

Readiness to teach? Some challenges and barriers associated with the disclosure decisions of teachers with disabilities in early childhood education.

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For student teachers and teachers with disabilities, determining whether to disclose their disability (that is, self-report) or the extent of it in learning and employment contexts can be a complex dilemma. Before a student teacher or teacher decides to disclose or conceal their disability, they must consider a range of potential responses and disclosure outcomes, including whether they will be considered “ready and fit to teach”. Research provides evidence of disabled teachers facing this dilemma from when they apply to enter initial teacher education (ITE) programmes through to when they seek and secure employment as qualified teachers (see, for example, Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Griffiths et al., 2023a; Ware et al., 2022). The issue of disability disclosure among student teachers and teachers with disabilities in the early childhood education (ECE) sector has received limited attention in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article offers a step towards addressing this lack by looking at the complexities of disclosure decisions among student teachers and teachers with disabilities in their ITE programmes and ECE workplaces, respectively. The article also offers recommendations to address barriers, facilitate disclosure and support inclusion for this group of students and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Introduction

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) 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” (p. 4). According to Aotearoa’s Office for Disability Issues (2016), 1.1 million people (24% of the population) in Aotearoa New Zealand have some form of impairment. People can be born with a disability (congenital) or acquire a disability at any point in their life due to accident, age, illness or injury. Some have “visible” or “apparent” disabilities that can be easily recognised, such as physical and sensory disabilities; others have “invisible” or “nonapparent” ones that are harder to identify, such as mental health, neurodiverse and learning diversities.

Statistics on the Aotearoa ECE workforce lacks information on teachers with disabilities and other diversities (Education Counts, 2024). Research and policy-based strategies emphasise the importance of the ECE workforce reflecting the diverse backgrounds and characteristics, including disability, of the children and communities that access ECE services (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 2019; Purdue et al., in press; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023). They embrace the premise that a diverse education workforce serves to highlight human diversity and encourage acceptance of difference. However, student teachers and teachers with disabilities can find disclosing a disability to an ITE provider and/or ECE employer complex and challenging. The main concern for these individuals is fear of being discriminated against by those who see the disability as a mark of professional incompetence and/or a lack of suitability for teaching (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023). In the next section, we briefly look at ITE and ECE employers' legislative responsibilities in Aotearoa New Zealand before discussing disclosure requirements.

Legislative responsibilities and obligations

In Aotearoa New Zealand, a raft of comprehensive legislation, policies and strategies support non-discriminatory learning and teaching environments (see Griffiths et al., 2023a, 2023b for more information). Among these are *the Human Rights Act 1993*, which protects people in Aotearoa from discrimination on various grounds, including disability, and the *Employment Relations Act 2000*, which mandates employers to safeguard individuals from discrimination and to promote equitable opportunity access to employment and promotion. The *Tertiary Education Strategy* (New Zealand Government, 2019) prioritises inclusive education, requiring ITE providers to align practices accordingly, while the *National Education and Learning Priorities* (New Zealand Government, 2019) guides early learning services in removing barriers to inclusion in workplaces and learning environments.

All of these measures align with Aotearoa's responsibilities as a signatory to the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). The convention recognises disability as an inherent aspect of human diversity deserving of respect and support of a kind that is free from discrimination. The convention accordingly emphasises the principles of equitable opportunity and reasonable accommodation to ensure that people with disabilities can participate in and contribute to society.

Article 24 of the convention specifically addresses the right to education and the importance of education systems accommodating the needs of learners with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Article 27 emphasises the right of disabled people to work on par with others and highlights the importance of reasonable accommodations for inclusive employment (United Nations, 2006). For teachers and student teachers with disabilities, reasonable accommodation requires workplaces and educational institutions to adjust or modify their programmes, schedules and environments so these individuals have equitable

opportunity to learn, participate and contribute their skills (Ministry of Education, 2024; Office for Disability Issues, 2016).

Disclosure requirements

Although student teachers and teachers with disabilities seeking qualifications and employment in Aotearoa New Zealand can choose not to disclose their disability, there is an expectation, premised on obligation and “good faith”, that they will provide this information to their ITE provider and/or ECE employer when asked. ITE providers and ECE employers can ask potential applicants and employees health- and disability-related questions if the work at hand requires particular levels of fitness and ability, as in the teaching occupation (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, n.d.; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019, 2022). Nevertheless, disclosure is a personal choice and thus accords with legislation protecting individuals’ rights to keep their personal information private (Privacy Act, 2020).

However, to become a registered teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers must hold a practising certificate and meet standards and other criteria set by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2022). One such criterion is fitness to teach, defined as being “physically and mentally able to carry out a teaching role safely and satisfactorily” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 8). Applicants must also declare that they “do not have a condition that would affect [their] ability to teach safely and satisfactorily” (p. 8). They may also be asked for “additional evidence, such as a medical certificate, to support [their] ability to teach” (p. 8).

When a student teacher or teacher with an invisible disability chooses to disclose their disability, or when a student teacher or teacher with a visible disability chooses to disclose how their disability might affect their ability to do the work to the standard required, ECE employers and ITE providers are legally obliged to take this information into account and determine how they can provide these individuals with reasonable accommodations in their learning and workplace environments. These accommodations can vary based on the person’s disability (or disabilities) but may include additional learning and teaching resources, support so they can fully engage in their programme of study and/or workplace, changes to the physical environment, and flexibility with regard to time, tasks and leave (Ombudsman, 2023).

Practicum placements are a core component of ITE programmes (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019). These placements present another layer of complexity with respect to disclosure and privacy rights for student teachers with disabilities because the provisions of the Privacy Act 2020 mean that ITE providers can only disclose information about disability to associate teachers and managers in the practicum settings if the students in question give their consent for that information to be shared. The following section sheds more light on the challenges and barriers associated with disability disclosure for student teachers and teachers with disabilities.

Challenges and barriers associated with disclosing

The reasons why student teachers and teachers with disabilities elect not to disclose information about their disabilities vary. The most common reason for non-disclosure among these individuals evident in the disability literature is fear that others will respond to the disclosure with negativity (see, for example, Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023; Wilson et al., 2018).

Medical model thinking still strongly dominates understandings about disability (Barton, 2011). This model positions disability as abnormal—as a deficit within the individual that requires fixing or treatment to achieve normalcy. The model maintains that the problems disabled people experience result exclusively from their impairment, and that they must improve, adapt or change to fit in and contribute to society.

Under this model, reactions to disability tend to be negative, patronising, hostile, hurtful, isolating, exclusionary and discriminatory and to promote an uncritical acceptance of people with disabilities as incapable and always in need of help and support (Barton, 2011). Consequently, some people view disabled people as of less value than their nondisabled peers and a burden on society. For student teachers and teachers with disabilities, these societal and self-perceptions can have negative impacts for them from entry to ITE and beyond (Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023).

The common perception of a good teacher is someone with the knowledge and skills to provide high-quality teaching practice and as someone who is “able” to work competently within the stressors and demands of teaching (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). As such, good teachers are typically viewed as normal, healthy and able-bodied (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023). In contrast, disabled teachers can be seen as incapable, unproductive, prone to high absenteeism and unable to meet the demands that teaching requires (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023).

Despite anti-discriminatory legislation and policies, disabled teachers, both preservice and in-service, often have to defend their competence and rights. However, speaking out against the social, cultural and physical barriers that prevent them from demonstrating their full potential can be challenging and risky (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023; Wilson et al., 2018). Many do not want to contest or challenge the disablist environment they continually find themselves up against and therefore hide or minimise their disability to the extent they can from their ITE provider or ECE employer. This response can also adversely affect these teachers’ identities as teachers because they cannot be their true selves in their learning and teaching contexts (Neca et al., 2022; Ware et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2018).

Bellacicco and Demo (2022; 2023) concluded from their research that teachers and student teachers with disabilities often hesitate to self-disclose due to concerns over privacy and professional assumptions. Tal-

Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019) reported that some of the teachers in their research saw their disability as having no relevance with respect to competency in their professional role or their work alongside others and so did not disclose information about it. Research highlights that even when student teachers and teachers with disabilities know of requirements to disclose, fear of bias can lead them to be very strategic about when and how they disclose, if at all (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023; Wilson et al., 2018).

According to Keane et al. (2018), disclosure for student teachers with disabilities is very much a “personal journey” involving a “series of negotiations and decisions” predicated on the desire not to be “seen as different or ‘other’ than the norm” (p. 823). Some of the students in Keane and colleagues’ study worried that their job prospects would diminish if prospective employers knew about their disability, a finding consistent with studies showing that employers often hesitate to offer employment to graduates with disabilities (see the review of literature by Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019). Keane et al. (2018) also observed that fear of disclosure is compounded by institutional requirements to disclose and the need to meet fitness to teach criteria, while Bellacicco and Demo (2023) found that disabled student teachers are less likely to disclose if they have had previous negative disclosure experiences.

Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019) position these fears about disclosure as “ethical dilemmas” that have their origins not only in other people’s stigmatising perceptions of disability but also in the need to navigate the dual identity that comes from belonging to the disabled community while working within the ableist structures of a nondisabled society. The authors contend that teachers with nonapparent disabilities are those who struggle the most with these dilemmas. The authors furthermore claim that the disclosure dilemma is rarely a one-off issue but can be experienced many times within ITE and teaching settings. Griffiths et al. (2023a) likewise point out that the potential for negative impacts from disclosure is ongoing for student teachers and teachers with disabilities and can appear at different times throughout their study and careers.

While the decision to disclose is complex, a driving motivator and major benefit of disclosure for student teachers and teachers with disabilities is opportunity to access crucial academic support and accommodations (Melián & Meneses, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2024; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019; Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2017; Tomas et al., 2022). However, the risks and barriers of disclosure can far outweigh the benefits. For example, recent comprehensive research into the experiences of students with disabilities navigating tertiary education in Aotearoa found that self-reporting disability information often resulted in these students having to overcome various barriers before they could access support (Ministry of Education, 2024).

According to the Ministry of Education (2024) research, some tertiary-education providers required students to have their disability formally diagnosed before agreeing to provide support. Costs associated

with attaining this evidence presented another barrier for the students concerned, as did the need to repeatedly share their disability information with different people. The lack of institutional support in general during the disclosure process added to the students' feelings of stress. It is not surprising, then, to also learn from the study that these tertiary-education students were generally reluctant to self-report disabilities because of barriers such as these.

Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2023) found that student teachers' reluctance to disclose disability-related information led to feelings of isolation as well as actual instances of isolation. Overall, the decision *not* to disclose can see student teachers and teachers with disabilities not receiving the necessary accommodations to do their job well or to reach their full teaching potential (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Wilson et al., 2018).

Facilitating disclosure

To help facilitate disclosure by student teachers and teachers with disabilities in ITE programmes and ECE workplaces, we offer the following key recommendations.

Perceptions matter

Understandings of disability matter in relation to who is perceived as “ready and fit to teach” and who is not. It is therefore important that ableist discourses, fixed images of a good teacher, and assumptions about being ready and fit to teach continue to be challenged and deconstructed (Bellacicco & Demo, 2022). The Office for Disability Issues (2019) states that one way to do this is through disability responsiveness training. This type of training makes it easier for organisations to discuss disability-related matters and thereby gain less stereotypical perceptions of people with disabilities. The office emphasises, however, that the

training should be delivered by someone who has a lived experience of disability and is knowledgeable about the modern conceptual understanding of disability. The training aims to get the audience to understand their own values and how they impact on decisions to employ disabled people (paras 2, 3).

Researchers also emphasise the importance of raising, through disability responsiveness education, awareness of the rights of teachers with disabilities by supporting open dialogue about the reality and importance of diversity among teachers (Melián & Meneses, 2022; Neca et al., 2022; Purdue et al., in press; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019). Ensuring that there are safe spaces in which student teachers and teachers with disabilities can share their lived experiences is therefore essential. Telling their stories provides opportunity to have misconceptions about disability and readiness to teach challenged and their identities as learners and teachers affirmed. To facilitate disclosure decisions, ITE

institutions and ECE workplaces need to show student teachers and teachers with disabilities that disability is welcomed and accepted in the teaching profession.

Promote cultures of openness, trust, proactivity and inclusiveness

The extent to which ITE providers and teachers' workplaces create an inclusive environment facilitative of disability disclosure is an important factor in the disclosure decision (von Schrader et al., 2014).

Environments that engender a culture of openness and trust give student teachers and teachers with disabilities the security they need to interact openly and honestly with others, which in turn facilitates their willingness to disclose information about their disability (Melián & Meneses, 2022; Tal Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019, 2023).

Also, rather than placing the onus on student teachers and teachers with disabilities to negotiate systems and advocate for themselves, ITE providers and teachers' workplaces need to take a proactive approach to encouraging disclosure so that student teachers and teachers with disabilities can access supports and accommodations without fear of discrimination. However, such encouragement will be ill-advised if these individuals must still negotiate barriers to access and participation (Griffiths et al., 2023a, 2023b; Ministry of Education, 2024).

Student teachers and teachers with disabilities who feel confident that disclosing information about their disability will result in increased support and acceptance from their ITE provider and/or employer, gain opportunity not only to feel heard, valued and respected but also to share their strengths and ideas (thus improving their psychological and social wellbeing), enhance their academic and professional achievement and build a more competent and authentic professional self (Bellacicco & Demo, 2022; Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2017; Tomas et al., 2022). It is important that disability is seen as part of these teachers' identity and as an advantage in their work with children and whānau.

Inclusive educational settings and workplaces are characterised by cultures accepting of diversity, including disability. As such, they are well positioned to make inclusive accommodations such as workspaces designed with universality in mind (Ombudsman, 2023). Universal design focuses on elements such as flexibility, usability, tolerance for error, and absence or minimisation of barriers within physical and social environments (Ball & Traxler, 2023).

Identify and remove barriers

The disability literature strongly indicates that asking student teachers and teachers with disabilities to "trust the system" when deciding to disclose information about their disabilities is only feasible when ITE providers and teachers' workplaces successfully address the wider sociopolitical and institutional barriers (whether attitudinal, policy or practice) to disclosure (Barton, 2011; Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Lindsay et

al., 2018; Neca et al., 2022; Siuty & Beneke 2020; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023; Ware et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2018).

An important shift in approach in this regard is to move the emphasis away from disability support and accommodations that require those with disabilities to fit in with ableist norms. Instead, the aim is to implement principles of accessibility that anticipate and embrace diversity (Ball & Traxler, 2023; Melián & Meneses, 2022). Experiences and perspectives are powerful tools for promoting inclusion in both ITE and workplaces. Students and teachers who choose to share their personal experiences of disability with their ITE lecturers and employers can help develop a deeper understanding of disability realities and thus work towards removing barriers and tailoring support based on specific needs (Marshall et al., 2020; Melián & Meneses, 2022). By upholding Aotearoa New Zealand's disability legislation, policies, and strategies, including employment law and human rights law any risks associated with sharing information can be minimised (Purdue et al., in press).

Ensure appropriate and consistent support

As Siuty and Beneke (2020) observe in relation to disabled student teachers, the accommodations available to them are not always appropriate or consistent. This situation can present another layer of complexity for these student teachers because of the need to renegotiate accommodations throughout their programmes of study. This claim is consistent with evidence from the Ministry of Education (2024) that showed some disabled preservice students having to advocate on their own behalf for suitable accommodations.

Policies and systems need to embrace a rights-based approach to accommodations so that student teachers and teachers with disabilities feel safe and well supported. By consistently focusing first and foremost on the requirements of the teaching role and then on flexible, responsive and individualised deployment of support that enables student teachers and teachers with disabilities to meet those requirements, ITE programmes and workplaces build a platform of accommodations underpinned by inclusive rather than deficit principles (Purdue et al., in press).

Implement clear disclosure policies and processes

ITE programme entry processes, content, and practicum placements should all be reviewed to ensure accessibility for student teachers with disabilities and to ensure these students feel comfortable disclosing information about their disability from the time they apply to enter a programme. Ball and Traxler (2023) emphasise that tertiary-education institutions must signal acceptance of difference during initial interactions. They point out that the language used on application forms and interview processes can signal inclusion and acquaint students with the accommodations and the support available to them. Inclusive non-judgemental language, according to the Ministry of Education (2024), can lessen the

feelings of vulnerability and risk that people with disabilities wanting to enter or already participating in ITE report with respect to disclosure.

Purdue et al. (in press) also maintain that responsiveness education should extend to the associate teachers who mentor students during their practicums. Associate teachers need to be aware of teacher education programmes' policies and practices regarding inclusion of students with disabilities as well as their own obligations within their workplaces.

Ensuring that associate teachers have this understanding not only helps promote the participation of students with disabilities, thus reducing the risk of discrimination associated with disclosing their disability, but also facilitates co-operation between ITE staff and associate teachers in providing support (Sokal et al., 2017). ITE policies and systems also need to be sufficiently flexible to allow students and staff to report instances of discrimination and to ensure that these and related workplace issues are effectively addressed.

Ball and Traxler (2023) argue that clear policy and processes relating to disclosure of disabilities can help remove the stress associated with the dilemma of when and how to disclose. Explicit information and instructions about when and how student teachers and teachers with disabilities should disclose information about their disability can help guide the decisions they make in this regard. However, both information and instructions must be consistent with the human rights and privacy legislation provisions embedded in programme and employment requirements.

Conclusion

This article has provided some understandings around the disclosure dilemmas faced by student teachers and teachers with disabilities in the ECE sector. Because disability can elicit significant negativity in society, many student teachers and teachers with disabilities do not disclose their disability to their ITE organisation and/or ECE employer for fear of being stigmatised, rejected or discriminated against. Being a disabled preservice or in-service ECE teacher can involve struggles for inclusion, equity, choice and empowerment because of the social, cultural and physical barriers still prevalent in society that limit their acceptance and inclusion. These barriers tend to put disabled teachers in positions of powerlessness and to silence them, profoundly undermining their sense of self-worth and identity.

While, in Aotearoa New Zealand, we have a context of legislation that is anti-discriminatory and requires ITE providers and ECE workplaces to provide non-discriminatory teaching and learning environments for student teachers and teachers with disabilities, we still have more work to do to ensure these people feel safe to disclose their disabilities or information about them and therefore receive the support and accommodations they require as of right. We therefore hope that our recommendations will help

motivate action for change and encourage those involved in ITE programmes and workplaces in the ECE sector to develop attitudes, policies and practices that promote equity for all.

A strong case exists for increasing levels of equity funding to ensure that all student teachers and teachers with disabilities receive adequate and timely support within ITE programmes and ECE workplaces. More research on the lived experiences of teachers with disabilities is also important. By providing added insights into the barriers to and facilitators of inclusion, such research can help disrupt discrimination and progress positive change.

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