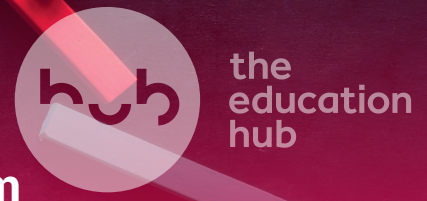


The Illusion of Inclusion: The experiences of neurodivergent children and those supporting them in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system



Executive summary of key findings and recommendations

Summary of the key findings and recommendations

This report has collected the perspectives and experiences of 2400 people engaged with neurodivergent young people – parents and whānau, teachers and education leaders, people working in support services, and neurodivergent tamariki themselves. The story it tells is nothing short of devastating. While there are individuals and organisations – schools, early childhood centres, and support services – that are doing an impressive job (often in challenging circumstances), the reality is that the system does little to support them. The lack of resources available to provide the types and amount of support that neurodivergent young people and their whānau need, and the frequent disconnect between educational structures and systems and what research (and personal stories) tell us best support neurodivergent children is stark.

Below outlines the primary findings from our survey about how well New Zealand's education system is set up to support our neurodivergent students.

A broken system

Respondents from all backgrounds overwhelming described the current education system as outdated and heading towards major crises, with many seeing home schooling as the only option.

There are a growing number of neurodivergent children, but Ministry of Education data do not adequately capture this nor has available resourcing kept pace, leading to significant pressure on schools and growing rates of burnout among teachers and specialist support staff.

For many respondents, the inability to provide students with the support that they need due to large numbers of students needing additional support, inadequate resourcing, and a lack of knowledge and training about how best to support neurodivergent students is taking a substantial toll.

Many respondents questioned the current approach to inclusion or mainstream schooling in New Zealand without adequate support being available.

Issues with funding and funding settings

There is a lack of public funding available to ECE centres and schools to support their neurodivergent students, resulting in many having to draw on their operational budgets or fundraising to afford necessities such as teaching resources, in-class assistance, sensory accommodations, and screening or diagnosis for students.

The high threshold and limited criteria for support, particularly for ORS funding, means that many students who require support are missing out.

In addition to the low likelihood of success, applying for government funding and funded services was described as a painful process, hard to navigate, and with many hoops to jump through.

Issues with support availability and the quality of provision

The lack of ministry-funded in-class support was the most discussed consequence of the general lack of funding.

Even when funding was available for a TA, it can be difficult for schools and ECE centres to find and retain skilled staff to fill these roles.

In some cases, the lack of permanence and limited training of TAs and ESWs led to the implementation of cookie-cutter advice rather than individualised support, and could manifest in a tendency for some TAs to take over too much of the child's work.

Accessing external services is challenged by high wait times, lack of specialists in some regions, and inadequate funding.

While some respondents had positive experiences of Ministry-funded specialist support, overall, there appears to be a substantial lack of funded services, specialists, and resources.

Many respondents commented on chronic understaffing within the Ministry of Education and specialists with unmanageable caseloads.

Funded support through outside agencies, specialists, and therapists was described as lacking on all levels.

The process for screening, diagnosis and assessment of students was described as too long and difficult, preventing the initiation of specialised support during a crucial time in a child's life.

Even when Ministry of Education specialist services are available, they can be insufficient or their advice and support inappropriate.

For parents, public support was wholly insufficient, often leaving them on their own to deal with feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Inequities in ability and opportunity to access support exist across the system.

Issues with ratios and school environments

Adult to child ratios in school classes and in ECE were described as unfeasible and ridiculous, across all respondent groups.

Most respondents felt that current school and ECE environments cannot meet neurodivergent students' sensory needs, describing spaces as inaccessible, non-inclusive, exclusionary, or even hostile, with MLES, ILES, and open pod learning particularly singled out as being problematic.

The Learning Support Action Plan appears to have had very limited impact on the experiences of most neurodivergent students to date.

Teacher knowledge, understanding, behaviour, and biases

There is growing awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity, however, comprehensive knowledge of neurodivergence was not the default among educators. The majority of respondents identified the lack of educator knowledge about neurodivergence as a substantial problem.

Many teachers are keenly aware of the gap between their desire to support neurodivergent students and their ability to do so, but there is a lack of professional development opportunities.

Many recent graduates have limited understanding of neurodiversity due to a lack of focus on neurodivergence in initial teacher education.

Teacher behaviour and attitudes towards neurodivergent students are instrumental to the success of school inclusion for neurodivergent students, and appear to be strongly connected to a teacher's personality, interpersonal style, and familiarity with neurodivergence.

A punitive approach to discipline, which appears to occur in many schools, was the most commonly mentioned negative staff behaviour.

Some teachers do not report on students' progress honestly until it is too late, downplaying difficulties and trying to be falsely reassuring.

Strong, positive relationships between teachers and neurodivergent students play a critical role in a successful educational experience, however, there were many examples of this not happening.

The importance of leadership, policies and culture

Poor leadership was most commonly associated with punitive approaches to behaviour management, exclusionary practices, lack of effort in supporting neurodivergent learners, and a lack of support for staff to attend PD on neurodiversity.

Effective leaders, who had knowledge of neurodivergence and positive practices for supporting neurodivergent students and staff made a substantial difference.

Poor leadership also has a negative impact on teachers, with teachers who want to authentically include neurodivergent students in the classroom having to do all associated work in their own time, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

Positive peer relationships were the hallmark of a school culture in which respondents felt that neurodivergent students could thrive.

Rigid curricula, timetables, assessments, and the general standardisation of processes in early childhood centres and schools were universally condemned by respondents.

Parents, teachers, and support service professionals also identified the rigid application of rules and structures as a major factor interfering with the achievement and wellbeing of neurodivergent students.

In addition, at some schools, accommodations for neurodivergent students are being arbitrarily denied or discouraged.

Relationships with families and seeing learning as a partnership between the school, whānau, and support services were associated with more positive outcomes for students but are not universally happening.

Respondents attribute a lack of collaboration in part to the absence of coherent systems for information-sharing within their schools and wished for easy access to a register of written profiles on neurodivergent students.

The successful implementation of collaboration systems appeared to depend partly on the efficacy of SENCOs or LSCs.

However, optimal SENCO support was rare, with many schools lacking the funding to provide enough release time for this role.

The use and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP) is highly variable across schools, with many examples of schools not offering IEPs or not implementing them.

What needs to happen

New Zealand needs a coherent, systematic, and systemic response to supporting neurodivergent children and young people. The response must bridge education and health (and other related sectors and services), ensure that actions, policies and decisions are informed by robust, up-to-date evidence, and bring together everyone – parents and whānau, teachers and schools, including specialist staff within school, support

services, the Ministry of Education, and most importantly, neurodivergent children and young people – who are impacted by and involved in the system.

Almost all respondents called for more funding across the education sector, enabling better pay for teachers and trained support staff, allowing more investment in special education and in lower socio-economic areas, and affording better access to funded specialist services and supports.

Having timely access to funded external support and resources, and in particular specialists and therapists, was identified as one of the most helpful things to enable inclusion, and an area where the most respondents felt improvements could make a big difference.

Creating an organisation or structure responsible for centrally co-ordinating the full range of support needed by neurodivergent students is essential for ensuring there is a consistent and holistic approach to support.

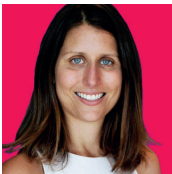
Substantial improvements are required to the provision of in-class support to neurodivergent students including ratios and class size, TAs, specialist resources and accommodations.

There is an urgent need to upskill teachers, school leaders, and those employed in SENCO, LSC, or other specialist teacher roles in schools in understanding neurodivergence, specific conditions, and how best they can support their neurodivergent students.

Establishing school-wide policies and procedures that are fair and responsive to the needs of neurodivergent students is essential.

It is essential that the Education and Training Act is amended to ensure that all children with special educational needs not only have access to education but have access to the supports, services, and resources that they need to fully participate in and benefit from education.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



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Romy Hume

Romy Hume is an independent researcher with a PhD in Education from the University of Auckland, specialising in critical disability and neurodiversity studies. Her research focused on therapeutic relationship-building with autistic adults. It flipped the script on traditional autism interventions, which aim to change the autistic person's behaviour to suit the neurotypical majority, by exploring practical ways for therapists to change their behaviour to suit autistic ways of being. She is currently writing a part-fiction, part-poetry, part-educational book based on her research to make it accessible to non-academic audiences.