Autistic children: Promoting their inclusion, engagement and skill development in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

The early childhood education (ECE) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand is committed through policy to inclusive pedagogy for all children, however translating such policies into everyday practice for teachers can be challenging. According to an Education Review Office (ERO, 2022) report, many ECE teachers do not feel confident teaching children with disabilities. With increasing numbers of autistic children with additional needs enrolling in ECE, it is vital that teachers build capability through professional learning to promote the rights, wellbeing and belonging of these children (ERO, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2017). Our intention in this article is to forefront the rights of autistic children attending ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand and the importance of culturally responsive, thoughtful, intentional pedagogy to meet their learning needs. We identify and describe the characteristics and strengths of autistic children that teachers can affirm and build on, highlight evidence-based practices from research that can help facilitate the active participation and inclusion of these children and their families, and discuss the importance of culturally responsive practice. We also share freely available resources that support teachers' professional development and implementation of inclusive curriculum. We conclude by emphasising the critical importance of the type of working conditions in ECE settings and support systems that promote inclusive practice.

KEYWORDS

Early years, autism, inclusion, intentional teaching

Introduction

Autism is "a neurodevelopmental condition that affects cognitive, sensory, and social processing, changing the way people see the world and interact with others" (Autism New Zealand, n.d., para. 1). Because autism is a complex condition, common misconceptions about autism's typical presentations from the past remain (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2020). That said, autism is better

understood today, especially when viewed through a neurodevelopmental paradigm that recognises brain-based differences and, importantly, presumes competence rather than incompetence or deficiency (Skelling, 2020). People often see the characteristics of autism as universal, but the opposite is true. Each child with autism is unique and has a different set of the condition's widely recognised traits or characteristics, each of which sits along a spectrum (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2020; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). Among the most common traits and characteristics are struggles with social interactions and communication, and adherence to specific repetitive interests and behaviours. McAnelly and Gaffney (2020) acknowledge that greater recognition is now being given to gaining understanding of how sensory stimulation affects autistic children's participation, wellbeing and learning. As Skelling (2020) emphasises, those who work with autistic children need to understand they should not treat autism like an illness that can or should be cured, but rather should exercise knowledge and strategies to ensure these children are conceptualised as active citizens who must be fully included in all aspects of their learning environment. Skelling's (2020) advice aligns with the strengths-based, rights-focused approach needed to ensure equity of learning opportunity for diverse learners in early years settings (Macartney, 2019; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016).

Recognition of the importance of inclusion and removal of barriers to participation in ECE for children with disabilities is supported by policy and legislation in Aotearoa New Zealand. All children in this country have the right to an inclusive early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2017; New Zealand Government, 2019, n.d.; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). According to the Education Review Office (ERO, 2022), the challenges associated with ensuring full participation of disabled children in ECE include lack of teacher professional development, limited resources, low teacher confidence, unsupportive teacher to child ratios, stretched Ministry of Education support, and environments not always being culturally responsive, universally accessible or sufficiently adapted. ERO (2022) also noted that effective leadership, quality teaching, interagency collaboration, and sound transition to school processes are vital components of inclusive education for young children with disabilities. As Macartney (2019) and Mackenzie et al. (2016) stress, these facilitators of inclusion rely on replacing deficit or ableist approaches to disability with a sociocultural approach wherein teachers can exercise agency to ensure the inclusion of disabled children is not only normalised but also expected and ordinary.

For autistic children and their families attending early education services, ECE environments and learning programmes need to be organised in ways that make them affirming, culturally responsive, accessible and equitable. New Zealand's ECE curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) has this type of culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogical practice at its heart; it also assumes the participation of all children in its aspirations. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) accordingly acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity, and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives. A fundamental expectation is that all ECE settings offer a curriculum that recognises these rights and enables the active participation of all children, including those who may need additional learning support (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Consequently, with respect to autistic children, ECE managers and teachers in New Zealand must be ready, willing and able to offer an inclusive environment that removes barriers for these children and

facilitates their participation in ECE programmes (Macartney, 2019; McAnelly & Gaffney, 2017, 2019). Researchers and commentators stress that because enacting this aspiration can be challenging at times, it is essential that teachers can access the information and resources they need to engage in respectful, culturally responsive, strengths-based, intentional pedagogical practices that allow them to support these children according to their individual needs (Brodzeller et al., 2018; Macartney, 2019; McAnelly, 2024; Skelling, 2020). The following whakataukī provides an adept summation of this requirement: Ko te ahurei o te tamaiti arahi ō tātou māhi | Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work.

The importance of active participation for autistic children's learning

Much of the current ECE literature continues to categorise children's participation in early learning settings with/in a discourse of physical presence. Studies by Knauf (2019) and Macartney and Morton (2011), for example, found that agents such as politicians, policymakers, researchers and ECE teachers tend to couch children's participation in terms of them simply being enrolled at and regularly attending their programmes. Knauf (2019), in particular, makes clear that participation is frequently conditional on a child being the "right" age and/or ability. Autistic and other disabled children are therefore especially vulnerable to these mindsets (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2017; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). These children often have difficulty even accessing the opportunity to "participate" in ECE settings, and when they do, they may face charity-based thinking that positions them as fundamentally broken and thus incapable of full participation and learning (Macartney, 2019; Purdue et al., 2020).

Participation in ECE programmes is also usually positioned, as Eriksen (2018) and Kessler and Swadener (2019) observe, as open to all—as an opportunity that every child can engage in. This supposition is, however, optimistic at best. As Correia et al. (2019) argue, in reality, participation is only fully open to some children because "children's right to participate … [is too often] dependent on the characteristics of the activities, organisations, and people involved. … [Therefore, it is critical] to promote a culture of participation in which researchers, policymakers, and practitioners need to be aligned" (p. 86).

Several researchers, among them Mackey and Lockie (2012) and McAnelly and Gaffney (2017), contend that reconceiving of participation as being more active in nature would support teachers to more expansively understand and implement autistic children's right to an equitable, inclusive ECE. Active participation in this context can be broadly understood by ECE teachers as autistic "children and their families actively engage[d] in decision making related to daily matters, curriculum/ programme, and management and governance" (Mackey & Lockie, 2012, p. 85). More specifically, McAnelly and Gaffney (2017, p. 20) emphasise that active participation for these children means they:

> are able to realise an image of themselves and each other as capable, competent, powerful learners and contributors to the world around them … [who] enjoy responsive, reciprocal relationships that value different ways of being, doing and knowing … [and]

> are supported to have an equitable voice in decision making processes about the things that affect them there [because] inclusive education for all is understood as a fundamental human right [in the inclusive early learning community].

This notion of active participation by autistic children in inclusive ECE relies on teachers mindfully incorporating into their practice the following principles and understandings: cultural responsivity (Noakes-Duncan, 2023; Tupou et al., 2024), equity of access (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019), presumption of competence (Biklen, 2020), an image of the autistic child as rich in learning potential and multiple intelligences (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016), respect for the autistic child as an inherently sensory meaning-maker (McAnelly, 2022), honouring different ways of seeing and experiencing the world as a strength and an asset to early learning communities (Macartney, 2019; Purdue et al., 2020), and bringing an abiding sense of safety, security, belonging, and place to the worlds autistic children are a part of (Mackenzie et al., 2016; Rameka, 2018; Wastell & Degotardi, 2017).

These intentional teaching pedagogies are key means by which ECE teachers can support autistic children's active participation in ECE. Intentional teaching refers to the purposeful and deliberate actions of teachers, each of which is underpinned by their knowledge of individual children and the professional knowledge and skills they bring to meaningful and appropriate curricular experiences for all children in ECE (McLaughlin et al., 2016). As *Te Whāriki* reminds teachers, their "primary responsibility is to facilitate children's learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59).

Supporting inclusion through intentional and culturally responsive teaching

Intentional inclusive teaching of autistic children in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context makes visible the specific pedagogical knowledge, actions, and decision-making processes that underpin this type of teaching. Intentional teachers therefore know that the "wiring" of the autistic brain differs from that of the non-autistic brain (Bogdashina, 2016). They understand that autistic learners typically encounter challenges with relationships and social communication, that their meaning-making of the world around them is atypical, and that they have diverse sensory perception, processing, and integration capacities (Bevan-Brown & Dharan, 2016; McAnelly, 2022; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016; Tomchek et al., 2018). More generally, these teachers expect to encounter and are respectful of neurodivergence in all its forms (Silberman, 2015). They value it as a marker of human identity (Kapp, 2020; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), and they use anti-bias, emancipatory language in their everyday interactions with everyone involved in their ECE workplaces (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Kapp et al., 2013). Framing neurodivergence in general, and autism in particular, in these ways supports ECE teachers to become not only more purposeful, deliberate, and reflective in their practice, as is a fundamental outcome of intentional teaching, but also more rights-focused and mana-enhancing in accordance with the inclusive practice that *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) sets out as an explicit responsibility for teachers.

When ECE teachers weave together culturally responsive practice and intentional teaching to support learning, development, and inclusion, they not only enhance children's identities, language, and cultures but also their agency, wellbeing, and mana (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2017, 2018). It is therefore important that ECE teachers engage with cultural frameworks and think intentionally about ways to improve outcomes for autistic children and support their families within those frames (Noakes-Duncan, 2023; Tupou et al., 2024). Two such frameworks are *Tātaiako* (Ministry of Education, 2011) and *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2018), which have helped teachers promote the inclusion, wellbeing and success of Māori and Pacific learners, respectively, within early learning services. Purdue et al. (2024) have advocated for the development of similar disability-related guidelines and competencies for the education sector, to progress the development of a shared understanding of what inclusion for disabled children and their families looks and feels like. The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand's Inclusive Education Capability Framework Advisory Group have implemented such a recommendation and are currently trialling the *Inclusive Teaching Practice Guidance* within the education sector (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.). This resource, once finalised, will enable services and teachers to reflect on and develop cultures that promote inclusive relationships and attitudes as well as policies and practices that enable children with disabilities to be effectively included in the everyday curriculum.

Other frameworks that early childhood teachers can use to guide and enhance their bicultural and multicultural practice include (but are not limited to) the following:

- *The Hikairo Schema: Culturally responsive teaching and learning in early childhood education settings* (A. Macfarlane et al., 2019): This schema promotes the use of culturally responsive pedagogies that help create culturally inclusive environments and develop cultural capacity through a te ao Māori lens.
- *Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori assessment for learning* (Ministry of Education, 2009): This resource encourages assessment practices based on kaupapa Māori theory, that is, Māori ways of knowing and being.
- The *Fonofale* Pasifika model of health (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001): The model promotes a holistic view of health and wellbeing for Pacific children and families, thereby helping teachers build understanding of cultural parameters for Pacific inclusive teaching.
- *He Awa Whiria* (S. Macfarlane et al, 2015): The authors use the metaphor of a braided river to illustrate the intentional blending of Māori and Western knowledges into practice to support teachers to be responsive to all children's cultural ways of knowing and being.

The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2017) encourages teachers to use cultural frameworks such as this because they help teachers consider the appropriateness of their practices and modes of engagement with children and families. The authors of the above frameworks contend that if teachers work in the ways suggested, they will be better equipped to provide this type of support to all children and families and thus implement *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) in a more robust and culturally responsive way. The importance of valuing difference and being culturally competent and responsive cannot be underestimated (S. Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2020; Purdue et al., 2020). As *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) emphasises from the outset that because practices in ECE settings need to be inclusive, individualised, and intentional, teachers must embrace

more thoughtful culturally and linguistically responsive practices that support the rights and needs of infants, toddlers, and young children.

Evidence-based practices for inclusive early childhood programmes

The concept of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in inclusive ECE settings comes from the evidence-based medicine movement in the health sciences. A practice can only qualify as an EBP when researchers from different research groups have published multiple studies demonstrating its effectiveness. A comprehensive review by the US's National Clearinghouse for Autism Evidence and Practice (NCAEP) (Steinbrenner et al., 2020) identified 28 EBPs for autistic children and youth. That review, in turn, led to the development of eLearning modules for each practice (https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/). In addition, a subset of eLearning modules are available at the same website specifically for use with toddlers (https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/afirm-for-toddlers), and another subset for paraprofessionals (https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/afirm-for-paraprofessionals), for the foundational evidence-based practices. In the next section, we highlight in *italics* EBPs for which Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (AFIRM) have been created. It is important to note that selection of a specific EBP is based on factors additional to those providing evidence of effectiveness. These factors are identified first from information about the autistic child's individual learning goals as identified by the teacher and family members, and second from the teacher's knowledge about the type of practice(s) that might work best in relation to the autistic child's specific abilities, cultural background, and the programme context (e.g., presence of neurotypical peers, curriculum, cultural values). Collecting this information is an essential part of the EBP process. Evidence-based practice in inclusive ECE is thus a three-legged stool consisting of the EBP itself, priorities for the child, and teacher wisdom.

Embedding EBPs to support autistic children

The strategies that ECE teachers can use to support autistic children are ones demonstrated as beneficial for supporting these children to secure success within ECE programmes. These strategies include those focused on arranging the environment and providing materials and resources that support engagement in an inclusive environment, as well as intentional teaching approaches embedded in routines, activities, and transitions (Sandall et al., 2024; Snyder et al., 2015). Each of the following twelve strategies include at least one example of an EPB that can be explored in an AFIRM module.

1) **Incorporate a predictable schedule and routine**: Many autistic children rely on a predictable routine and schedule to help them organise and plan for events and activities. Without this information, or when changes to typical routines occur, children may exhibit frustration or coping challenges. Teachers therefore need to inform children about any changes to routines and environments (e.g., scheduled events, less outside time due to weather, rearrangement of furniture or equipment) well before they occur. *Visual supports* (Meadan et al., 2011), such as the use of visual schedules, is an EBP and the topic of an AFIRM module (https://afirm-

modules.fpg.unc.edu/Visual-Supports/content). The visual schedule depicted in photographs, drawings, words, and symbols placed where children can review it is helpful for all children and, especially, those with autism.

2) **Provide supports for sensory sensitivities**: Atypical acuity of one or more sensory channels is a characteristic of autistic children but it is one likely to vary from child to child. As such, one ECE setting may have a child who is drawn to music and therefore plays notes on an instrument by mimicking sound and another who covers their ears whenever music is playing to avoid this noise. Incorporating *antecedent-based interventions* (ABIs) or arranging the environment to address these sensitivities goes a long way towards preventing negative reactions to a sensory event (Schilling & Schwartz, 2004) (e.g., bright lights, music, crowded spaces, hard chairs or surfaces, tastes of food). Examples of these interventions, which are the topic of an AFIRM module, include dimming lights, providing headphones, having seats that allow for mobility, and ensuring access to objects to hold and/or fidget toys (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Antecedent-Based-Interventions/content).
3) **Incorporate high-interest items and content**: Because young autistic children can be very interested in some aspect of their environment, embedding that interest in an activity can facilitate engagement (Dunst et al., 2011). For example, if the toys for play or illustrations in books include trains, cars, dinosaurs, logos from a favourite movie, and the like, the child may be more attentive to an activity that aligns with the learning goals for that child. Access to the embedded item can also serve as a reinforcer for the child, which is in keeping with the use of *reinforcement* described in an AFIRM module (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Reinforcement-Introduction-Practice/content). Technically, if embedding a high-interest item in an activity increases the probability that the child will engage with that activity, then engagement has been reinforced.
4) **Give choices**: An initial step in building autistic children's self-determination, self-advocacy, and mana is providing these children with choices (White et al., 2023). Choices of toys, activities, and play areas can happen throughout the programme. Choices of colour, songs to sing, number of items, and so on build content knowledge and vocabulary. *Prompting*, or the use of cues, can facilitate choice-making and is therefore the focus of an AFIRM module (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Prompting/content).
5) **Helping to be independent**: When an autistic child is first learning a skill or behaviour, the teacher may provide a physical or verbal prompt, as noted. Such prompts can be very helpful during that initial stage of learning, for example when a child is just learning to write his/her name, or to use a spoon at mealtime. Autistic children, however, sometimes begin to depend on the teacher's prompt. Once a child becomes successful when given a teacher prompt, it is very important for the teacher to intentionally withdraw this teacher support so the child can write his/her name or use a spoon independently. One way to encourage such independence is to delay giving the prompt for a short period of time at first (a second or two) and gradually increase the time delay (e.g., to 5 seconds) (Eyler & Ledford, 2024; Schuster & Griffen, 1990). For example, after the child has learned to use the spoon to eat the meal with the teacher putting her/his hand on top of the child's to guide the child's action, the teacher might wait a second or two before providing the physical guidance. Over a period of time, the teacher would gradually extend the delay in providing the physical guidance, allowing the child the

opportunity to independently use the spoon. *Time delay* is a focus of one of the AFIRM modules (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Time-Delay/content).

6) **Embed learning opportunities throughout activities**: Creating opportunities for autistic children to learn new concepts and skills and to practise them, not only within the contexts where they will be immediately used but also in other contexts, is important (Snyder et al., 2015). The AFIRM module on the evidence-based strategy of *naturalistic interventions* describes how teachers can embed learning opportunities in established routines and activities (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Naturalistic-Intervention/content).
7) **Incorporate multiple modes of communication**: Using multiple forms of communication can support the child's acquisition of expanded vocabulary and concepts, including words and phrases in a second or third oral language. The use of visual supports such as pictures and photographs as well as the use of signs and gestures may benefit some young children. Using multiple forms of communication may benefit all children as they navigate learning the three official languages of Aotearoa New Zealand. Examples of using *augmentative and alternative communication* systems is a focus on an AFIRM module (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Augmentative-Alternative-Communication/content). Some children may benefit from using these communication methods as they are learning oral language, which has been found not to delay the development of oral language for many children (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.; Charlop-Christy et al., 2002). An example of a widely used system that uses visual symbols is the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) developed by Frost and Bondy (2002). Others will be learning a communication system that they will use throughout their lives such as a device that has voice output if needed (Chavers Edgar et al., 2024; Muharib et al., 2024).
8) **Assign classroom tasks**: Asking autistic children to contribute to programme activities helps them learn how to contribute to the community, play alongside peers, and take responsibility for completing assigned tasks. Teachers can also allocate tasks in group settings where peers may recommend other tasks based on their identification of child strengths. This focus on child strengths has the benefit of an anti-ableism approach. If learning how to complete a task is required, teachers can use the EBPs of *modelling* and *video modelling* (Buggey et al., 2011) covered in separate AFIRM modules (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Modeling/content; https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Video-Modeling/content). Autistic children can also learn to complete the task independently using *self-management* (Peterson et al., 2021), an EBP that involves self-monitoring of task completion but can also include self-directed engagement with a choice-activity once they have completed the task (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Self-Management/content).
9) **Involve peers**: During the early childhood years, peers exert an increasing influence on social-emotional development, social relations development and communication, and play skills. For many autistic children, positive social engagement with peers can be challenging; some may even choose to play alone (Gunning et al., 2019). Teachers can intentionally enhance autistic children's social engagement with peers by planning integrated play activities and employing peer-mediated interventions in which an autistic child and neurotypical peers together learn ways of socially engaging, communicating, and playing with one another in a positive way (see https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Peer-Based-Instruction-Intervention/content). These

engagements are foundational to the formation of early social relationships (Snyder et al., 2015).

10) **Prepare children for social situations**: Some autistic children find social situations stressful or challenging if they are unstructured (e.g., outdoor or free play activities) or include nonroutine special events (e.g., celebrations, special mat-times, visits to and by family or community members). Some autistic children do not pick up on the social cues to determine expectations about what to do in nonroutine social contexts and specific information about the purpose for the social event and expected behaviour can be helpful. The use of child-centred *social narratives* described in an AFIRM module (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Social-Narratives/content) can be helpful. These social narratives are typically written from the point of view of the child, clearly describe the social context, and then describe a few suggested strategies that could be helpful (Coogle et al., 2018). Examples of these narratives include the Social Stories™ by Carol Gray (2010). For example, a strategy for free play may be, "I can pick an activity I like and ask someone to play with me". The social narratives are read with the child prior to the event as a way of preparing them as well as serving as a reminder to use the strategies identified and described.
11) **Understanding and addressing challenging behaviours**: Autistic children sometimes behave in ways that affect their engagement and learning in inclusive settings (Head Start Early Learning and Knowledge Center, 2024). Examples may be tantrums, hitting other children, or for a few even self-injury. To better understand why such behaviours occur, teachers have to make sure that they define them well (they are observable and measurable), and then keep a record of when they occur during the day and what happens right before and right after the behaviour. When teachers collect this information over a short period of time (1-2 weeks), they may begin to see a pattern that suggests why the child has such behaviours. Collecting information to determine the reason or function of the behaviour is referred to as *functional behaviour assessment* (FBA) and is the focus of an AFIRM module (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Functional-Behavior-Assessment/content). Based on this information, teachers may decide to change things in the room or routines that appear to trigger the behaviour as described in the AFIRM module on *antecedent-based intervention* (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Antecedent-Based-Interventions/content), *redirect* the child's attention to a preferred activity or give them a choice as described in the AFIRM module on *response-interruption and redirection* (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Response-Interruption-Redirection/content), attend to and reinforce behaviour to build alternative skills that might accomplish the same purpose as the challenging behaviour as described in the AFIRM module on *differential reinforcement* (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Differential-Reinforcement/content), if possible ignore the behaviour if its purpose appears to be to get the teacher's attention as described in the AFIRM module on *extinction* (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Extinction/content), or teach the child communications skills if he or she is frustrated at not being able to communicate as outlined in the AFIRM module on *functional communication training* (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Functional-Communication-Training/content). It is also important to point out that sometimes autistic children have unique behaviours, such as

rocking or some stereotypic behaviour, that do not affect their participation or learning, in which case we may just accept as part of the child expression of his/her neurodiversity.

12) **Identify goals for activities and celebrate accomplishments**: As teachers arrange environments with the aim of engaging autistic children, they also need to identify the skills and competencies that should be the focus of the activities. Once a child is engaged in the activity, the teacher can interact in ways that support the child's learning of identified goals. Consideration of the early or first steps towards a goal is helpful. Goals can be broken down into smaller steps through the use of a *task analysis* (https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Task-Analysis/content), which allows teachers to highlight the autistic child's success on the smaller steps as they make progress towards accomplishing the entire goal or routine independently (Baker et al., 2019). Teachers can also support the child's success on the small steps of a routine through *visual supports* (noted previously), such as small picture or word reminders of the sequence of steps leading to accomplishment of the entire routine.

ECE teachers need to be mindful of their responsibilities to be knowledgeable in their approaches to guiding autistic children's learning while also simultaneously maintaining their commitment to biculturalism and culturally responsive practice (Ministry of Education, 2017; New Zealand Government, 2019; Teaching Council of New Zealand, 2017). The above intentional pedagogical practices allow autistic children to participate equitably while also addressing their learning needs, mana, wellbeing and belonging.

Working conditions that inhibit and support inclusive practice

Although Aotearoa New Zealand has made a clear commitment in legislation and policy to inclusive ECE, translating that policy into everyday practice is a challenge given the ECE sector's current battle against less than conducive working conditions (e.g., large group sizes, poor teacher to child ratios, staffing issues, lack of professional development), most of which are associated with lack of funding and teacher shortages (New Zealand Educational Institute [NZEI], 2023; Office of Early Childhood Education, 2024). Funding and staffing cuts within the learning support and disability sectors are exacerbating this situation (NZEI, 2024). Despite research confirming the important role that well-funded, qualified teachers and good working conditions play in ensuring inclusive ECE provision that benefits children with disabilities and their families, sadly, this has been ignored by current government (ERO, 2022; Purdue et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, disabled tamariki, and especially those with additional needs such as autistic children, are the group within ECE most likely to be excluded and discriminated against because of poor working conditions and limited resourcing. The ERO (2022) report highlights parental, family, and whānau concerns about their children with disabilities not being accepted within ECE services or receiving a less than quality education. Most ECE teachers know what is expected of them in relation to providing high-quality inclusive ECE that benefits all learners and their families, but unfortunately structural and resourcing barriers continue to impede attainment of this level of provision (Ministry of Education, 2017; New Zealand Government, 2019; Teaching Council of New Zealand, 2017).

A range of factors underpin these issues, one of the most prevalent being the neoliberal values that favour privatisation and corporatisation of social, cultural, and political contexts, including ECE. There can be no quick fixes to the barriers undermining inclusive, high-quality ECE when the sector continues to face the significant underfunding and resourcing issues that leaves it struggling to turn policy and research rhetoric into reality for children with disabilities and their families. These numerous concerns around working conditions and resourcing make it all the more important to provide the government and Ministry of Education policy strategists with a clear research-backed understanding of the barriers involved in supporting children with diverse learning needs and in meeting the requirements of culturally responsive and inclusive practice in the ECE sector (Purdue et al., 2020).

To reduce incidents of exclusion and discrimination, ECE teachers need to have the level of funding support that gives them the staffing qualifications and ratios, other resources and working conditions they need to deliver an inclusive curriculum for disabled children and their families (ERO, 2022; Purdue et al., 2020). The need for funding and structural change is urgent not only in terms of progressing the rights of these children and their families but also in terms of providing quality ECE for all. By helping ensure everyone working in the sector feels valued and acknowledged for the important work they do, these government-led changes would greatly benefit learners and help reduce the inequities and discrimination experienced by disabled children and their families (ERO, 2022; NZEI, 2023). ECE teachers well-supported in policy and practice will be even better able to contribute to making early learning settings inclusive, culturally relevant, equitable, and safe for all.

Conclusion

More and more children with additional learning needs are enrolling in ECE. As such, teaching in this sector has become more challenging and demanding than ever. ERO's (2022) finding that many ECE teachers do not feel confident teaching disabled children is especially concerning. One of the key recommendations in the ERO report is to build capability through professional learning and development. An aim of this article is to support that recommendation and to strengthen research-to-practice links. Throughout this article, we have emphasised the importance of a mana-enhancing, culturally responsive, strengths-based and intentional approach to support the learning needs of young autistic children. Understanding that each child has a unique set of abilities and skills and that teachers therefore need to take a holistic approach to the child's learning is critical to creating a respectful, inclusive learning atmosphere and supporting the needs of autistic children. Instead of constructing autistic children as too difficult to teach, it is important that teachers identify and eliminate barriers to meeting the rights and needs of these children. These actions may require teachers to learn more about autism so they can understand and support these children's uniqueness and differences (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Researching and sharing stories and exemplars in relation to inclusive practice can help the sector question and think about what is working well, what is not, and why from different perspectives. This approach is a good means of equipping teachers, both preservice and in-service, with the knowledge, skills, and values that enable them to fully understand their role in inclusive education and to make a

positive difference through design for learning and teaching (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). Listening to the voices of parents and whānau of autistic children and to children themselves also has the benefit of providing new understandings and practices that facilitate transformative learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Although Aotearoa New Zealand has made good progress towards acknowledging and supporting, through policy and curricular intent, the right of all disabled children to inclusive high-quality ECE, we still have much more to accomplish, especially in relation to promoting and implementing the working conditions that support inclusive practice. If we are to continue advancing inclusive ECE for autistic children, then we must continue to collaborate and advocate together, so that we can move the inclusive approach embedded in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) forward with commitment and intent. The whakataukī , Ko te ahurei o te tamaiti arahi ō tātou māhi | Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work, provides a clear message for us all. We must value all children's cultures and their uniqueness, and provide high-quality inclusive learning environments so that all children's rights and needs are able to be met (Ministry of Education, 2017; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

Acknowledgement to Professor Angus Macfarlane

We would like to express our deepest sympathy at the passing of Professor Angus Macfarlane. Angus's vision, guidance and dedication has been integral to the development of our attitudes and practices around culturally responsive practice in early childhood education. Angus inspired us all to keep challenging the status quo and progressing positive change. His unwavering commitment to biculturalism and inclusive practice has had a profound impact on the education sector. Although Angus is no longer with us, his research mahi will continue to shape our philosophies and practices and will remain a source of inspiration for us all. We are very grateful for the opportunity to have known and worked alongside him.

He rei ngā niho, he parāoa ngā kauae

To have a whale's tooth, you must also have a whale's jaw

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Laura J. Hall, PhD, is Professor of Special Education at San Diego State University. She is the creator of the MA Degree/Autism specialization program with publications (book, journal articles) focused on supporting educators to maximize the potential of individuals with autism and their families. The focus of her current research is on evaluating the implementation of evidence-based practices by school personnel, fostering authentic community engagement, and identifying factors that foster equity and inclusion in diverse communities. She is leading several grant funded program transformation efforts focused on preparing a culturally responsive and identify affirming early education workforce.

Dr. Samuel L. Odom is a Senior Research Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development (FPG), University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. At FPG, he co-directs the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice. In addition, he is an adjunct professor at San Diego State University. Throughout his career, his research and scholarship has focused on issues related to inclusion of children and youth with disabilities. In 2016, he received an honorary doctoral degree from Stockholm University. In 2023, Dr. Odom received the Career Research Award from the Division of Research of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Erin Hall is a senior lecturer in the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) programme at UCOL (Universal College of Learning – Whanganui Campus). Prior to this her background was in kindergarten teaching and in leadership roles, both in New Zealand and Australia. Erin has interests in the areas of inclusion and diversity, professional practice experiences, and mentoring, with all these areas underpinned by the values of collaboration, relationship building and seeking ongoing understanding about teaching and learning.

Kerry Purdue is a Regional Academic Staff Member in the early childhood education programmes at Open Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga. Kerry is a kaiako/researcher who is interested in a wide range of issues related to early childhood education policy and practice including, disability, quality, curriculum, rights, equity and inclusion, and ITE. She is currently working with some colleagues on a research project on teacher diversity in early childhood education. The aim of this project is to continue the kōrero on what needs to be done to ensure early learning services are safe, fair and equitable places for all.