Finding our place: The experiences of neurodivergent kaiako in ECE

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ABSTRACT

The study reported in this article is part of a broader research project conducted in 2025 to investigate the experiences of kaiako with disabilities in ECE. A social constructionist theoretical framework was employed to collect data via an open-ended online survey and semi-structured online interviews. For the purpose of this article, we analysed responses from kaiako who self-identified as neurodivergent, specifically as having autism and ADHD. Key findings from the research underscored the valuable contributions neurodivergent kaiako bring to the teaching profession, and included empathy, creativity, and a nuanced understanding of diverse relational dynamics. These findings highlighted the importance of recognising neurodivergent kaiako as integral contributors to the ECE sector, and call on ECE leaders and managers to adopt a strengths-based approach to cultivating ECE environments that are genuinely inclusive of neurodivergent kaiako. Recommended actions include identifying and removing barriers to reduce the fear of disclosing neurodiverse conditions, to provide appropriate work accommodations, and to foster inclusive and affirming workplace cultures and environments.

KEYWORDS

Neurodivergent kaiako, early childhood education, inclusion, equity

Introduction

Neurodivergent kaiako within Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood education (ECE) sector bring unique perspectives, skills, and insights to their work that can enrich learning communities. Many, however, have encountered stigma, misunderstanding, and systemic barriers that hinder their ability to thrive in the profession (Hohaia-Rollinson et al., 2025; Williamson-Garner et al., 2025). This article shares findings from a 2025 research project that explored the lived experiences of kaiako with disabilities to understand how attitudes, systems, and environments shaped these teachers' daily realities. This research was informed by the social model of disability, which is underpinned by principles of equity and social justice (Barton, 2011); it challenges deficit-based understandings of disability, and it seeks to disrupt inequities that constrain disabled teachers' participation and

belonging. For the purposes of this research article, we explored the responses of ECE kaiako who self-identified as neurodivergent, all of whom reported having autism and/or ADHD (attention deficit disorder), alongside other conditions in a couple of cases.

Conceptually, neurodiversity recognises that differences in human brain function are natural variations within the human population (Altogether Autism, 2022a; Ministry of Health [MoH], 2024). In asserting that "no one 'type' of brain is inherently better or worse than any other type of brain" (Altogether Autism, 2022a, para 3), the concept challenges the medical model, which labels neurodivergent conditions as "neurological deficiencies or disorders" (Tuwasmi & Burton, 2024). These conditions include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, mental-health conditions, intellectual disability, and traumatic brain injury. The neurodiversity movement reframes these conditions as different – neurodivergent – ways of thinking, learning, understanding, and communicating that have value and should be recognised and supported (Altogether Autism, 2022a; MoH, 2024).

Neurodiversity in Aotearoa New Zealand

Data capturing the number of people in Aotearoa New Zealand who identify as neurodivergent, or having been diagnosed as neurodivergent, is limited. Reasons include individuals not disclosing, self-reporting, or being aware they are neurodivergent, or this information simply not being collected. Data from the *2023 Census* (Statistics New Zealand, 2025) revealed that approximately 17% of the population – 753,000 adults aged 15 and above and 98,000 children aged 0-14 years old – reported having a disability, a category that includes neurodiverse conditions. The data also showed that 2% of the population have an autism diagnosis and 3% have an ADHD diagnosis. Although the number of ECE kaiako who identify as neurodivergent in Aotearoa New Zealand is not currently known, the increasing number of people who identify as neurodivergent in our population has implications for the ECE workforce.

Impacts of neurodiversity on adults

For adults, the effects of being neurodivergent vary depending on the person's condition, their environment, and the support available to them. These factors shape participation in society – including in the home, education settings, and workplaces – and can affect the relationships the person has within these contexts. Neurodivergent adults, including those with autism and ADHD, may excel in any or all of the following traits: high-level and creative thinking, problem-solving, the ability to focus, attention to detail, and analytical skills, which enable innovative solutions. These adults often show resilience and adaptability, having developed coping strategies from their own experiences (Autism New Zealand [Autism NZ], 2025a; Lawrence, 2019; Wood, 2022).

However, neurodivergent adults often face challenges in gaining employment. Standard recruitment processes may lack flexibility and facilitate misunderstandings when communication is unclear. Neurodivergent adults may also experience social exclusion, stigma, systemic bias, and insufficient accommodations, all of which can contribute to high levels of anxiety and depression (Altogether Autism, 2022b; Wood, 2022).

Because neurodiverse conditions can be non-apparent, neurodivergent adults often resort to masking (hiding their condition) in order to be seen as neurotypical, that is, as a person whose brain develops and functions in ways that align with societal standards. Twumasi and Burton (2024) observed that workplaces designed for neurotypical adults can be challenging and lead to burnout for people who are neurodivergent. They urged employers to carefully and thoughtfully develop "neuro-inclusive" environments (p. 86).

Neurodivergent people may also face difficulty building and maintaining relationships and engaging in social interactions, because behaviours and language can be easily misinterpreted. Another challenge for neurodivergent people is access to support services, including when they attempt to gain a diagnosis. This problem is especially common among women and ethnic minorities (Miller & Fleischmann, 2024; Wood, 2022).

Employment barriers and discrimination within educational settings

Neurodivergent kaiako may serve as effective role models for neurodivergent learners and learners with disabilities, but they may require understanding and support when seeking employment, and once in their workplaces so they can thrive as inclusive educators (Lawrence, 2019; Wood & Happé, 2023). We have previously highlighted the broader legislative context in Aotearoa which protects disabled teachers' rights (for more information see Griffiths et al., 2025). However, educational institutions often reinforce ableism and neurotypicality by privileging nondisabled and neurotypical norms, thereby marginalising neurodivergent kaiako as "other" (Baird, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2025; Williamson-Garner et al., 2025; Wood, 2022).

Wood et al. (2022) and Lawrence (2019) emphasise that autistic teachers offer valuable insights into creating more inclusive educational environments, yet their contributions are often overlooked or undervalued. Their research found that listening to and acting on the lived experiences of autistic teachers may drive meaningful systemic change by challenging the structures that perpetuate exclusion.

Misconceptions and myths about employing neurodivergent or (disabled) kaiako are common and contribute to exclusion or reduced missed opportunities in the workplace. We highlight three of the main misconceptions and provide corresponding facts to address them.

Misconceptions and myths

A common myth is that neurodivergent kaiako are not as productive as their neurotypical colleagues, a belief that is unfounded (Autism New Zealand [Autism NZ], 2025b; Ministry of Social Development [MSD], n.d.). For example, kaiako with ADHD frequently demonstrate hyperfocus – also known as hyperfixation – a state of concentrated engagement in their work that brings a sense of joy, commitment, and spontaneity to their teaching practice (McRae, 2024). Such characteristics are particularly beneficial in ECE settings, where adaptability, working under pressure, and problem-solving skills are valued and contribute to kaiako effectiveness and productivity (Griffiths et al., in press).

Another common misconception is that accommodating neurodivergent kaiako is costly and complicated (Autism NZ, 2025b; MSD, n.d.). Most accommodations are low-cost, easy to implement, and can benefit all kaiako within an ECE setting. Listening to the lived experiences of neurodivergent kaiako is one of the easiest and cheapest ways to identify their needs, which include appropriate support (Stevens, 2024). Creating a low sensory, quiet space can help all staff regulate in a busy environment, while clear, direct communication benefits everyone by minimising misinterpretation and supporting how neurodivergent kaiako process information (Twumasi & Burton, 2024). Flexible arrangements, such as permission to complete paperwork or administrative tasks at home, and removal of sensory triggers, such as noise, lighting, temperature changes, and interruptions – common in ECE settings – are cost-free strategies that can boost the productivity of all kaiako (Twumasi & Burton, 2024).

Finally, it is often believed that neurodivergent kaiako are more likely than their neurotypical colleagues to be problematic or require disciplinary action (Autism NZ, 2025b; MSD, n.d.). Evidence indicates that neurodivergent people are no more likely to face disciplinary action than their neurotypical peers (Autism NZ, 2025b). Neurodivergent kaiako may have different ways of communicating, socialising and behaving, but challenges arise only when these differences are misunderstood, usually due to limited knowledge of neurodiversity and the distinct skills neurodivergent people contribute to the workplace (Autism NZ, 2025b). ECE managers and leaders can foster inclusivity in their settings by offering reasonable accommodations, promoting clear communication, and providing training to help neurotypical employees support and work effectively alongside their neurodivergent colleagues (Griffiths et al., 2025; MSD, n.d.). Like all employees, neurodivergent kaiako thrive in environments that value respect, understanding, and opportunities for success.

Employment barriers and recruitment practices

Employment-related barriers for neurodivergent kaiako often stem from discriminatory attitudes, systems, and environments, making it harder for these kaiako to secure, remain in, and progress in their work (Bellacico & Ianes, 2022; Williamson-Garner et al., 2025). While disclosing a neurodivergent condition during the hiring process can lead to needed support, many applicants avoid disclosure due to fear of discrimination, bias, or being seen as a potentially difficult employee (Davies et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2024). Inclusive job advertisements that demonstrate a commitment to diversity can help attract diverse applicants and encourage disclosure (MSD, n.d.).

Standard recruitment processes often follow neurotypical methods and communication styles that can disadvantage neurodivergent applicants (Davies et al., 2023). For example, these applicants can find it difficult to respond to open-ended interview questions and questions that ask them to recall experiences, leading to miscommunication. Adjustments, such as providing additional time to answer questions or offering tailored question formats, can make the job application process more inclusive and fairer (MSD, n.d.).

Kaiako roles can be demanding, which increase the risk of anxiety and burnout. ECE settings that lack inclusion because of sensory challenges, unrealistic expectations, and poor communication can exacerbate this risk (Wood & Happé, 2023). Providing reasonable accommodations and appropriate

support for neurodivergent kaiako is essential for their participation and success (Griffiths et al., 2025; MSD, n.d.; Purdue et al., 2024). This research highlights the importance of recognising neurodivergent kaiako as integral contributors to ECE settings and provides insights into the facilitators of and barriers to inclusion for this group of kaiako. The aim of this article is to provide further understandings of how we can improve ECE environments for all (Griffiths et al., 2021, 2023). By explicitly considering the intersectionality of neurodivergence and professional teaching demands, we can provide more targeted accommodations that enhance equity, inclusion and kaiako effectiveness within the sector (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

Methodology

We employed a qualitative methodological approach to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives, interpretations, and constructions that student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities hold of disability, equity, inclusion, and exclusion (Cohen et al., 2017; Whitburn & Goodley, 2022). This approach was appropriate because it amplified study respondents' voices in a way that brought their experiences and issues to the fore (Burr, 2024; Doyle & Loveridge, 2023). Qualitative research operates on the premise that "people are meaning making beings" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 288) who strive to interpret and make sense of their lived realities.

In this approach, we adopted social constructionism as our epistemological framework; it emphasises that knowledge is co-constructed through social processes, languages, culture, and interactions, thereby aligning with the lived experiences of individuals and worldviews (Burr, 2024; Gergen, 2022). We also used interpretivism to understand the meanings that our study respondents assigned to their experiences. Interpretivism, widely used in qualitative research, offers a nuanced understanding of individuals' views, feelings, perspectives, and accounts (Doyle & Loveridge, 2023). We employed these approaches to help us describe and interpret the experiences of student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities in ECE; we anticipated that it would help us to uncover how social constructions of disability impact the inclusion of student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities in ECE.

The overall aim in this research project was to advance kōrero (conversation) about the opportunities and challenges associated with applying equity legislation and policy in practice for disabled kaiako training and working in ECE. Our focus research question was:

- What are the lived experiences of student teachers and teachers with disabilities in ITE and ECE workplaces?

Our supplementary research questions were:

- What are the barriers to and facilitators of disclosure decisions for student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities?
- What are the barriers to and facilitators of equity and inclusion in initial teacher education (ITE) and early childhood education for student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities?

- What accommodations do student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities need to function effectively in their learning and teaching contexts?
- How can ITE and ECE workplaces be responsive to the needs of student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities, and why is this important?

Having determined our research approach, we received ethics approval from The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. This approval confirmed our adherence to research principles, such as the anonymity and confidentiality of respondent data. Approval also included consideration of whether the project met the principles of partnership, participation and protection that are embedded in te Tiriti of Waitangi and the Treaty of Waitangi.

Data collection

We employed two methods to collect our data. First, we invited student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities who work in ECE throughout Aotearoa New Zealand to tell their stories of learning and teaching experiences via an open-ended questionnaire delivered online through SurveyMonkey. To notify these kaiako about our research and invite their participation, we sent out an information sheet outlining the study and the participation process to all ECE services throughout Aotearoa New Zealand by using a public database of their email addresses. We also encouraged student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities to disseminate the questionnaire link within their personal networks.

Online delivery of the questionnaire offered several advantages and included the potential to reach a diverse group of student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities across the country. Online questionnaires tend to be less intrusive and onerous than other forms of data-collection methods for respondents, by allowing them to answer at their convenience – either by writing or audio – in a safe and inclusive setting. We invited anyone unable to access the questionnaire to contact us so we could accommodate their needs. Questionnaires are widely used to gather information about knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and behaviour (Mukherji & Albon, 2023).

Our questionnaire began by asking respondents to provide background information about themselves and to identify their disability or disabilities from a provided list, which included neurodiverse conditions. The remaining questions asked respondents to recount and to provide their perspectives on any disability-related issues they had experienced during their training and in their workplaces (Mukherji & Albon, 2023). We kept access to the questionnaire open for two months and sent reminder emails shortly before its closure. Fifty-four student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities completed the questionnaire.

Our second step was to invite student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities to participate in semi-structured online interviews using Microsoft Teams. Cohen et al. (2017) reported that interviews generate knowledge and usually provide deeper insights on a topic than surveys and questionnaires. Those kaiako who wished to participate received an information sheet, consent form, and interview guide (which contained the same questions as the questionnaire). Once we received the signed consent forms – 11 in total – we set up the interviews. These were conducted by pairs of researchers, with one person leading the interview and the other observing for support. Six of the interview respondents had also completed the online questionnaire.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded, with the recordings subsequently transcribed. This research article includes data from only the 19 questionnaire respondents and two interview respondents who identified as either autistic and/or ADHD. Some respondents had other neurodivergent conditions, such as dyslexia, and several cited physical disabilities as well. Table 1 summarises the background information that each person provided. To protect the respondents' anonymity, the table does not include all the background information.

Table 1. Background information for respondents who identified as neurodivergent

Survey respondent	Disability(ies)	Qualified kaiako	Service type	Employment status	Years of teaching
1	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Mental-health-related Orthopaedic impairment	Yes	ECEC*	Full-time	5–10 years
3	Neurodiverse (autism and ADHD) Mental-health-related Auditory processing disorder	Yes	ECEC	Full-time	20+ years
4	Neurodiverse (autism) Dyslexia	Yes	Home based	Full-time	10–20 years
7	Neurodiverse (autism)	Yes	ECEC	Full-time	10–20 years
11	Neurodiverse (autism)	In training	ECEC	Part-time	1–2 years
13	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Mental-health related	Yes	ECEC	Part-time	5–10 years
14	Neurodiverse (ADHD)	Yes	Kindergarten	Full-time	20+ years
18	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Mental-health related	In training	ECEC	Part-time	1–2 years
19	Neurodiverse (autism) Chronic or acute health issue	In training	ECEC	Full-time	1–2 years
21	Neurodiverse (autism) Chronic or acute health issue	Yes	ECEC	Part-time	10–20 years
22	Neurodiverse (autism) Dyspraxia Dyslexia	In training	ECEC	Part-time	3–5 years
23	Neurodiverse (autism and ADHD) Chronic or acute health issue	Yes	ECEC	Part-time	3–5 years
24	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Mental-health related	Yes	ECEC	Part-time	5–10 years
25	Neurodiverse (autism) Mental-health related	Yes	Kindergarten	Full-time	5–10 years
27	Neurodiverse (ADHD)	Yes	Kindergarten	Full-time	5–10 years
29	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Mental-health related	Yes	ECEC	Full-time	10–20 years

Survey respondent	Disability(ies)	Qualified kaiako	Service type	Employment status	Years of teaching
37	Neurodiverse (autism) Sensory impairments Mental-health related Learning disabilities	Yes	ECEC	Full-time	10–20 years
39	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Mental-health related Learning disabilities	In training	ECEC	Full-time	3–5 years
44	Neurodiverse (ADHD) Chronic or acute health issue	Yes	ECEC	Full-time	10–20 years
Interview respondent	**Disability(ies)**	**Qualified kaiako**	**Service type**	**Employment status**	**Years of teaching**
1	Neurodiverse (autism) Dyslexia	No	ECEC	Full-time	3–5 years
2	Neurodiverse (autism) Mental-health related Dyslexia	Yes	ECEC	Part-time	10–20 years

* ECEC= early childhood education and care

Data analysis

Our research team collaboratively analysed the survey and interview responses. We used reflexive thematic and discourse analysis for this task (Burr, 2024; Joy et al., 2023). Reflexive thematic analysis allowed us to construct narrative accounts from the themes generated through our engagement with the dataset, as reflexive thematic analysis is suited to a wide range of qualitative research questions; such narrative accounts can deliver profound, convincing, and at times surprising insights. Discourse analysis helped us to identify the narrative constructions that the respondents used to describe their lived experiences of disability (Burr, 2024).

Our data analysis work entailed coding, which allowed us to organise the data into key themes and concepts (Burr, 2024; Joy et al., 2023). We completed this process during fortnightly online meetings over a three-month period. We worked as a team which allowed us to offer our individual perspectives to the emerging themes and gain a comprehensive understanding of them. We engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions during our fortnightly meetings to consider how our interpretations of the data influenced the meanings we drew from it. This reflexive process supported transparency and trustworthiness in our data analysis process. Our iterative readings and manual coding of the data reflected not only the questions and discourses foundational to our research, but also the salient issues that student kaiako and kaiako with disabilities experience within ECE settings (Burr, 2024; Joy et al., 2023; Mukherji & Albon, 2023).

Findings

Strengths

Neurodivergent kaiako described a range of strengths they bring to ECE teaching – strengths they believed benefit tamariki, whānau, the programme, and their teaching teams. They highlighted creativity, innovative approaches and ideas, the ability to set up engaging and fun learning experiences, and passion for their work. Several kaiako said their enthusiasm for teaching young children made them motivated, energetic, and imaginative kaiako.

> One of my key strengths is my ability to multitask and remain engaged, which I attribute to my ADHD. This allows me to keep track of many different things happening simultaneously and respond to the needs of tamariki in a fluid, dynamic environment. (Respondent 1)

> Huge passion, motivation, perseverance, dedication, lots of ideas, drive to learn more, very reflective, can move on very quickly from a bad day, lots of energy, fun and humour. (Respondent 14)

Some kaiako said their neurodiverse condition gave them specific skills – such as hyperfixation – that enabled them to tune into and remain deeply engaged in children's interests, needs, and learning. Others identified strengths, such as problem-solving, organisational and observational skills that supported their efficiency and effectiveness as kaiako.

> I think I have innovative ideas and I am spontaneous. I like routine so I stick to it, which is good for the kids because they thrive on it too. I have energy and can keep up with the kids and have fun with them, which means I build a great relationship with them. … I like to be organised so I often reset the room and activities and make sure our resources are tidy. I have been told I have great attention to detail, like remembering. (Respondent 23)

> Creativity, Problem solving, Acceptance of all. (Respondent 27)

> I'm a very creative person. … I often see the little things that others might miss. (Respondent 29)

> I believe my ADHD was a positive thing. … It allowed me to have the freedom to move around, follow my creativity and use my hyper fixations within my job. (Respondent 44)

Neurodivergent kaiako also considered themselves strong advocates of inclusion. After positive and/or negative experiences of their own in the education system, they saw themselves as positive agents of change and role models for inclusion and equity. They felt well-equipped because of their own experiences to support neurodivergent children, advise their whānau, and grow their colleagues' understanding of neurodiversity. Most felt they were attuned to all children with additional learning needs and could advocate effectively for them and their families.

> I found that in some places it was seen as an advantage, especially in my ability to see it in others. I was called their autism detector. (Respondent 7)

> I feel I relate to children better being neurodiverse. I also relate well to families or children who have extra needs and require support. (Respondent 21)

> I am very in tune to our tamariki who are shy or anxious. Because of my ADHD, I understand how hard it is to sit at mat times or sustain focus for long periods. I am an advocate for child-led play. (Respondent 24)

> Having autism has helped me support whānau with autistic children both with strategies I use and also, on the occasions I have felt safe to, disclosing to them that I am also autistic has given some of them peace of mind about what it can mean. (Respondent 25)

> I feel my differences have influenced how I respond to inclusion of children with disabilities and their families. I feel I am more patient with them when it comes to their differing needs. (Respondent 37)

Challenges

Because they identify as neurodivergent, the kaiako who participated in our study sometimes found fulfilling their roles and responsibilities challenging. While experiences varied, common issues included adjusting to new routines or programme changes, managing time, and completing paperwork. Sudden room and staffing changes, particularly when communication from managers and team leaders was insufficient, made adapting to these changes especially difficult for some kaiako, one of whom described how such an event affected her.

> So it was Wednesday afternoon and I was … told that they're going to swap me and another teacher. … And I was kind of made to feel that I had no choice in the matter. … I called in sick on the Thursday because I just couldn't just go in there and act like everything was OK. … The fact that I have to go and learn a whole new set of routines. … You know, the way the under-twos are set up. (Interview respondent 1)

Several kaiako said that communication challenges sometimes affected their interactions with other staff and parents. These kaiako explained that they tend to interpret language literally and struggle to read other people's communication cues and feelings. They worried their directness and honesty could be construed as uncaring and unsupportive. Some mentioned that their fast-paced brain and impulsiveness could lead them to unintentionally work alone rather than collaboratively, as the following comments attest.

> I need some time to understand requests from others as well as more thinking to understand points of view. (Respondent 7)

> I am ADHD. I move a lot as I struggle to sit still. After twenty years of teaching, I am starting to get better at this. My mind is always busy; I'm thinking about lots of things at once and I implement things very quickly, often leaving my team behind, and sometimes

> I may not even consult with them, because I'm in such a hurry with overflowing passion that is hard to control. Managing emotions is a big challenge and being able to process changes or information I am not expecting can leave me unable to talk, literally. … I say things quickly, push buttons quickly, and want to get hold of things to try it out before people are even finished explaining it. (Respondent 14)

> I don't understand or realise what everyone is on about and what we're learning most of the time. To me, it means one thing, but to everyone else they understand it in a completely different way. I get too hyper-focused on the small details, so it changes the bigger picture for me. (Respondent 18)

> I take things very literally, so people need to be specific. (Respondent 19)

> Communication can be a struggle for me. (Respondent 37)

Some respondents said that sensory difficulties affected their work. They found busy, noisy environments especially distracting, and at times, overwhelming. Lighting also contributed to sensory overload.

> If I get overwhelmed (lower threshold sometimes), I need to swap out. (Respondent 21)

> Sitting at a desk for instance, lighting, others in the office, can make it impossible for the planets to align well enough to get started. (Respondent 27)

> I use fidget toys during meetings. The environment is very loud and overstimulating at times. I use earplugs when I need to reduce noise. (Respondent 29)

Barriers

Neurodivergent kaiako had difficulty fulfilling their roles and responsibilities not only because of their neurodiversity but also because of barriers arising from lack of awareness, understanding, and accommodations in their workplaces. Our data showed that even when some managers and team leaders knew a kaiako was neurodivergent, they still expected neurotypical behaviour. As several respondents noted, this expectation indicated that traits linked to neurodiversity were neither recognised, valued, nor supported in their workplaces.

> I have had misunderstandings with others due to the fact they forget I have neurodiversity and they think I should be behaving in an "NT" (neurotypical) way. (Respondent 37)

> A significant barrier I've faced is the pressure to hide or change myself to fit certain expectations or moulds. There are times when I've felt like I need to suppress aspects of my ADHD, such as my need for stimulation or my tendency to get easily distracted, because it doesn't always align with the "ideal" image of what a kaiako should be. This can create a sense of tension, where I feel like I'm not able to fully be myself. The

> environment can sometimes feel rigid, and I wish there was more flexibility for diverse ways of working and engaging with tamariki. (Respondent 1)

> I can't ask for some things, as statements have been made, such as we need to be in the office etc., so I fluff around with cleaning etc. and do my work at home, so I do more hours to achieve a similar amount of work as my colleagues. (Respondent 27)

Some kaiako said they experienced prejudice, negative reactions, and disbelief after disclosing they were neurodivergent. These responses undermined their wellbeing and job satisfaction. They felt judged and unsupported from the moment they revealed their condition.

> A … manager … questioned if ADHD was really a 'thing' or if it was an excuse for laziness and disorganisation. (Respondent 44)

> People don't seem to understand it and brush it off e.g., "everyone is a little ADHD". (Respondent 23)

Respondents' comments highlighted that most barriers stemmed from expectations of neurodivergent kaiako and kaiako with any form of disability; they need to change their behaviour to fit existing teaching and learning environments, rather than those environments being adapted to meet their needs. Some kaiako hesitated to request accommodations because they feared doing so would count against them. This tendency to mask or hide their condition contributed, as several kaiako reported, to feelings of exclusion, exhaustion, mental-health issues, anxiety, fatigue and even burnout.

> As an ADHDer, I am a yes man and have felt taken advantage of in some instances. When I have then stood up for myself, I have been negatively received or perceived as trouble when I have been trying to correct an issue. (Respondent 13)

> Sometimes I mask it. (Respondent 22)

> I am completely mentally and physically exhausted a lot of the time from the effort that it takes. (Respondent 25)

> There are times where I struggle a little more than others, but I mask it a bit, purely for the benefit of everyone at the centre not having to deal with me and my stuff basically. (Interview respondent 2)

Accommodations

The neurodivergent kaiako who participated in our study said they did their work well when individualised accommodations enabled them to use their skills and strengths to good effect. Among the key accommodations kaiako identified were empathetic leadership, team support, recognition that neurodiversity is a part of human diversity rather than a deficit, and being able to disclose their neurodiverse condition and ask for accommodations without fear of stigma. These factors boosted their confidence as kaiako and enhanced their feelings of belonging.

> My team leader always tries to inform me of big changes well ahead of time. She can read when I am overwhelmed and need a break. I think willingness to accommodate makes me feel that I belong and that they genuinely care about my wellbeing. They are always encouraging me and giving me positive feedback on what I am doing well. (Respondent 23)

> My manager always makes me comfortable. … Every day my manager is so understanding of my needs and when I'm overstimulated. (Respondent 19)

Equally important were tools and flexible work and non-contact arrangements that helped mitigate sensory and executive functioning issues.

> The management and leadership team has also supported me … to find strategies that both help myself and others. I have also been able to bring in my own supports, for example, a wobble stool to help me with sitting and concentrating at a computer. They also invested in noise cancelling headphones for any team member to use to support non-contact work. (Respondent 3)

Respondents also noted that workplace colleagues who really got to know them and what support they needed reduced their anxiety and allowed them to be their authentic selves. Supportive teaching teams helped neurodivergent kaiako confidently navigate professional relationships and fostered inclusion.

> I have a lot of support around me, which makes me feel comfortable and safe to carry out my work duties. The support I receive is accommodating and reassuring. (Respondent 39)

> They accept me for me, have learnt who I am and what I bring as a person to my role … my boss is all about wellbeing, belonging, and supports me to do my job in a way that best suits me as an individual. (Respondent 4)

> I like how they understand what needs are and they help support me when I need it. (Respondent 11)

Discussion

A deep understanding of neurodiversity within the ECE sector is key to fostering inclusive, respectful, and empowering environments for neurodivergent kaiako, as well as supporting neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau (Wood, 2022; Wood et al., 2022). When managers, team leaders, and teaching colleagues value the unique ways neurodivergent individuals perceive and interact with people, places, and things, they are better positioned to adapt workplace practices and environments accordingly (Twumasi & Burton, 2024; Wood et al., 2022). Understanding neurodivergent kaiako reduces stigma, inhibits exclusion, and prevents these teachers from feeling compelled to mask their identities (Stevens, 2024; Williamson-Garner et al., 2025). These outcomes

lead to fairer workloads, better teamwork, improved mental health and job satisfaction (Stevens, 2024; Twumasi & Burton, 2024).

Insights from neurodivergent educators are a critical resource for building truly inclusive workplaces (Wood et al., 2022). Listening to and learning from neurodivergent kaiako helps the sector move beyond tokenistic inclusion and to create work environments that leverage diversity as a strength. Because neurodiversity varies greatly between individuals, a universal means of support is counter-effective. Empowering kaiako to tailor supports that align with their specific experiences and needs requires a collaborative, person-centred approach that goes beyond compliance to focus genuinely on strengths and new opportunities (Griffiths et al., 2025). Providing opportunities for neurodivergent kaiako and encouraging them to share their experiences helps to address and resolve any myths and barriers.

A culture of ableism in ECE settings marginalises neurodivergent kaiako by equating competence with neurotypical behaviours (Stevens, 2024). Neurodivergent kaiako often feel pressured to "act" neurotypically to fit into workplace norms (Baird, 2020; Wood & Happé, 2023). When they lack appropriate support, many try not to draw unwanted attention to themselves, a situation that can increase anxiety, stress, and burnout (Stevens, 2024; Wood & Happé, 2023). Prevailing societal understandings of "competency" limit the acceptance of diverse ways of teaching and relating (Twumasi & Burton, 2024). Understanding human cognition calls on us to move beyond labels like "normal" and "deficit" and instead recognise and value the breadth of human diversity where each expression offers unique insights and strengths (Barton, 2011). A strengths-based approach towards team diversity can help to foster a culture of collaboration, learning and teamwork and may promote more inclusive environments (Griffiths et al., in press). When diversity is viewed as an asset, rather than a problem, the focus shifts from inability to ability and towards removing barriers to inclusion for neurodivergent kaiako. Shifting entrenched attitudes and myths about neurodiversity is also essential to normalising inclusive cultures and accepting every team member (Griffiths et al., 2021).

The lived experiences of neurodivergent kaiako challenges traditional views of what defines a "good" kaiako, and invites the ECE sector to rethink entrenched workplace norms and acknowledge that excellence takes many forms (Stevens, 2024; Twumasi & Burton, 2024). Workplaces that truly value neurodiversity are able to confront long-held assumptions, rethink societal biases, and embrace human complexity. Welcoming diverse ways of thinking leads to greater innovation, healthier, more inclusive work environments, and a more equitable society (Purdue et al., 2024; Twumasi & Burton, 2024).

Research highlights a gap between understandings of neurodivergent kaiako and workplace expectations (Twumasi & Burton, 2024; Wood et al., 2022). Neurodivergent kaiako are often pressured to fit in rather than use their strengths (Baird, 2020). Limited understanding of neurodiversity can lead to misinterpreting neurodiverse behaviours, such as difficulty with eye contact, time management, and social interaction (Wood & Happé, 2023). As Wood et al. (2022) emphasise, effective change requires a systemic commitment to accommodating difference and identifying the structural barriers that maintain ableist norms. Addressing these barriers would help

the ECE sector better meet its stated goals of diverse, inclusive ECE settings (Hall et al., 2024; Hohaia-Rollinson et al., 2025; MoE, 2017; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

Because neurodivergent kaiako typically have a deep affinity with children with additional learning needs (Stevens, 2024), they can serve as advocates and role models for inclusion (Lawrence, 2019; Stevens, 2024; Wood & Happé, 2023). Their lived experiences positively influence their work with neurodivergent tamariki and their whānau (Lawrence, 2019), and they often demonstrate empathy for other marginalised children or groups (Stevens, 2024). The ECE sector needs to view these kaiako as assets, not deficits. Emphasising inclusive strategies, creating a culture of acceptance and empowerment built on a strengths-based approach, and fostering flexible, accommodating workplaces are crucial for fostering the wellbeing of neurodivergent kaiako and tamariki (Lawrence, 2019; Stevens, 2024; Wood et al., 2022; Wood & Happé, 2023).

Supporting kaiako with effective accommodations is a vital step toward creating more inclusive ECE environments (Bellacicco & lanes, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2021, 2023, 2025). Practical, timely accommodations – such as flexible communication, sensory-friendly work environments, manageable workloads, recognition of diverse approaches to planning and organisation, and clear expectations – relieve neurodivergent kaiako of the need to mask their condition/s and help them flourish in their work (Stevens, 2024; Wood & Happé, 2023). For maximum impact, these accommodations need to be part of everyday practice, rather than seen as exceptions or favours. Leadership that understands and implements tailored accommodations enhances kaiako wellbeing, productivity, and retention, and affirms neurodiversity as natural, rather than a deficit (Twumasi & Burton, 2024).

Accommodations are both practical and attitudinal, and most effective when they foster a workplace culture in which inclusion is standard practice, and kaiako can confidently ask for adjustments without fear of stigma or negative consequences (Wood et al., 2022). People with “invisible” conditions, such as neurodiverse ones are most likely to seek support when they are assured their needs will be respected, their job security protected, and their career progression unaffected (Hall et al., 2024; Wood & Happé, 2023). Misunderstandings in the workplace – such as interpreting reduced eye contact as disengagement rather than a sensory regulation strategy – can be avoided when leaders actively seek to understand diverse needs (Wood & Happé, 2023). A genuinely inclusive culture intentionally accommodates diverse communication styles, celebrates different ways of thinking, and positions diversity as a strategic advantage rather than a problem to be managed (Baird, 2020; Twumasi & Burton, 2024).

Such a shift requires more than recognising diversity in theory. It calls for lived inclusion, where all kaiako feel empowered to bring their authentic selves to their practice (Barton, 2011). Leaders drive this change by modelling acceptance, integrating equity into policies and routines, and fostering psychologically safe environments that enable genuine belonging and contribution (Twumasi & Burton, 2024). When neurodivergent kaiako feel supported and included, the benefits ripple outwards – strengthening teams, deepening collaboration, and modelling inclusion for tamariki and whānau (Williamson-Garner et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2022). ECE managers and leaders must therefore commit to ensuring inclusive workplace cultures are foundational, not merely aspirational.

Conclusion

Our research supports the notion that meaningful inclusion of neurodivergent kaiako happens when ECE leaders and managers actively recognise and value the strengths these kaiako bring to their roles. Within ECE settings, such recognition is not only ethically important; it strengthens the overall quality of teaching and learning by building trust, encouraging open communication, and transforming ECE cultures from tolerance to genuine acceptance and celebration of diversity. Inclusive cultures are shaped not only by policies but by daily interactions, leadership modelling, and the dismantling of norms that privilege one way of thinking or working over another.

Achieving inclusion requires more than awareness; it means actively identifying and removing barriers – whether structural (e.g., rigid rostering, inflexible communication expectations), attitudinal (e.g., misinterpreting behaviour through a neurotypical lens), or environmental (e.g., poor noise and lighting controls). Practical and timely accommodations are essential to this process, but they must be embedded into everyday workplace practices, rather than treated as exceptions. Normalising accommodations enables neurodivergent kaiako to request support without fear of stigma, thereby improving their wellbeing, collaboration, and retention.

Everyone in the ECE sector must ensure that neurodivergent kaiako are supported to excel, and not be merely included. In doing so, the sector both practises and models the inclusion it seeks for tamariki and builds stronger, more empathetic, and more innovative learning communities. Embracing neurodivergent kaiako as valued, authentic educators transforms workplaces and teaches tamariki that every person has mana.

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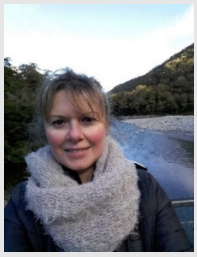

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