

This case study is also captured within musical lyrics that can be accessed at <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/01d02ae14b.html>

Keywords: Autism, NCEA, Alternative Education, Emotional Regulation, Student Engagement, COVID-19, Relational Pedagogy, New Zealand

1. Introduction

Disengagement among secondary school students has traditionally been framed as an issue of motivation, behaviour, or capability. However, emerging research suggests that disengagement is more accurately understood as a mismatch between learner needs and institutional design [1,2]. This is particularly evident for high-functioning autistic students, who often possess strong intellectual capacity but encounter persistent barriers related to sensory processing, executive functioning, and implicit social expectations [3–5]. Mainstream schooling environments—characterised by rigid behavioural expectations, limited tolerance for emotional dysregulation, and high social demands—can inadvertently marginalise these learners [6,7]. As a result, students may be labelled as underperforming or disengaged despite significant

underlying capability. This paper examines an alternative model implemented by the Villa NCEA Academy, in which relational safety, non-judgemental regulation, and structural flexibility are embedded into daily practice. The model is further strengthened by a lockdown-era innovation involving daily teacher–student contact.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on institutional practices, leadership accounts, and alignment with established theoretical frameworks. The analysis is interpretive, situating observed practices within the broader literature on autism, engagement, and trauma-informed education.

3. The Villa NCEA Academy Model

Relational Architecture: Daily Whānau Practice

Central to the model is the daily 1 p.m. whānau gathering, in which every student participates in structured reflection. Questions such as:

- “What has been your happiest moment today?”
- “What has been your saddest moment?”
- “On a scale of 1–10, how are you feeling?”

create a predictable, emotionally literate community.

Such practices align with evidence that structured relational engagement enhances psychological safety and academic participation [8,9].

Non-Judgemental Regulation as Core Practice

A defining feature of the Villa model is the **normalisation of regulation behaviours**.

Students were explicitly supported to:

- signal overload using a “**T**” hand gesture
- leave the classroom without permission to regulate
- cry or experience emotional release without intervention or correction
- withdraw physically (e.g., sit under desks, isolate briefly)

Crucially:

These behaviours were not pathologised—they were accepted as part of learning.

There was:

- no judgement
- no behavioural correction
- no punitive response

Students were trusted to:

return when ready

4. Theoretical Alignment

This approach aligns strongly with contemporary understandings of autism and regulation:

- Emotional dysregulation is often a response to overload, not defiance [5,10]
- Suppressing regulation behaviours increases distress and reduces cognitive capacity [11]
- Psychological safety is a prerequisite for learning [12]

By allowing students to regulate openly, the Villa model removed the need for masking—a cognitively and emotionally costly process commonly reported by autistic individuals [13].

5. Flexible Structural Design

The Villa environment intentionally minimised traditional constraints:

- No uniforms
- Minimal rules
- Open hours (8 a.m.–6 p.m.)
- Voluntary movement within the learning space

Rather than producing chaos, this resulted in:

- reduced anxiety
- increased autonomy
- improved engagement

This reflects a shift from **compliance-based education to self-regulation-based education**.

6. Lockdown Innovation: Daily Individual Connection

During COVID-19 lockdowns, the model extended into a digital format. A key practice was implemented:

Every teacher contacted every student, every day.

Using platforms such as Microsoft Teams, communication included:

- video calls
- live interaction
- chat-based support

7. Connection as Safeguarding

This daily contact functioned as:

- an engagement mechanism
- a wellbeing monitoring system
- a safeguard against isolation

Research indicates that social isolation during COVID-19 significantly increased risks of depression and anxiety among young people [14,15]. The Villa model effectively mitigated these risks through consistent relational presence.

8. The “Zero Invisibility” Principle

The combined practices of:

- daily whānau gathering (collective visibility)
- daily teacher contact (individual visibility)

ensured that:

no student became invisible

This dual-layer relational system is consistent with trauma-informed educational approaches emphasising connection as a protective factor [16].

9. Outcomes

A striking outcome of the Villa model was that:

All enrolled students—many entering as documented academic failures—successfully transitioned into university.

This finding challenges prevailing assumptions about:

- the limits of disengaged learners
- the impact of non-traditional structures
- the necessity of behavioural compliance for academic success

Instead, it suggests that:

when barriers are removed, capability emerges.

10. Discussion

10.1. Reframing Behaviour

Traditional education systems often interpret behaviours such as withdrawal, emotional expression, or avoidance as non-compliance. In contrast, the Villa model interprets these behaviours as signals of regulation need

This reframing aligns with neurodevelopmental and trauma-informed perspectives [10,16].

10.2. The Cost of Suppression vs the Power of Acceptance

Suppressing behaviours such as:

- leaving the room
- emotional expression
- physical withdrawal

can increase cognitive load and reduce learning capacity [11,13].

By contrast, accepting these behaviours:

- reduces stress
- restores regulation
- enables re-engagement

10.3. Relational Pedagogy and Academic Excellence

The Villa model demonstrates that:

high expectations and high compassion are not contradictory—they are interdependent.

Academic success was not achieved despite the relational model, but because of it.

10.4. System Design vs Student Deficit

This case study reinforces a key conclusion:

Disengagement is often a system design failure, not a student failure.

When systems:

- demand conformity over regulation
- prioritise compliance over connection
- enforce uniformity over flexibility

they exclude learners whose needs fall outside the norm.

The musical expression that can be found at the following link captures the reality of this medical narrative.

<https://heyzine.com/flip-book/01d02ae14b.html>

11. Conclusion

The Villa NCEA Academy model provides a compelling example of how education can be redesigned to support high-functioning autistic learners.

Key insights include:

- regulation must be accepted, not suppressed
- connection must be systematic, not incidental
- flexibility must be intentional, not accidental

The COVID-19 lockdown period further demonstrated that:

daily human connection is one of the most powerful protective and educational interventions available.

Ultimately, this model shows that when learners are:

- seen
- accepted
- supported

they are not only capable of re-engagement—they are capable of excellence.

References

1. Hattie J. Visible Learning. London: Routledge; 2009.
2. Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of educational research*, 74(1), 59-109.
3. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Washington, DC; 2013.
4. Lai, M. C., Lombardo, M. V., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2014). vol. 383, issue 9920. *Autism Lancet*, 896-910.
5. Robertson, C. E., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2017). Sensory perception in autism. *Nature reviews neuroscience*, 18(11), 671-684.
6. Humphrey, N., & Lewis, S. (2008). 'Make me normal' The views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools. *Autism*, 12(1), 23-46.
7. Ashburner, J., Ziviani, J., & Rodger, S. (2008). Sensory processing and classroom emotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes in children with autism spectrum disorder. *The American journal of occupational therapy*, 62(5), 564-573.
8. Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of educational research*, 79(1), 491-525.
9. Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*, 82(1), 405-432.
10. Hill, E. L. (2004). Executive dysfunction in autism. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 8(1), 26-32.
11. Pellicano, E., & Burr, D. (2012). When the world becomes 'too real': a Bayesian explanation of autistic perception. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 16(10), 504-510.
12. Brunzell T, Waters L, Stokes H. Trauma-informed education. *Contemp Sch Psychol*. 2015;19:1-13.
13. Hull, L., Petrides, K. V., Allison, C., Smith, P., Baron-Cohen, S., Lai, M. C., & Mandy, W. (2017). "Putting on my best normal": Social camouflaging in adults with autism spectrum conditions. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 47(8), 2519-2534.
14. Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., ... & Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid systematic review: the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59(11), 1218-1239.
15. Lee, J. (2020). Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. *The lancet child & adolescent health*, 4(6), 421.
16. Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2016). Trauma-informed positive education: Using positive psychology to strengthen vulnerable students. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 20(1), 63-83.
17. OECD. Students at Risk of School Failure. Paris: OECD; 2012.
18. Roorda DL et al. Teacher-student relationships and engagement. *Rev Educ Res*. 2011;81(4):493-529.

THE VILLA NCEA ACADEMY STORY

Re-engaging High-Functioning Autistic Learners Connection. Acceptance. Achievement.

A relationally designed alternative education model that turned disengagement into achievement – 100% of students transitioned to university.



 <p>1. RELATIONSHIP IS THE FOUNDATION</p> <p>Daily 1pm whānau gathering where every student is heard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been your happiest moment today? • What has been your saddest moment? • On a scale of 1–10, how are you feeling? <p>This build trust, belonging and emotional literacy.</p>	 <p>2. NON-JUDGEMENTAL ACCEPTANCE</p> <p>Students are free to regulate in ways that work for them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the "T" signal to take time out • Go outside to cry or calm down • Sit under a desk if needed <p>No judgement. No correction. Just acceptance. They return when ready.</p>	 <p>3. FLEXIBILITY WITHIN STRUCTURE</p> <p>An environment built on choice, autonomy and trust.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No uniforms • Very few rules • Open 8am – 6pm • Students come and go as need be <p>Freedom to manage time, energy and learning.</p>	 <p>4. EXPLICIT COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICATION</p> <p>We teach the social and emotional skills that mainstream often assumes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe, structured sharing • Respectful listening • Clear communication expectations <p>Building a community of trust and understanding.</p>	 <p>5. REGULATION IS PRIORITISED</p> <p>Overwhelm is real. Regulation is not optional – it's essential.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement is normal • Rreaks are supported • Self pacing is encouraged <p>When regulation is supported, learning becomes possible.</p>
--	---	---	---	---

 <p>6. LOCKDOWN INNOVATION: DAILY CONNECTION</p> <p>During COVID-19 lockdowns, we made one promise – no student would be invisible.</p> <p>Every teacher spoke to every student, every day.</p> <p>Via Microsoft Teams, video calls and chat – we maintained:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Engagement • Wellbeing • Academic momentum <p>No one slipped through the cracks. No one was left behind.</p>		 <p>7. OUTSTANDING OUTCOMES</p> <p>Our students came to us as documented failures – often at the bottom of the bottom class.</p> <p>100% of our students transitioned to university.</p> <p>Not despite our approach – because of it.</p> <p>When students feel safe, seen and supported, they can achieve beyond what they thought possible.</p>	
---	--	--	--

8. KEY INGREDIENTS OF OUR SUCCESS

	+		+		+		+		+	
RELATIONSHIP & TRUST		NON-JUDGEMENTAL ACCEPTANCE		FLEXIBILITY & CHOICE		DAILY CONNECTION & COMMUNITY		SAFETY & REGULATION		HIGH EXPECTATIONS WITH COMPASSION

<p>WHAT OUR STUDENTS SAY</p> <p>“ Villa is the first place where I've been able to be myself.”</p> <p>“ I can take breaks without being judged. It helps me learn.”</p> <p>“ The daily check-ins made me feel like someone actually cared.”</p>		<p>9. WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Disengagement is often a system design problem, not a student problem. ✓ Connection is the most powerful intervention in education. ✓ When regulation is respected, learning thrives. ✓ Every student has potential when the environment is right. <p>OUR BELIEF</p> <p>Every young person deserves an education that sees them, accepts them and believes in them.</p> <p>At Villa, we don't just re-engage students. We empower them for life.</p>	 <p>VILLA NCEA ACADEMY</p> <p>Different by Design. Life Changing by Choice.</p> <p>www.villaeducation.co.nz</p>
--	--	---	---

SEEN. HEARD. ACCEPTED. SUPPORTED. EMPOWERED. ACHIEVING.

Copyright: ©2026 Bruce H. Knox. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.