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E koekoe te tūī, e ketekete te kākā, e kūkū te kererū: Early childhood kaiako amplifying the rights of the neurodivergent learner

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Te Whāriki is a curriculum for all children without exception and sets out expectations for inclusive teaching practice in early learning environments that recognise, affirm and enhance the rights and mana of all tamariki. However, not all tamariki get to realise the sort of inclusive early childhood education that *Te Whāriki* promises them, and neurodivergent tamariki are frequently amongst this number. The disempowerment, marginalisation and exclusion that neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau regularly experience can often be attributed to early childhood kaiako being uncertain about what neurodivergence is, and a lack of knowledge and confidence in differentiating teaching practices - and learning environments - to best suit the needs of neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau. In this article, we explore what neurodiversity is and offer some approaches to support the inclusive teaching practice of kaiako in their work with neurodivergent tamariki. As we do this we also review the barriers to inclusion and citizenship that neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau often encounter. Over time kaiako should become more confident in adopting neuro-affirming teaching practices to better ensure the learning potentials, rights and mana of neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau are established, enhanced and celebrated in the way that *Te Whāriki* intends.

Introduction

The right of all children in Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu | New Zealand to enjoy an equitable, inclusive early childhood education has been a feature of advocacy for the last third of a century. Firstly, the Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1993, then the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008, and most recently they endorsed the UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2010. The challenge now is to enact these ideas so that all tamariki experience the inclusive education they have the right to. In this article we are going to outline what we think needs to happen for the group of tamariki identified as neurodivergent.

What neurodivergence is, and is not

Before early childhood kaiako can affirm neurodivergence, they need to better understand what neurodivergence is and is not. The first port of call in strengthening these understandings is around the use of the terms ‘neurodiversity’ and ‘neurodivergence’. Neurodiversity is a term that’s been around for nearly 40 years, arising from social and social relational models of theorising disability and difference, that describes how all people’s brains have a different way of perceiving, interpreting and processing the world around them (Blume, 1998; Botha et al., 2024). It was coined as a means of moving away from the binary created by psychology of normal and abnormal and the deficit-based language arising from medical model theorising that had typically been used up until then to describe disability and difference, such as ‘suffers from’, ‘abnormal’, ‘disease’ and ‘disorder’ (Silberman, 2015).

The neurodiversity paradigm was rapidly taken up by the learning and intellectual disability community, particularly the autistic community, to normalise brain-based difference - that set them apart from so-called 'neurotypical' people - as a strength and asset (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). It took a good while longer to reach education settings though, but is now well-known terminology for many kaiako, including those in early childhood education. In contrast to neurodiversity, the term neurodivergence conceptualises where people fit across the neurodiverse range of possibilities. While neurodiversity speaks to the diverse brains, perceptions and modes of meaning-making that that everybody draws on, neurodivergence speaks to the ways in which brains, perceptions and modes of meaning-making might function in ways that diverge, or are different from, the 'norm' (Ako Aotearoa, n.d.) - that being, what is neurotypical. Being different from the norm is very much viewed as a strength and asset, rather than something that constrains a neurodivergent person's humanity or rich potentials. The terms neurodiversity and neurodivergence are commonly used interchangeably, but academically they do hold different meanings and emphases.

There are no hard and fast rules, or right or wrong answers, about which term to use. Even within communities that can describe themselves as neurodiverse or neurodivergent, people are drawn to using different terms for different reasons, though an increasing number are opting to go with neurodivergent as a form of identity. The key here is that they are able to freely engage in that identity work without being told by neurotypical people how they are or are not able to, or allowed to, identify (den Houting, 2019). A similar process has been worked through over time about the use of identity first or person first language, and how language choices either taken up by or forced upon disabled people impacts their ability to freely engage in identity work in a way that feels right and makes sense to them (Andrews & Forber-Pratt, 2022).

So what constitutes neurodivergence anyway?

There is a common misconception that neurodivergence is another term for autism. This is not correct. While autism is one expression of neurodivergence, it's not the *only* expression of neurodivergence. It is important to note that neurodivergence is not a disability in and of itself, but rather something that can add extra meaning to, and understanding of, the underlying disability or disabilities that make someone neurodivergent (Chapman, 2020). Other expressions of neurodivergence include, but are not limited to, Down syndrome, synaesthesia or where one sense is experienced through another, epilepsy, anxiety disorders, clinical depression, dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sensory processing disorder, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Tourette's syndrome, rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD), and other learning/developmental disabilities. The key point is that no expression of neurodivergence is more legitimate than any other (Rosqvist et al., 2020). They can all mean something quite different in terms of learning support needs, though there are also some similarities and parallels. Many neurodivergences are part of people's lives from the time they are born, where others might be acquired, for example if they were in a car accident, or experienced something very traumatic in their lives.

Some critical features arise from adopting such understandings. Firstly, there is no fixing the way a person thinks, fixing their disability or fixing them. Various therapies and medications are commonly suggested, but this is based on promoting an aspiration for the neurotypical ideal and a denial that other ways of being can be legitimately supported. Secondly, creating a positive learning community means creating a space that supports all learners and their neurodiverse ways of being. Yes, we want everyone to get along and participate in their learning communities, but does it have to follow a neurotypical mould? Lastly, we need to be more cautious about our expectations about what everyone in a community should learn. For example, reading has become a problem because today we expect everyone to read. One hundred years ago you could get through school not reading and go onto a meaningful life. Maybe AI and other technologies will make the 'need' for reading redundant. What expectations do we create for children in early childhood settings that reflect our neurotypical assumptions, rather than responding to the neurodivergence reflected across the tamariki who are attending?

Exclusion as standard

Unfortunately, experiences of disempowerment, marginalisation and exclusion have long been more the norm rather than the exception for neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau in Aotearoa New Zealand's early learning environments (see, for example, (Macartney & Morton, 2013; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2017; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019; McAnelly, 2022; Purdue, 2009; Purdue et al., 2020; Rickard, 2024; Sharma, 2023). These experiences are typically punctuated by persistent, pervasive barriers to being, doing and knowing that fail to nurture and sustain safety, security, trust and belonging as fundamental building blocks for the active participation and learning of neurodivergent tamariki. These tamariki are frequently viewed as being incapable of meaningful learning and so are consigned to lurking in the margins of early learning settings. Within these early learning communities, neurodivergence often tends to be defined as a behavioural issue rather than an innate brain-based difference that tamariki cannot switch on and off at will. This can lead to 'othering' (Watson, 2023), where neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau feel increasingly like outcasts and pariahs who do not belong in early learning communities and will never find a place there. In turn, the aspirations, funds of knowledge and expertise that the whānau of neurodivergent tamariki bring with them are commonly silenced. However painful they might find it, these whānau can often feel frozen in place, not daring to imagine different or better for their tamariki, as they have become conditioned by the charity and pity-laden theorising of inclusion as physical presence that many early learning communities have come to rely upon (Macartney & Morton, 2013; Macartney, 2019). All of these things are mana-diminishing anathema to the rights-focused framework for inclusive practice that *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) provides.

***Te Whāriki* and inclusive early childhood education**

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) makes several emphatic statements about inclusive early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, including establishing that:

> all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives (MoE, 2017, p.12).

It also identifies that teachers are to support these rights as they:

> actively respond to the strengths, interests, abilities and needs of each child and, at times, provide them with additional support in relation to learning, behaviour, development or communication (MoE, 2017, p.13).

Lastly, there is a statement that teachers should actively change the environment to suit the tamariki present by:

> offering an inclusive curriculum also involves adapting environments and teaching approaches as necessary and removing any barriers to participation and learning…teaching inclusively means that kaiako will work together with families, whānau and community to identify and dismantle such barriers (MoE, 2017, p.13).

Neurodivergent tamariki are not apart from this vision of inclusive early childhood education. In fact, neuroscientific perspectives about how children's brains develop, and the brain's multitude of wiring pathways, influence their capacities to actively participate and learn, and these were an explicit consideration in the latest update of *Te Whāriki*. The curriculum highlights how:

> neuroscientific research provid[es] evidence for how children's biological foundations interact with

> specific aspects of the environment during development and how brain development can be nurtured by high-quality early learning environments (MoE, 2017, p. 62).

Nonetheless, it does not provide specific guidance on neuro-affirming teaching practices that better ensure neurodivergent tamariki are able to realise their right to an equitable, inclusive early childhood education. Kaiako are expected to nurture and amplify such practices, but do not always know how these are constituted or how to centre them in their teaching.

Suggestions for neuro-affirming teaching practices

With this in mind, here are our suggestions of some important research evidenced neuro-affirming teaching practices that kaiako can take up in support of the inclusive early childhood education of neurodivergent tamariki, and their whānau.

Slow pedagogies

One critical way where kaiako can work to affirm neurodivergence is by embedding slow pedagogies into their practice. Slow pedagogies are about being relaxed, patient, unhurried, gentle and affirmative in your practice, and recognising the passage of time as an opportunity rather than a challenge (Clark, 2022). These possess transformative potentials to positively impact the active participation and learning of neurodivergent tamariki, and in fact all tamariki. Neurodivergent tamariki thrive when their kaiako are able to take the time to dwell with them in particular moments of interest and/or need, allow for often slower processing and longer meaning-making time. Do not hurry them, speak to them kindly and compassionately, and affirm them and their neurodivergence as incredible strengths and assets to their early learning community (Warren, 2025).

Being trauma-informed

Another way in which kaiako can work to affirm neurodivergence is in taking a trauma-informed approach to practice. This is because many neurodivergent tamariki, whether it is intentional or otherwise, become traumatised through their interactions with the people, places and things comprising the world around them (Murphy, 2025). This trauma adversely impacts the learning, wellbeing and development of neurodivergent tamariki, as well as their mana. Kaiako need to learn to recognise and understand trauma in neurodivergent tamariki. This trauma can and does look different from tamaiti to tamaiti, so kaiako cannot afford to make assumptions about their understandings. Instead they must have in place solid responsive relationships with neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau so as to be able to quickly identify where things are off kilter for them. These relationships should also allow kaiako to be able to help neurodivergent tamariki return to a state of regulation where they feel safe and secure - this being a fundamental starting point for the capacity to learn (Clifton, 2023; Wood, 2024).

Understanding the neurodivergent tamaiti as an inherently sensory learner

Many neurodivergent tamariki possess sensory sensitivities that mean they perceive, interpret and integrate the sensory stimuli which they receive from the world around them in ways that are quite intense according to a normative lens (Dunn et al., 2016; Gaffney & McAnelly, 2025; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007). What these tamariki need is for their kaiako to know them and their sensory sensitivities well enough so that the learning environment can be adapted into a safe, nurturing, calm space for them to explore, and express, their unapologetic and authentic selves within their learning. This includes providing support when they become dysregulated by the onslaught of sensory stimuli inherent in the early learning environment. In those moments, which despite the very best of inclusive intentions sometimes do happen, kaiako should be especially relaxed, unhurried, gentle and affirmative in supporting the neurodivergent tamaiti to 'disarm' their threat response and return to a state of regulation (McAnelly, 2022; Murphy, 2025). It is important that kaiako speak to neurodivergent tamariki quietly, kindly and compassionately, and avoid shaming their responses as almost without exception they cannot help them. Similarly,

kaiako need to recognise that the threat response sparked by sensory dysregulation experienced by neurodivergent tamariki can take some time to work its way out of their nervous system, so patience in meeting neurodivergent tamariki where they are is critical. Knowing how a child responds in particular moments leads to better anticipation, and so avoiding the re-traumatising that can otherwise occur.

Listening using all your senses

Kaiako listening to neurodivergent tamariki using all their senses can be really helpful too. This is listening, not only with their ears, but adding their eyes, their touch, their nose, by using movement and positioning in space, through warmth, through shared sensory experiences, through feelings and emotions, and so much more (Rinaldi, 2021). In this way, kaiako will expand their ability to listen exponentially, and neurodivergent tamariki - who are very often multimodal communicators and meaning-makers courtesy of how their brain has been uniquely knitted together (McAnelly, 2022) - are better able to thrive as is their right.

Neurodivergence as a learning strength and asset within early learning communities

Underpinning the ways in which kaiako can affirm neurodivergence as a strength and asset in their early learning communities is adopting an image of the neurodivergent tamaiti as capable, strong and rich in multiple intelligences. This image of the neurodivergent tamaiti is about presuming the capability and competence of neurodivergent tamariki in the first instance, understanding and respecting that neurodivergent tamariki know what learning is important to them as well as how to go about it, and appreciating the diverse ways in which they make meaning of, and communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas about, the world around them (Higginson, 2023; McAnelly et al., 2025; Warren, 2025). The ways in which the brains of neurodivergent tamariki work means they might come at learning in atypical ways, not that they are incapable of learning, and it is important that we do not get atypical and incapable confused. This has been the foundation of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which is being promoted within the Aotearoa New Zealand education system to support more diverse approaches to learning (Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, n.d.).

Diversity being expected, welcomed, respected and honoured

One way in which kaiako can show that they expect, respect, value and honour the various ways of being, doing and knowing that neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau bring with them is by legitimating those diverse perspectives. A critical means to facilitate this is by supporting neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau to meaningfully engage in decision making about the things that interest and affect them within early learning communities (Gaffney & McAnelly, 2024; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019). Kaiako need to remember to be intentional about offering up those opportunities, and to listen to what neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau have to contribute. It is not sufficient for kaiako to pay these lip service and not follow through on thoughts, ideas, opinions and requests that are raised. Instead, kaiako must demonstrate that they are ready, willing and able to enter into responsive, reciprocal dialogue that centre tamaiti voice (however it comes), perspectives, rights and mana.

Recognising and affirming the aspirations, funds of knowledge and expertise of whānau

Sitting alongside this kaupapa is the knowledge that the wellbeing of tamariki and their whānau is inextricably interconnected. This is no different for neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau who, as for neurotypical tamariki and their whānau, rely on kaiako who understand that teaching inclusively means working in inclusive and affirmative ways with whānau (Macartney, 2019; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2017; Murphy, 2025; Purdue et al., 2020). The first step here is for kaiako to recognise and honour the aspirations, funds of knowledge and expertise that whānau bring with them as the first kaiako of their neurodivergent tamariki. Whānau are almost without exception excited to share what they have come to learn about their neurodivergent tamariki with kaiako, because it makes a difference to how kaiako in turn are able to support their tamaiti to actively participate, learn, and fulfil the maximum extent of their potential. Whānau often know more than kaiako do about how the diverse brain wiring of their neurodivergent

tamaiti impacts on that tamaiti's capacities to participate and learn. Kaiako need not feel embarrassed that whānau are often better positioned in terms of knowledge about neurodivergent tamariki and what makes them 'tick'. The onus of responsibility is on them to continually encourage kōrero that support whānau aspirations, funds of knowledge and expertise to be heard and positively inform inclusive teaching practice (Gunn & Nuttall, 2019; Gunn et al, 2020).

Adopting an explicit rights orientation to teaching practice

Foundational to all of the neuro-affirming teaching practices outlined above is the importance of kaiako taking an explicit rights-oriented approach to practice. This is important because while Aotearoa New Zealand has its own Disability Strategy (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) which is heavily grounded in rights, as a country we are also a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Both of these documents enshrine the right to an equitable and inclusive education that supports neurodivergent tamariki to freely be, and become, their unapologetic authentic selves, and to fulfil the maximum extent of their potential, whatever that looks like to them. This adds an extra layer of purpose and meaning - further to that established within *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) - to the deep-seated responsibility and obligation that kaiako have to adopt a rights orientation in their practice (Gunn et al, 2020). Such an orientation requires kaiako to be committed to identifying and removing barriers that neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau encounter in their pursuit of an equitable and inclusive early childhood education. Furthermore, kaiako recognise and can articulate and justify that the realisation of that right to an equitable and inclusive education for neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau is fundamental to what they do and how they do it as kaiako (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019).

Conclusion

Neurodiversity has always been with us. If kaiako are going to meet the challenge set by *Te Whāriki*, the UNCRC and UNCRPD to provide an inclusive education for all, then they must accept that neurodivergence is a legitimate way of being and have the confidence to begin adapting their practices in line with the suggestions made in this article. This is an ongoing journey of learning, which like much of teaching, demands we be as prepared as we can, alongside the knowledge of neurodiversity that says expect the unexpected.

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