

Kaiako with disabilities in early childhood education: Continuing an important kōrero in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Objective three of Aotearoa New Zealand’s *He Taonga te Tamaiti, Every Child a Taonga: Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029* (Ministry of Education, 2019) is directed towards ensuring a well-qualified, diverse, culturally competent early childhood education (ECE) teaching workforce. The document also outlines actions needed to attract, retain and support diverse kaiako (teachers) in the ECE sector. These actions include “reducing barriers to people with disabilities entering the teaching workforce” (p. 24). Our aim in this article is to advance kōrero (conversation) about the opportunities and challenges associated with applying policy in practice for this group of kaiako (Griffiths et al., 2021, 2022). We do this by documenting Aotearoa New Zealand’s legislative obligations and responsibilities with respect to people with disabilities and examining what these mean for kaiako in training or working in ECE settings. We also look at the rights of disabled kaiako within the context of inclusive and non-discriminatory learning and teaching environments (New Zealand Government, 2019). The article concludes with a call for more research on removing barriers and supporting inclusion for kaiako with disabilities in the early childhood teaching profession.

Introduction

Despite growing awareness in Aotearoa New Zealand of the equity and inclusion issues experienced by people with disabilities, further attention is needed to address the barriers that prevent disabled people from participating fully in their communities and achieving their goals and aspirations. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) states that “persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2006, p. 4). The *New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016–2026* (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) defines disability as “something that happens when people with impairments face barriers in society ... it is something that happens when the world we live in has been designed by people who assume that everyone is the same” (p. 12).

Disability and impairment can occur at any time in our lives from conception to old age. According to the Office for Disability Issues (2016), 1.1 million people (24% of the population) in Aotearoa New Zealand have some form of impairment. The COVID 19 pandemic has resulted in some people contracting long COVID, a debilitating condition that affects all aspects of these people’s lives (Russell et al., 2022). Kaiako (teachers) with disabilities currently

working towards an early years teaching qualification and/or working within the sector can have a wide range of impairments, including neurodiversity, learning, mental health, physical, sensory, and health.

The vision of the *New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016–2026* (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) is that disabled people's rights are recognised, their wellbeing and belonging are nurtured, and that everyone works together to create a non-disabling society where people with disabilities can grow and prosper. To facilitate this aim in practice, robust conversations and shared understandings are required, and barriers identified and removed (Griffiths et al., 2021, 2022). Despite progress in this regard over the years, many disabled people still face discrimination and barriers that prevent them from engaging in and contributing to their communities. Evidence for this claim can be found in statistics and reports that highlight the significant inequities disabled people experience, especially in education and employment (for example, Office for Disability Issues, n.d. a, b, c; Statistics New Zealand, 2021; Tolooei, 2022). New Zealand's Independent Monitoring Mechanism's (2020) identification of the barriers preventing disabled people from gaining and retaining employment include the following (p. 126):

- Difficulty accessing higher education and training opportunities
- Inaccessible or intrusive application processes
- Inaccessible workplaces
- Discrimination, unconscious bias, and bullying from employers and others
- Limited understanding of reasonable accommodation and legal obligations for and responsibilities towards disabled people
- Inflexible workplace policies and arrangements
- Insufficient or ineffective employment support services and resources
- Lack of incentives for employers to design/redesign jobs for disabled people.

Because discrimination against disabled people is clearly an issue within our society, it is not surprising that kaiako with disabilities within the early childhood education (ECE) teaching profession experience barriers relating to attitudes, affordability, accessibility, and participation (New Zealand Government, 2019). Aotearoa New Zealand currently has no publicly available national statistics on student kaiako with disabilities enrolled in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes or on kaiako with disabilities working in the profession. This lack is evident across all sectors of the education system, including ECE.

Research on the inclusion and exclusion experiences of kaiako with disabilities both national and internationally is limited, and especially so for the profession. One recent international study, however, is that by Ware et al. (2022). These researchers documented the experiences of a group of teachers in mainstream schools who identified as disabled. All of them experienced “significant discrimination and barriers while at work” (Ware et al., 2022, p. 1417). Ware et al. (2022) concluded that “[u]rgent change is needed to support disabled teachers to access effective training as well as the removal of barriers to enable disabled teachers to remain in the workforce and progress their careers” (p. 1417).

Our primary aim in this article is to help address the aforementioned gap in research by advancing *kōrero* (conversation) on the entrenched difficulties disabled ECE student kaiako and kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand face

despite the raft of legislative and other measures upholding the rights of disabled people to contribute to society, including education, as they see fit. We consider that answers to why these barriers remain relatively entrenched and what can be done to ameliorate them continue to be relatively anecdotal rather than informed by research.

The rights of people with disabilities to work in the ECE teaching profession

In line with its commitment to honour international conventions that promote and protect the rights of people with disabilities, Aotearoa New Zealand has in place commensurate legislation, policies and strategies. All of these apply, of course, to ECE.

- The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) outlines the right of people with disabilities to be treated fairly, live a fulfilled life, take an active part in their community and be accorded the same considerations as non-disabled people. Article 27 outlines the rights of disabled people to work on an equal basis with others and emphasises the importance of providing reasonable accommodations to achieve this inclusivity.
- The *Human Rights Act 1993* prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability. It is illegal in Aotearoa New Zealand to discriminate against persons with disabilities either directly or indirectly.
- The *New Zealand Disability Strategy (2016–2026)* (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) promotes outcomes focused on working towards a non-disabling society where disabled people can reach their full potential.
- Employment legislation, such as the *Employment Relations Act 2000*, requires employers to protect disabled people from being discriminated against, promote equitable opportunities, and ensure that health and safety requirements, including safeguards against bullying, are met. (For other legislation related to being a “good employer”, see Employment New Zealand, n. d.).
- Education legislation such as the *Education and Training Act 2020* along with the government’s *Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) and Tertiary Education Strategy (TES)* (New Zealand Government, 2019) require education settings to be safe, inclusive, equitable, culturally responsive, and barrier free for all.
- *Our Code, Our Standards* (Teaching Council of Aotearoa, 2017) sets out the professionalism and teaching standards required of teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. These include meeting “relevant regulatory, statutory and professional requirements” (p. 20).

Aotearoa New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (MoE, 2017) is an inclusive curriculum. It requires kaiako to teach inclusively, work respectfully with others, and remove physical, social and conceptual barriers that prevent equitable participation for all.

Becoming and being a registered kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand

Teaching is a highly valued profession in Aotearoa New Zealand. Overseeing bodies such as the *Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Committee on University Academic Programmes,*

Ministry of Education, and Education Review Office are tasked with ensuring that teacher education programmes and all sectors of the education system maintain high standards of teaching practice (Zhang, 2021).

The *Teaching Council*, for example, oversees initial and ongoing teacher registration processes, sets standards relating to fitness to teach and determines the criteria against which teacher performance is assessed. The Council also details the standards and criteria beginning and experienced teachers must meet to achieve or retain a practising certificate (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022). The Council requires all ITE applicants as well as beginning and registering teachers to declare any impairments that might prevent them from meeting these standards and criteria. According to the Council, fitness to teach means being “physically and mentally able to carry out a teaching role safely and satisfactorily” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 28). It advises preservice and inservice teachers that when “considering this requirement, we will distinguish between any mental or physical conditions you have that affect your ability to teach, and any that do not impact on that ability” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 28). Understandings of disability therefore matter because they can affect interpretations of who is and who is not capable of teaching.

Fitness to teach: kaiako roles and responsibilities

The above statutory, curriculum and professional frameworks highlight the complexity and demands of teaching in ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand (Zhang, 2021). The stipulations and requirements of these frameworks reveal the wide range of professional knowledge, skills, dispositions, attitudes, and ethical behaviours that early childhood kaiako need to have and to exhibit to effectively support positive outcomes for the tamariki (children), whānau (family and extended family) and communities they serve. Taken together, these characteristics, spelt out in more detail below, suggest that kaiako must be healthy in mind, body and spirit if they are to handle the demands of the job well (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022).

Early childhood kaiako are required to demonstrate strong curriculum knowledge and practice, assessment and planning skills; provide curriculum-rich environments and experiences that recognise tamariki interests, skills, diverse abilities, and dispositions; apply a strengths-based approach to their everyday teaching supported by leaders in their settings; be effective communicators and advocates, active contributors and collaborators, and positive role models; and show leadership. They are also required to establish and maintain appropriate relationships not only with the tamariki, whānau, and colleagues in their ECE settings but also with the communities they work in (including iwi (tribe) and hapū (sub-tribe), local schools/kura, and support agencies) and with any networks they use as part of their professional development (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), Aotearoa New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, clearly sets out the particulars of what kaiako must know and be able to do to fulfil their everyday roles and responsibilities. The curriculum positions kaiako as knowledgeable, considerate and intentional facilitators, planners and assessors who can draw on a range of theories, curriculum knowledge, pedagogies and strategies to enhance tamariki confidence and competence and remain responsive to diverse learners and diverse ways of learning. Underpinned by the articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the curriculum entrusts kaiako with supporting “equitable outcomes for Māori and ensuring that te reo Māori not only survives but thrives” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). The curriculum calls on kaiako to

become proficient speakers of te reo Māori, gain and exhibit knowledge of tikanga practices, and remain respectful of tangata whenua (indigenous people born of the land) and mana whenua (authority over land) of the communities they serve. The curriculum also expects kaiako to reflect critically and continually on their practice as part of their professional growth towards being effective, inclusive and culturally responsive teachers.

Because tamariki need to feel comfortable and secure in order to learn and develop, ECE kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand are also legally and ethically obligated to maintain a healthy and safe learning environment for the tamariki attending their centres. Kaiako are therefore expected to provide positive guidance and to encourage and support tamariki developing social competence through the use of vigilant supervision and effective teaching strategies. Parents and whānau need to be assured that their children will be well cared for at all times and have their emotional, physical and educative needs met by competent kaiako (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

The influence of normalising judgements on kaiako with disabilities

Normative standards are established and reinforced within society through discourses, policies and practices, and they make it possible for people to compare, differentiate, hierarchise, homogenise and inevitably discriminate against people with disabilities. Measuring individuals against normative standards of human appearance, ability and behaviour makes evident the people who deviate, to varying degrees, from the norm, such as those with some form of disability (Barton, 2011). As previously stated, the standards for kaiako set and enforced by various agencies positions teaching as a profession that requires certain levels of physical, intellectual and emotional capability (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). This situation has the inherent risk of only those deemed “able” to conform to these standards being of value to the teaching profession. Consequently, some disabled people wanting to enter the profession may be prevented from doing so, while disabled kaiako within the profession may be subjected to intentional or unintentional discrimination and exclusion (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020).

This consideration calls into question the power that the Teaching Council, ITE institutions, and early childhood organisations and services have to interpret and establish a fitness to teach criteria and thereby make decisions about a disabled person’s suitability for teaching in the sector. Kaiako with disabilities who do not have formal teaching qualifications may be even more vulnerable to interpretations of fitness to teach. Around 30% of early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand do not have formal teaching qualifications (Ministry of Education, 2021). These kaiako, including those with disabilities, therefore have to rely on early childhood management and leaders abiding by legislation and associated policy and practice documents when making decisions about their ongoing fitness to teach.

Disability carries a whole range of negative discourses, assumptions and stigmas, all associated with constructions of normality (Barton, 2011). Awareness of these constructions is important if we are to ensure non-discriminatory, fair and equitable employment and teaching opportunities for kaiako with disabilities. The main common assumption that disability is a biological or psychological flaw and disability has led to an uncritical acceptance of impairment as a problem of the individual (Barton, 2011). If disabled kaiako experience challenges and difficulties in their job, a common assumption is that their impairment is the sole cause of such problems. These kaiako may be advised to change or improve in some way so they can undertake their responsibilities more competently. This approach pays

little heed to the discriminatory attitudes, policies, practices and environments that limit the ability of disabled kaiako to teach effectively; it also leaves the sociocultural and physical environments of ITE and ECE settings unchanged (Neca et al., 2022).

Another common assumption presents disability as synonymous with dependency and/or incompetence (Barton, 2011). People with this mindset tend to judge a disabled person's ability to conform intellectually and physically to societal expectations and requirements and not to think about their own biases and assumptions. Some educational settings disfavour employing disabled kaiako because doing so might mean significant costly adaptations to the environment or to everyday practice. Little consideration is given to the accommodations mandated in non-discriminatory legislation, disabled people's rights and workplace diversity goals (see, for example, Independent Monitoring Mechanism of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2020; Keane et al., 2018; Sokal et al., 2017; Tolooui, 2022; United Nations, 2006).

Unfortunately, as Sokal et al. (2017) and Ware et al. (2022) confirm, disabled kaiako can indeed be disadvantaged by teaching and learning environments designed and organised with non-disabled individuals in mind. Equally unfortunately, as these same researchers remind us, adapting such environments to meet the needs of disabled kaiako is often inadequately funded and inhibited by the complex procedures involved. Unwilling to invest their own limited finances in making required changes, the organisations concerned leave disabled kaiako significantly hindered by the lack of action in this area and thus unable to contribute their teaching skills to the extent they otherwise could. This situation also perpetuates the conception of disabled people as lacking capability (Neca et al., 2022).

Disabling sociocultural and physical teaching and learning environments cannot help but limit job opportunities and career progression for kaiako with disabilities. These environments can also limit these individuals' sense of the employment possibilities and opportunities available to them. It is also likely that the dominant negative discourses associated with being disabled and their implications lead some preservice and inservice kaiako with disabilities to hide or minimise their disability or impairment to the extent they can from their ITE organisation, employer and colleagues. This response can also adversely affect these people's identities as kaiako because they cannot be their true selves in their teaching contexts (Neca et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2017; Ware et al., 2022).

Challenges to such responses to disability are needed to transform thinking about the nature of disability and the place of kaiako with disabilities in the early childhood teaching profession (Barton, 2011; Morton et al., 2021). A rights-based approach offers an alternative view of disability and impairment because it is premised within notions of social justice, fairness and human rights. Such an approach facilitates attitudes, policies and practices that reflect the principles of equity, humanity, belonging and inclusion. It also makes clear that the problems disabled kaiako experience do not result exclusively from their impairment but from a range of attitudinal, policy and practice barriers and issues (Barton, 2011). It is therefore important that the ECE sector continues to resist normalising judgements and negative constructions of disability by challenging discrimination against disabled kaiako at the micro level and by challenging disabling policies and structures at the macro level (Office for Disability Issues, 2016; United Nations, 2006).

The importance of progressing awareness and change

Research beyond Aotearoa New Zealand suggests that, despite many policies and guidelines supporting the inclusion of kaiako with disabilities, these people represent a very small proportion of the teaching workforce. The research consistently confirms the barriers to entering and staying in the profession for disabled kaiako. It also confirms that kaiako with disabilities sometimes underreport their disabilities due to fears of stigma and discrimination (Bargerhuff et al., 2012; Keane, et al., 2018; Sokal et al., 2017; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Ware et al., 2021).

We consider that the successful inclusion of kaiako with disabilities in ECE requires reconciling the above-discussed statutory, ethical and educational arguments for the inclusion of kaiako with disabilities in the early childhood workforce with the assumptions and statutory requirements that define a good teacher. This reconciliation needs to occur at each stage of a teacher's journey—from applying for entry to ITE through to ongoing employment as a qualified kaiako. A useful perspective with respect to effecting this reconciliation is Bellacicco and Demo's (2022) "dilemma of professional competence" (p. 29). This dilemma recognises that inclusion in education carries inherent contradictions. The contradiction for kaiako with disabilities is between their rights to be accommodated in inclusive environments that enable them to make a positive contribution and the requirement for all kaiako to maintain safe, responsive and stimulating learning environments for children while meeting certain levels of professional competence as outlined in the Standards for the Teaching Profession (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

Bellacicco and Demo (2022) explain that dilemmas of this sort are complex problems that cannot be resolved by supporting one set of requirements and not acknowledging the negative consequences of this support on the other set. For example, tertiary institutions offering ITE are required to—and are generally able—to accommodate and support student kaiako with disabilities in their academic work. However, tensions can arise during the practicum part of these students' courses (Bargerhuff et al., 2012; Sokal et al., 2017). This is because practicum placements may involve an interpretation of practice competence that excludes kaiako with disabilities. Bellacicco and Demo (2022) maintain that reconciliation of this type of dilemma is achieved through ongoing dialogue centred on achieving a shift in understandings and conditions, such that both requirements can co-exist.

Student kaiako with disabilities need inclusive and supportive teaching environments so they can critically reflect on their practice and develop their own unique strategies for effective and quality teaching practices that meet professional standards. They cannot do this in environments where they experience discrimination and stigma; where their disability is seen as a deficit.

Creating successful practicum experiences for ITE ECE student kaiako with disabilities thus requires collaboration and dialogue between ITE providers, early learning services and the ākonga (student) themselves. This process begins with ITE providers and the communities of practice within settings agreeing to foster sustaining relationships with each other so as to secure shared understandings of and commitments to diversity and inclusion (Bargerhuff et al., 2012; Hohaia-Rollinson et al., 2021; Neca et al., 2022; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). Conclusions drawn from this process may then require settings to restructure their cultures, policies, and practices so they are responsive to and inclusive of the diversity of individuals with disabilities.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Teaching Council encourages ITE providers and services to unpack the code and standards so as to identify and define quality practices in their unique settings. The Council also encourages teachers to use the code and standards to set personal goals within the framework of a professional growth cycle (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). These approaches to the standards have the potential to support diversity because they enable providers, educational settings and teachers to consider different ways to meet the standards and thus ensure inclusivity of different teachers in different contexts.

However, these approaches also require settings to have attitudes, cultures and employment practices that facilitate critical reflection and dialogue supportive of kaiako diversity and quality (Kearns, 2017). Fixed or narrow mindsets of teaching competence, ableist cultures and lack of flexibility in employment conditions reduce the pathways available for teachers to participate and contribute (Bellacicco & Demo, 2022; Sokal et al., 2017; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). Furthermore, it is important that those of us who work in ITE and ECE early childhood education look closely at our personal and teacher selves to identify “where our own prejudices reside, where they come from, how they’re potentially destructive, and how exactly we will replace them with more sensitive, forward looking, equity minded teaching perspectives” (Olsen, 2016, p. 106).

With regard to ECE, the limited body of research available both internationally and nationally suggests that the sector’s management and teaching teams need more knowledge, awareness and commitment to engage effectively with disability studies and create inclusive environments and conditions for kaiako with disabilities (Morton et al., 2021). According to Ware et al. (2022), research on the experiences of teachers with disabilities has the “potential to contribute to policy and practice that has both social and economic implications” (p. 1435).

Tātaiako (Education Council, 2011) and *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2018) provide guidance on the competencies kaiako need to exhibit to promote the inclusion and success of Māori and Pacific learners, respectively, in education. These guidelines help both ITE providers and education settings reflect on and develop their practices against an agreed-upon framework. An important benefit of this framework is that it requires early childhood management and teaching teams to ask important questions about how tamariki and whānau are experiencing education. Efforts to answer to these questions cannot help but require these teams to critically examine not only their own practices but also the meanings they ascribe to teaching competencies and their enactment in practice.

The development of similar sets of disability-related guidelines and competencies may help ITE and ECE providers and the wider education sector develop a shared understanding of what inclusion for tamariki, whānau and kaiako with disabilities looks like. Intrinsic to that development is the opportunity it provides for services and individual kaiako to reflect on and develop cultures that promote inclusive relationships and attitudes as well as policies and practices that enable kaiako with disabilities to be effectively included in the teaching workforce.

Conclusion: more research is needed

Over the last two decades or so, Aotearoa New Zealand has seen shifts in thinking about the rights, place and participation of disabled kaiako in the teaching profession. However, research on these matters has yet to sufficiently address what is written in policy and what actually happens in the day-to-day lives of kaiako with disabilities. More

research on ECE kaiako with disabilities and their experiences of disability, discrimination, equity and inclusion within their ITE and education settings is therefore important.

The cultural prejudice and bias arising out of normative constructs of ableism prevalent in our society, including the early childhood sector, means that many kaiako with disabilities confront barriers to their effective participation in the profession during their teaching careers. These barriers can have a negative impact on these teachers' identities, wellbeing, job performance, and willingness to stay in the profession (Neca et al., 2022).

We need to listen to the voices of disabled kaiako to gain a full understanding from their perspective of the sociocultural, physical and ideological barriers that create discriminatory learning and teaching environments for them. This additional information on the inclusion and exclusion experiences of disabled kaiako will help the early childhood sector meet their legislated responsibilities (New Zealand Government, 2019). If you are a kaiako with disabilities who would like to participate in a research project on teachers with disabilities in ECE, please email the corresponding author for more information.

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