

Learning in One Place at a Time: A Personal Perspective on Block Teaching, Neurodiversity, and Belonging in Foundation Education

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Abstract

Block and intensive teaching models are often evaluated through metrics of efficiency, satisfaction, or performance. This paper examines curriculum structures as pedagogical and ethical configurations of time, shaping cognitive load, belonging, and the lived experience of learning within Foundation (Year 0) education.

Framed by neurodiversity-informed, critical disability, and ethics-of-care perspectives, the study adopts a practitioner inquiry approach, drawing on reflective comparative analysis of block and concurrent module delivery within a UK Foundation programme. Grounded in my positionality as a dyslexic educator with hyperacusis, it considers how temporal organisation distributes cognitive pressure, structures relational proximity, and encodes assumptions about the learner. The analysis suggests that curriculum design is not merely administrative but ethically consequential. In this context, block teaching functions as a form of structural inclusion by reducing fragmentation and supporting cognitive containment during transition into higher education.

The paper contributes to scholarship on block and intensive learning by reframing timetabling as pedagogical infrastructure and by positioning lived neurodivergent experience as a legitimate analytic lens. Rather than advocating block delivery as universally superior, it argues that temporal coherence can act as an inclusive scaffold, particularly within Foundation contexts where belonging and academic identity are still emerging.

Key words: Block teaching; Foundation education; Student belonging; Inclusive pedagogy; Learning design

Introduction: Why Block Matters to Me

Curriculum structure is often treated as administrative necessity rather than pedagogical choice. Yet the organisation of time in higher education (HE) shapes how students experience attention, pressure, confidence, and belonging. This paper argues that block and intensive teaching are not simply alternative timetabling models but ethical configurations of learning conditions. Building on earlier work exploring belonging and continuation in Foundation education, this paper shifts attention from relational interventions to the structural environments within which those practices operate. Specifically, it examines how temporal architecture, whether modules are delivered sequentially or concurrently, influences cognitive load, engagement, and depth of learning.

The paper offers a personal and practice-based perspective grounded in my experience as a dyslexic educator with hyperacusis and as programme lead of an Art and Design Foundation (Year 0) course in UK HE. It draws on reflective practice, informal programme observation, and existing scholarship rather than formal empirical data. My perspective is shaped both by having struggled within traditional HE structures characterised by simultaneous modules and fragmented demands, and by now observing similar patterns among students transitioning into university study, particularly those with uneven educational histories, neurodivergent profiles, or low academic confidence.

While scholarship on block and intensive teaching has expanded in recent years, much of this work has focused on performance metrics, student satisfaction, implementation challenges, or comparative outcomes across delivery models (e.g., Thomas et al., 2025; McWilliams et al., 2023). Important contributions have also examined Universal Design for Learning (Wilkinson & Merry, 2024; Merry, 2023), assessment rhythms within immersive delivery (Slevin, 2021), and institutional redesign under block models (Thomas et al., 2025; McWilliams et al., 2023). Within the *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, scholarship has explored implementation challenges, assessment rhythms, student transition, and institutional redesign under block models. However, fewer studies have examined block teaching through a neurodivergent insider lens or as an ethical configuration of educational time, and less attention has been given to how curriculum structure is experienced from within, particularly through neurodivergent embodiment, or to how block and concurrent modes function as ethical configurations of time that shape belonging, cognitive load, and academic identity. The lived perspective of educators who themselves navigate cognitive and sensory difference remains underrepresented in block teaching literature, as does sustained consideration of curriculum architecture as a site of structural inclusion rather than logistical efficiency. This paper addresses that gap by examining block teaching through a neurodiversity-informed and care-oriented lens, positioning temporal coherence as a pedagogical condition with relational and ethical implications, particularly within Foundation education.

This paper therefore asks:

How does the temporal structure of a curriculum shape students' cognitive experience, sense of belonging, and capacity for deep engagement in Foundation education?

To explore this question, the paper first situates block teaching within existing scholarship and outlines the theoretical lenses that inform the analysis. It then draws on reflective practice

within a Foundation programme to examine how temporal structure appears to shape engagement, confidence, and belonging. The paper concludes by considering the implications of curriculum design as an ethical configuration of educational time.

This paper does not argue that block teaching is a universal remedy. Rather, it suggests that temporal coherence can function as an inclusive scaffold by reducing fragmentation, containing cognitive pressure, and creating conditions for relational depth. By reframing timetabling as pedagogical infrastructure, the paper contributes to conversations about block and intensive teaching as structural forms of inclusion rather than logistical variation.

Theoretical Framing: Neurodiversity, Care, and the Ethics of Educational Time

This paper is grounded in three intersecting theoretical perspectives: the neurodiversity paradigm (Botha et al., 2024), critical disability approaches to education (Dolmage, 2017), and relational or ethics-of-care frameworks (Biesta, 2013; Felten et al., 2023). Together, these lenses reposition curriculum structure not as neutral infrastructure but as a site where inclusion, exclusion, and belonging are materially organised through time.

The neurodiversity paradigm reframes cognitive and sensory differences such as dyslexia as forms of natural human variation rather than individual deficit. Developed collectively through autistic and cross-disability activist scholarship rather than originating in a single academic source (Botha et al., 2024), the paradigm positions neurodivergent experience as epistemically authoritative. Within this perspective, disablement emerges not from difference itself but from institutional environments that privilege particular processing speeds, communicative norms, and attentional capacities. Educational structures that assume rapid task-switching, simultaneous cognitive demands, and sustained divided attention may therefore disadvantage some learners, not because of lack of ability, but because of structural misalignment in how cognitive load is distributed (Sweller, 1988; Dolmage, 2017). Dolmage (2017) argues that contemporary HE operates within a neoliberal logic that valorises hyper-productivity and individual flexibility, rendering requests for accommodation visible as weakness rather than structural critique (p. 177). Within such a climate, temporal demands are normalised rather than interrogated, and disability is economically ordered through expectations of productivity and expendability (p. 108).

Critical disability scholarship similarly challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of educational struggle, locating difficulty within systemic arrangements rather than individual pathology (Dolmage, 2017; Botha et al., 2024). When student overwhelm is interpreted solely as a problem of resilience, organisation, or motivation, the structural conditions producing that overwhelm often remain unexamined. Examining temporal architecture through a disability-informed lens shifts attention to how module overlap, assessment clustering, and fragmented contact patterns intensify cognitive load and constrain participation. In this sense, curriculum design becomes a question of structural anticipation rather than reactive accommodation.

Alongside these perspectives, relational and ethics-of-care frameworks emphasise that education is not simply the transmission of content but the creation of conditions in which learners can engage meaningfully with ideas, peers, and themselves. Belonging research highlights the centrality of relational continuity, trust, and psychological safety in supporting student persistence and engagement (Thomas, 2012; Felten et al., 2023). Care-oriented

approaches position attentiveness to students' cognitive and emotional realities as a pedagogical responsibility rather than an optional enhancement (Felten et al., 2023; Biesta, 2013). Within this framing, the organisation of time becomes ethically consequential: compressed immersion may foster relational depth and coherence, whereas fragmented structures may dilute community formation and increase anxiety.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives support a re-reading of block teaching as more than a logistical arrangement. Temporal coherence can be understood as a form of structural care, one that anticipates cognitive diversity and transition-related vulnerability by reducing fragmentation and enabling sustained engagement. In this way, block teaching is positioned within broader debates about inclusive design, belonging, and educational ethics, inviting consideration of time itself as a pedagogical condition.

Methodological Position: Reflective Narrative as Pedagogical Inquiry

This article adopts a reflective practitioner inquiry approach, written in the style of a scholarly paper rather than a purely personal essay. It aligns with traditions of autoethnographic and self-study inquiry in which lived experience is understood as a situated and interpretive mode of knowledge production, enabling critical interrogation of professional practice (Morace-Court, 2026; Muscat & Thomas, 2023). It does not report formal empirical research, nor does it present systematically collected student data. Rather, it draws upon my lived experience as a dyslexic educator with hyperacusis and as programme lead of a Foundation (Year 0) course operating within both block and concurrent delivery structures. This approach aligns with classroom-focused practitioner research in block teaching contexts, where teacher-authored reflective inquiry has been used to examine pedagogical patterns emerging across repeated iterations of delivery (Muscat & Thomas, 2023). Like their work, this paper does not seek generalisability but aims to illuminate how structural features of block delivery shape classroom dynamics over time within a specific educational context.

The reflections presented here emerge from sustained engagement with curriculum design, programme leadership, and everyday pedagogical practice. Observations referenced throughout are informal and practice-based, developed through teaching, team discussions, student interactions, and longitudinal programme oversight. No formal data collection instruments were used, no student interviews or surveys were conducted for the purposes of this paper, and no individual students are identified. As such, institutional ethics approval was not required. The purpose of this paper is not to claim generalisable findings but to offer a situated and interpretive perspective that may resonate with others working in block or intensive contexts.

Positioning this work as reflective inquiry acknowledges the epistemic value of insider perspective, consistent with neurodiversity-informed scholarship that values lived experience as analytic lens rather than bias to be eliminated. My neurodivergent lived experience shapes how I perceive cognitive load, environmental stimulus, fragmentation, and temporal pressure within educational structures. Rather than seeking objectivity through distance, this paper adopts reflexivity, recognising the dual role of educator and analyst and the interpretive nature of the observations presented.

The Foundation context is significant. In the UK, Foundation (Year 0) programmes serve as transitional pathways into undergraduate study, enabling students with diverse academic and social backgrounds to access HE. Students entering these programmes often present with varied prior attainment, uneven academic preparation, and, in some cases, additional learning, wellbeing, or mental health needs. As a result, transition, belonging, and academic confidence are not peripheral concerns but central pedagogical priorities.

Transition to HE is widely recognised as a critical period shaping retention, engagement, and long-term success (Stuttard, 2007; Thomas, 2012). Interventions that foster reflective practice, resilience, and self-regulation have been associated with improved progression and adaptability (Tangney, 2014), while collaborative and peer-based learning has been shown to strengthen networks of mutual support and confidence-building (Devenish et al., 2009). Within this context, curriculum structure carries particular weight. The organisation of time, assessment clustering, and relational continuity may either amplify transition-related vulnerability or create conditions of stability and containment.

In writing this piece, I draw on established literature relating to deep and surface learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011), belonging (Thomas, 2012), relational pedagogy (Felten et al., 2023), neurodiversity and disability scholarship, and emerging research in block and intensive teaching (Slevin, 2021; Wilkinson & Merry, 2024). These frameworks provide conceptual grounding for interpreting reflective observations rather than serving as post hoc justification.

The aim is therefore philosophical and interpretive: to examine how temporal organisation in HE functions as pedagogical infrastructure. By placing reflective narrative in dialogue with theory, this paper seeks to expand discussions of block teaching beyond performance metrics and toward ethical and relational considerations.

Educational Structures as Pedagogical Conditions

Block and intensive teaching models typically reorganise the academic calendar so that students focus on one module at a time, or on a reduced number of concurrent modules, within compressed timeframes. Across HE contexts, such models have been associated with increased immersion, concentrated feedback cycles, altered assessment rhythms, and shifts in staff workload and curriculum planning (Slevin, 2021; Wilkinson & Merry, 2024). Within the *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, scholarship has examined implementation strategies, student transition experiences, Universal Design for Learning adaptations, and institutional reform under block structures (McWilliams et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2025). Much of this literature has explored student satisfaction, performance outcomes, and logistical considerations of intensive delivery (Slevin, 2021; Wilkinson & Merry, 2024).

While these contributions provide important insights into the mechanics of block models, less attention has been given to how temporal reorganisation functions as a pedagogical condition shaping cognitive load, belonging, and participation, particularly when viewed through neurodivergent embodiment. In many institutional contexts, curriculum structure is positioned as a matter of scheduling, credit distribution, or efficiency. Yet decisions about timetabling, module overlap, and assessment rhythm shape the conditions under which students are asked to think, organise, and participate. As Biesta (2013) reminds us, education concerns not only delivery but the conditions under which learners are positioned to receive and respond. How

many modules students study at once, how frequently they encounter tutors, how assessment deadlines cluster, and how learning time is distributed across weeks all influence what kinds of engagement are possible. These structural arrangements implicitly anticipate a particular kind of learner: one able to hold multiple conceptual threads simultaneously, self-organise across competing priorities, and move fluidly between domains. Barnett (2007) similarly argues that HE increasingly organises learning under conditions of speed and uncertainty, placing pressure on students' capacities for coherence and meaning-making.

For many students, particularly those entering via Foundation routes, this assumed learner often does not exist. Students may be managing employment, caring responsibilities, anxiety, neurodivergence, or gaps in prior educational experience. When multiple modules run concurrently, learning risks becoming shallow, fragmented, and reactive rather than cumulative and reflective (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Barnett, 2007). This concern resonates with scholarship distinguishing between surface and deep approaches to learning, where fragmentation and time pressure are associated with more instrumental engagement (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Block teaching disrupts this assumption by asking students to focus on one learning narrative at a time. It alters the rhythm of study, compressing immersion while reducing simultaneous demands. This shift has significant implications for how students understand learning, assessment, and themselves as learners.

Neurodiversity, Time, and Cognitive Load: A Personal Lens

My perspective on block teaching is inseparable from my own experiences of neurodivergent and sensory experience. As a dyslexic learner, I have always needed time to process information, revisit ideas, and build coherence across concepts. As someone with hyperacusis, environments characterised by constant sensory input, noise, interruption, competing demands, are physically and cognitively draining. In traditional multi-module structures, learning often feels like existing in a state of perpetual partial attention: always another deadline approaching, another shift in expectations. For me, this produced not only academic difficulty but a persistent sense of inadequacy, of being out of step with an educational system not designed for my way of processing the world.

From a neurodiversity-informed perspective, such experiences can be understood as structural misalignment rather than individual limitation. Concurrent module structures that assume rapid task-switching and divided attention may function as disabling environments for some learners, not because of lack of ability, but because of how cognitive demands are distributed across time.

Research emphasises that dyslexia is not related to intelligence but to differences in how language and information are processed (Evans, 2014). Nevertheless, many dyslexic learners leave school with diminished confidence, shaped less by ability than by systems that privilege speed and fragmentation. Evans links cumulative academic pressure and insufficient structural support to disengagement and withdrawal. This resonates with my own educational history and with patterns I recognise among Foundation students who struggle less with content than with managing simultaneous demands.

Educational time, as critical disability scholarship reminds us, is never neutral. As Dolmage (2017) argues, universities are structured around expectations of speed, productivity, and

individual flexibility that position certain bodies and minds as normative while marking others as deficient. Norms of pace and multitasking therefore reflect institutional assumptions about whose capacities are anticipated and valued. Block teaching alters these assumptions by redistributing temporal intensity and reducing parallel demands. It creates what might be described as cognitive containment: fewer transitions, fewer competing narratives, and more opportunity to remain with ideas long enough for understanding to develop. From a neurodiverse perspective, this is not a minor adjustment but a structural reconfiguration of cognitive labour.

Wilkinson and Merry (2024) also highlight the relational dimensions of block teaching, noting that increased contact time enables tutors to work iteratively with students and respond more quickly to emerging needs. This aligns with my own observations within Foundation education, where continuity of staff, peer groups, and shared focus appears to foster trust, confidence, and a sense of being ‘held’ by the learning structure, conditions that are particularly important for students with histories of educational disruption or exclusion.

What has been striking is seeing how many students, who do not necessarily identify as neurodiverse, benefit from the same conditions. This suggests that block teaching aligns with principles of inclusive design: what supports those at the margins often improves learning for everyone. From my own dyslexic perspective, the compatibility between block teaching and inclusive design is especially significant. The opportunity to engage deeply with one subject, revisit materials, and receive ongoing feedback within a shorter, coherent timeframe contrasts sharply with the cognitive strain of managing multiple concurrent modules. As Wilkinson and Merry (2024) argue, accessibility in block teaching is not solely about accommodations, but about designing learning environments that are equitable by default.

Foundation Education and the Question of Belonging

Foundation programmes occupy a complex position within HE. They are simultaneously preparatory, remedial, and aspirational. Students arrive with diverse motivations and histories, and many carry narratives of prior educational failure or exclusion. Belonging is therefore not a peripheral concern in Foundation education; it is foundational. Research on student transition and persistence consistently shows that students who do not feel they belong are less likely to engage deeply, persist, or imagine themselves as future degree-level learners (Thomas, 2012). Felten et al. (2023) similarly emphasise that HE is a relationship-rich environment, where everyday interactions with peers and staff, particularly within the classroom, play a crucial role in supporting confidence, wellbeing, and continuation. This is especially significant for students from non-traditional or marginalised backgrounds, who may otherwise feel academically or personally on their own.

The current Foundation structure predates my programme leadership and reflects institutional decisions made during a broader curriculum review. The first semester begins with a five-week single-module block designed to introduce academic expectations and studio practice in an immersive format. This is followed by two modules delivered concurrently over seven weeks. In contrast, the second semester consists of three modules running simultaneously across twelve weeks, more closely resembling traditional semesterised delivery across the institution. While the rationale for this sequencing was established prior to my involvement, the structural

contrast provides a situated comparison between immersive and concurrent temporal architectures within the same cohort.

Across successive iterations of delivery, differences in engagement, organisation, confidence, and depth of learning have become noticeable in everyday practice. During the initial five-week block, students often appear to develop a clearer sense of expectations and academic momentum. Informal observations within the teaching team suggest stronger attendance patterns, more consistent participation, and increased willingness to contribute to discussion. These patterns echo findings in block teaching research, where immersion is frequently described as clarifying and concurrent study as fragmenting (Slevin, 2021).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a useful conceptual lens for interpreting these contrasts. UDL positions inclusive curriculum design as anticipatory, accounting for learner variability through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (Merry, 2023). Immersive formats may reduce the requirement for students to divide attention across multiple subjects, thereby minimising threats and distractions that can undermine motivation (Merry, 2023). As Dolmage (2017) notes, accommodation models frequently operate within a framework that assumes traditional lectures and high-stakes testing as default, retrofitting adjustments rather than rethinking structure. From this perspective, block teaching may function less as accommodation and more as anticipatory design (p. 96). Within a Foundation context—where students are negotiating academic transition, identity formation, and uneven prior preparation—the reduction of simultaneous cognitive demands may function not merely as a preference but as a form of structural inclusion.

These effects appear not only cognitive but relational and affective. Concentrated study creates space for continuity of staff and peer interaction before academic pressures multiply, supporting the kinds of relational continuity identified as central to engagement and continuation in HE. Viewed through a neurodivergent lens, the contrast between block and concurrent delivery suggests that what is often framed as student preference may instead reflect differing degrees of structural compatibility between curriculum architecture and cognitive diversity.

Evans (2014) also highlights the role of supportive teachers and learning environments in shaping dyslexic learners' persistence and self-belief. Accounts of successful dyslexic adults frequently attribute continuation in education to educators who recognised strengths, reduced fear of failure, and encouraged alternative ways of engaging with learning. Where such support is absent, students are more likely to experience anxiety, low self-esteem, and disengagement. This reinforces the importance of pedagogic structures that allow time, trust, and continuity to develop, conditions that block teaching appears particularly well placed to support.

Observations from Practice: Semester One and Semester Two

One of the most revealing aspects of this programme has been the contrast between semesters. Following the immersive opening block in Semester One and the subsequent move into more concurrent study, the transition to three parallel modules in Semester Two intensifies this structural shift. While students often enter Semester Two with a sense of motivation, recurring patterns become evident over time. These include heightened anxiety around deadlines, difficulty prioritising competing tasks, reduced attendance in at least one module, and a shift

towards more surface-level engagement focused on task completion rather than depth of learning. Some students appear stretched across multiple demands, while others disengage more quietly, remaining present but participating less fully. For students with existing vulnerabilities or lower academic confidence, this fragmentation can exacerbate feelings of overwhelm and self-doubt.

These observations echo Slevin's (2021) account of block module design as emerging from sustained dialogue between students and staff rather than abstract curriculum reform. Slevin describes how block teaching developed in response to student feedback that studying multiple concurrent modules, particularly early in undergraduate study, was experienced as overwhelming, fragmenting, and anxiety-inducing. Students characterised the transition to university itself as an 'upheaval' (p. 164), one intensified rather than eased by the immediate demand to manage several parallel academic narratives. A similar distinction between concurrent balancing of multiple assessments and immersive sequential study is noted in institutional descriptions of the Block Model (McWilliams et al., 2023), where traditional semesterised structures are characterised by competing demands across subjects. This framing resonates strongly with my own observations in Foundation education, where difficulties under concurrent module structures often reflect not a lack of motivation or ability, but the cumulative pressure of divided attention and competing expectations.

Importantly, this contrast cannot be explained by differences in student capability. Many of the same students who struggle in Semester Two thrived under block conditions just weeks earlier. The difference often lies not in the learner, but in the structure. In education, structural conditions often go unexamined, while student struggle is framed as an individual deficit rather than a response to how learning is organised. Block teaching, by contrast, appears to create conditions more conducive to deep engagement. Where attention is not constantly divided across competing modules, students seem better able to read carefully, reflect openly, and take intellectual risks. This aligns with research on deep and surface approaches to learning, which suggests that fragmentation and time pressure are associated with more instrumental engagement (Biggs & Tang, 2011), as well as with accounts of immersion within block models that emphasise sustained focus and active participation (Slevin, 2021; McWilliams et al., 2023). Within this context, assessment appears more closely integrated with learning itself, rather than experienced as an interruption of it. Slevin (2021) further notes that under concurrent module structures, students increasingly disengaged from formative practices such as group critiques and feedback waypoints, not because these practices had changed, but because students' capacity to engage with them had diminished. Activities intended to support learning instead became sources of anxiety.

This distinction is crucial. It suggests that pedagogic challenges are not always resolved through refining activities or assessments alone but may require rethinking the structural conditions under which learning is asked to occur.

Depth Versus Coverage: Rethinking Educational Value

One common justification for running multiple modules concurrently is coverage: more content, more variety, more skills developed at once. Yet this raises important philosophical questions about what HE values. Is learning primarily about accumulation, or about transformation? Is the aim exposure to content, or the development of understanding?

Research on student learning suggests that when students are required to manage multiple competing demands, they are more likely to adopt surface approaches to learning, focused on coping, recall, and task completion rather than meaning-making. Drawing on the foundational work of Marton and Säljö (1976a, 1976b), Biggs and Tang (2011) distinguish between surface approaches, where students attend to isolated facts and anticipated assessment demands, and deep approaches, where learners seek to understand underlying meaning and structure. Surface learning is often accompanied by anxiety, boredom, and a desire simply to “get through” the task, while deep learning requires time, focus, and appropriate learning conditions (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Barnett (2007) reinforces this distinction by arguing that learning in HE should be characterised by depth, personal insight, and understanding rather than the mere acquisition of knowledge. For Barnett, understanding develops through sustained engagement within a field, and learning becomes compromised when students are required to divide their attention across multiple, competing domains. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that structural conditions which fragment attention risk undermining the very forms of understanding that HE claims to value.

From my perspective, block teaching foregrounds depth over breadth by creating the conditions necessary for deep engagement. It allows students to stay with complex ideas long enough for meaning to emerge, rather than encountering them briefly before moving on. It also enables formative feedback to be acted upon, not merely received and then displaced as attention shifts elsewhere. For Foundation students, this depth is particularly significant. These learners are not only acquiring disciplinary knowledge; they are learning how to be students within HE. Block teaching supports this meta-learning by making academic processes visible, contained, and manageable, reducing the cognitive and emotional labour involved in navigating multiple concurrent demands.

Dalley’s (1984) reflections on art education are helpful in thinking about how pedagogy can support confidence and engagement. They describe the teacher’s role not as one of constant intervention, but as creating conditions in which students can develop through a form of pedagogical “holding back,” allowing space for experimentation without fear of failure. Although written in the context of art education, this perspective resonates strongly with Foundation teaching more broadly. Many students arrive with low academic confidence and a heightened fear of “getting it wrong,” shaped by prior educational experiences. Block teaching appears to create a similar holding environment. By reducing fragmentation and competing demands, it allows students to establish their own criteria for success, participate more openly, and take intellectual risks without immediate comparison or overload. Dalley also emphasises the importance of group dynamics, shared reflection, and trust, suggesting that psychologically safe learning environments enable students to engage more fully and learn from one another. This aligns with contemporary research on collaborative and peer-to-peer learning, which highlights how trusted group settings foster relational behaviours such as mutual support, confidence-building, and shared problem-solving, factors that contribute to long-term engagement and persistence even when they are not immediately measurable (Cowan, 2015; Devenish et al., 2009). Together, these perspectives help to explain why block teaching appears to support not only academic engagement, but also affective dimensions such as confidence, participation, and belonging.

Discussion: Temporal Structure as Inclusive Infrastructure

The contrast between immersive and concurrent delivery suggests that temporal structure functions as pedagogical infrastructure rather than administrative background. The patterns observed across semesters indicate that engagement, confidence, and depth of learning are shaped less by inherent student capacity than by how cognitive demands are distributed across time. When temporal organisation shifts, so too do students' modes of participation. This reframes apparent differences in performance or resilience as potential effects of structural alignment or misalignment rather than individual deficit.

Theoretically, these observations support a disability-informed reading of curriculum design. If disablement emerges through institutional arrangements rather than inherent deficit, then module overlap, assessment clustering, and rapid task-switching must be understood as pedagogical decisions with inclusionary consequences. Temporal compression in block teaching does not reduce academic rigour; rather, it redistributes cognitive labour, enabling sustained attention and coherence. In this sense, block teaching can be understood as anticipatory design rather than accommodation: a structure that anticipates variability in processing speed, executive function, and sensory tolerance without requiring disclosure or individual adjustment.

Rather than adding to belonging scholarship, these findings suggest that belonging is structurally organised through time. While relational continuity and psychological safety are widely recognised as central to engagement (Thomas, 2012; Felten et al., 2023), the observations here suggest that such conditions are not only produced through interpersonal practice but through temporal design. Stabilised peer groups and sustained tutor contact appear less as supplementary community-building strategies and more as consequences of how curriculum time is organised. In this sense, belonging emerges not solely from intentional relational interventions but from structural containment. Time itself functions as a relational resource.

The discussion also challenges dominant narratives within HE that equate variety and simultaneity with intellectual richness. Coverage-driven models assume that exposure to multiple concurrent domains enhances breadth. The observations here suggest that fragmentation may instead normalise coping strategies and task management over sustained inquiry. When attention is persistently divided, depth becomes structurally harder to sustain. Block teaching foregrounds immersion over multiplicity, raising questions about whether HE prioritises accumulation or transformation. Block teaching also reshapes the temporal rhythm of learning. Rather than requiring constant task-switching across competing demands, it establishes a more predictable and sustained pattern of engagement. In contrast to conventional higher education structures, where students are expected to manage multiple modules simultaneously, block delivery reduces the need to continually reorient attention across competing tasks. This temporal coherence may be particularly supportive for neurodivergent learners, for whom predictability, continuity, and reduced cognitive switching can enable deeper focus and reduce cognitive strain (Sweller, 1988).

Importantly, this discussion does not position block teaching as unequivocally better. Rather, it reframes curriculum architecture as ethically consequential. Structural design communicates assumptions about the learner: their stamina, speed, organisational capacity, and cognitive

resilience. When those assumptions align narrowly with hyper-productive norms, some students will inevitably appear to struggle. The evidence from practice suggests that altering temporal architecture can reduce this misalignment. In doing so, block teaching contributes not merely to satisfaction or performance metrics but to a broader rethinking of inclusive design.

Within the block teaching literature, much attention has been paid to implementation, logistics, and measurable outcomes. This paper contributes a complementary perspective by foregrounding lived neurodivergent insight as analytic lens and by conceptualising temporal coherence as structural care. By situating block teaching within neurodiversity scholarship, critical disability theory, and belonging research, it extends current conversations beyond questions of efficiency toward questions of ethics. What emerges is a reframing of time as a pedagogical condition that shapes who can participate fully and on what terms.

Taken together, these observations suggest that temporal structure should be treated as a primary site of inclusive design rather than a neutral background variable. If curriculum architecture distributes cognitive pressure and relational opportunity, then decisions about block or concurrent delivery are not merely logistical but ethical — shaping who can participate fully and on what terms.

Leadership, Care, and Ethical Responsibility

Recognising curriculum structure as ethical infrastructure has practical implications for leadership. As a programme lead, I have become increasingly aware that decisions about temporal design communicate values: what we prioritise, whom we imagine our students to be, and how attentively we respond to their cognitive and emotional realities. Block teaching signals that focus matters, that learning deserves time, and that students are not expected to fragment themselves across competing demands. For students with prior experiences of educational struggle or exclusion, this can be profoundly affirming, communicating that difficulty is not a personal failing but something that pedagogy can respond to. In this sense, block teaching aligns with relational and philosophical perspectives on education that understand teaching not as the efficient facilitation of learning, but as the creation of conditions in which students can meaningfully encounter ideas, challenge, and themselves as learners (Biesta, 2013).

This does not suggest that block teaching is without challenge. It requires careful planning, coordination across staff teams, and institutional trust: trust that fewer modules can still offer meaningful learning, and that immersion can be more supportive than constant variety. These are not trivial demands, particularly within systems shaped by efficiency, coverage, and comparability. Slevin's (2021) account is instructive here in his refusal to frame block teaching as a fixed or universal solution. Instead, he describes curriculum design as a "*fluxive map*" (p. 179), a structure that must remain responsive to students' starting points, experiences, and trajectories. This resonates strongly with my own leadership practice, where block teaching is understood not as a static model but as an ongoing commitment to listening, adjusting, and course-correcting in relation to student need.

Conceived in this way, pedagogy becomes a living practice rather than neutral infrastructure. From a leadership perspective, engaging with the challenges of block teaching is therefore not

simply a logistical decision, but an ethical one, grounded in care, dialogue, and responsibility for the conditions under which learning is asked to take place.

Conclusion

This paper began with a question: How does the temporal structure of a curriculum shape students' cognitive experience, sense of belonging, and capacity for deep engagement in Foundation education? Through reflective analysis grounded in neurodivergent lived experience and existing scholarship, I have argued that curriculum architecture is not a neutral administrative concern but a pedagogical and ethical condition. The organisation of time distributes cognitive pressure, structures relational proximity, and encodes assumptions about who the learner is expected to be.

The contrast between block and concurrent delivery within a single Foundation programme suggests that temporal coherence can reduce fragmentation, contain cognitive strain, and support relational depth during a critical period of academic transition. This does not position block teaching as without limitation, nor does it offer generalisable empirical claims. Rather, it demonstrates that structural design plays a significant role in shaping patterns that are often misattributed to individual deficit.

Situated within a neurodiversity-informed and care-oriented framework, block teaching can be understood as a form of structural inclusion. When curriculum design anticipates cognitive variation and transition-related vulnerability, responsibility shifts from reactive accommodation to proactive anticipation. Decisions about module overlap, assessment rhythm, and continuity are therefore not merely logistical but ethical — shaping who can participate fully and on what terms. In Foundation education, where academic identity and belonging are still emerging, temporal organisation carries particular consequence. Attending to structure becomes part of attending to equity.

I often reflect on how different my own educational journey might have been had such temporal containment been available to me as a student. What I once interpreted as personal failure may, in retrospect, have been structural misalignment. Leading a Foundation programme that begins with block teaching has been both professionally affirming and personally illuminating. It has allowed me to witness students flourish under conditions that prioritise coherence over fragmentation and depth over acceleration.

In HE systems characterised by speed, expansion, and competing demands, the central question is not simply whether block teaching improves measurable outcomes, but what kinds of learning environments it makes possible. By foregrounding lived neurodivergent perspective as analytic lens, this paper contributes to block and intensive learning scholarship by positioning time itself as a critical, and often overlooked, dimension of inclusive pedagogy. Ultimately, the question block teaching invites us to ask is not whether we can cover more, but whether we are willing to design learning in ways that allow more students to remain, participate, and understand.

Contribution Statement

This paper contributes to scholarship on block and intensive teaching by reframing curriculum structure as ethical design rather than logistical arrangement. It extends current discussions by foregrounding lived neurodivergent perspective as a legitimate analytic position and by situating temporal coherence within broader conversations about belonging, cognitive containment, and transition pedagogy. In doing so, it shifts attention from student deficit and adjustment toward structural anticipation and inclusive design. While not presenting empirical findings, the paper offers a conceptual lens that may support educators and leaders reconsidering how time itself shapes learning experience.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI tools (ChatGPT) and Grammarly were used during the preparation of this manuscript to support clarity of expression and sentence-level editing due to dyslexia. The AI was not used to generate original ideas, arguments, analysis, or references. All content was reviewed, edited, and remains the responsibility of the author.

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