

Supporting neurodivergent teachers in schools and early childhood settings



ECE resources

Estimates suggest that around one-third of the world's population can be described as neurodivergent. Most teachers and leaders focus exclusively on learners when thinking about neurodivergence, and there is often limited awareness of the unique experiences, needs, and strengths of neurodivergent staff. Attention to the potential needs of neurodivergent teachers and staff is highly important in order that schools and early childhood settings are inclusive and welcoming of the wide range of interests, traits, and abilities present in neurodiverse groups of people. Developing school or centre-wide practices that offer flexibility in environment, communication methods, and tools may help to reduce stress and burn-out for neurodivergent teachers.

As employers, under the Human Rights Act (1993) and the Employment Relations Act (2000), schools and early childhood settings have a responsibility to meet the needs of neurodivergent or disabled staff. Employers are required to make any reasonable adjustments to work requirements and the workplace that may be needed by staff, with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (to which Aotearoa New Zealand is a signatory) recommending the use of universal design principles in schools and early childhood settings. It is important to note that there is no obligation for employees to change to fit into the workplace. To do so is a denial of the core rights of neurodivergent staff and a barrier to their full participation and positive contribution.

Defining neurodiversity for the workplace

Neurodiversity is a term based on 'biodiversity', chosen to advocate for neurodivergence as a desirable condition, related to the recognition of the importance of diversity for a thriving ecosystem. Valuing diversity leads to approaches which seek to develop the strengths of neurodivergent people, rather than pathologising their weaknesses, and to focus on making adjustments that support neurodivergent people to flourish, rather than attempting to resolve or mediate in perceived impairments.

- 'Diversity' simply means difference. 'Neuro' means the brain or nervous system. 'Neurodiversity' means a group of people with a range of difference in terms of the function or structure of the brain or nervous system.
- 'Divergent' means something different from the average experience. 'Neurodivergent' people are people whose brain function or structure is different from average or typical. Neurodivergence is an umbrella term for a range of functional and structural differences in the brain, often used to describe neurodevelopmental conditions (present since birth) or acquired conditions (as the result of trauma to the brain, for example), and also sometimes applied to long-term mental health conditions, in which people experience (often fluctuating) changes to brain functions such as cognition and regulation. Brain structural and functional differences can lead to differences in emotional, cognitive, and sensory processing which may affect behaviour.
- 'Disability' refers to a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial, long-term, and negative effect on a person's ability to do daily activities. The extent to which neurodivergence can be classed as an impairment varies. Neurodivergent people can and do live well and flourish. Research suggests that it is the presence of appropriate environments and supports that enables people to achieve high levels of satisfaction, performance, relationship, happiness, and wellbeing. Without the right

environment and support, some neurodivergent people report lower quality of life, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression, anxiety, and dependence on others.

Benefits of neurodivergent teachers in schools and early childhood settings

When schools and early childhood settings engage with and support their neurodivergent staff in positive ways, neurodivergent teachers and staff can offer numerous benefits, including:

- **Creativity and unconventional thinking**, which can disrupt the status quo and offer transformative and innovative teaching methods.
- **Focus, memory, and attention to detail** as well as high levels of efficiency, a thorough approach, and strong organisation and planning.
- **Personal qualities such as honesty, dedication, and perhaps a particular subject specialism** which they teach with passion and flow, and which is highly enjoyed by learners.
- **Empathy and sensitivity** to learners' emotional states, and a strongly kinaesthetic and emotional sense of others, usually felt as a sense of being understood. Research reports rich relationships between neurodivergent teachers and students grounded in strong connection, co-regulation, and empathy, and the powerful impact of these for children's learning.
- **Advocacy and understanding**, personal insights and neuro-specific perspectives that make them more compassionate and attuned to learners who are struggling in school or early childhood settings. They often also have personal knowledge of the support and adjustments that might benefit learners and are often more effectively inclusive of a range of learners. They can be strongly committed to providing an experience of neurodivergence that they would have enjoyed in their own education.
- **Positive role models for students** which counter stereotypes and stigmas, and dispel misconceptions about the capabilities of neurodivergent people. Having teachers who are open to discussing their neurodivergence can help other staff deepen their understanding and support for neurodivergent children.

Experiencing school and early childhood settings as a neurodivergent teacher

In a work environment already considered pressurised, the physical and social environments of schools and early childhood settings can present difficulties for neurodivergent teachers, which may explain why neurodivergent teachers are more likely to leave the teaching profession than neurotypical teachers. In the limited international research in this area, many neurodivergent teachers and staff report more systemic barriers within their teacher education and in-service experiences, due to physical and social environments that have not been adapted to their needs. For example, autistic teachers report experiences of meltdown, posttraumatic stress disorder, inertia, and shutdown, which they suggest are due to sensory overload, masking, and a lack of social support. Some of the difficulties that neurodivergent teachers and staff may experience include:

Managing implicit expectations, transitions, and change

Schools and early childhood settings often operate under unspoken and unwritten expectations, but many neurodivergent teachers prefer these to be made clear. For some teachers, expectations for self-regulation of work performance and self-management of workload can be disabling due to differences in working memory and capacity for planning, prioritising, organisation, and time management. Transitional times and aspects of the school or early childhood setting day that are unstructured can be challenging for some neurodivergent teachers who prefer predictability and guidance. Changes to routines and plans,

particularly when abrupt and chaotic, can also be very stressful and draining. Change can be easier to manage when it is to some extent predictable or logical, slowly implemented, and well-communicated.

Sensory overload

Without reasonable adjustments, sensory hypersensitivity can be highly disruptive of teachers' wellbeing and self-efficacy. Noise is reported to be the most significant sensory issue for teachers, particularly the background noise created by different rooms and people. Transitional noise, school bells, and the hum of lights or technology can also be difficult to manage, as well as other sources of sensory stimulation, such as bright and flickering fluorescent lights, odours from food and perfume, or busy spaces in which inadvertent physical contact occurs (people brushing past each other). With the talking and sounds of eating present in staffrooms, neurodivergent teachers and staff benefit from quiet places, such as an empty classroom in a school, for their breaks. When one sense is overloaded, neurodivergent teachers can have a difficult processing information across other modalities, experience feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, fatigue, and a reduced capacity for self-regulation.

Relationships

Relationships with colleagues can be impacted by a lack of understanding of neurodivergence, and even negative bias and stigma. Believing that their colleagues may misunderstand or hold about negative attitudes about neurodiversity can lead to neurodivergent staff fearing and avoiding conversations with other staff, especially when fatigue or sensory overload is also present. For example, an expectation of 'small talk' can be disabling for neurodivergent individuals who prefer direct communication, while phone conversations can be difficult due to the lack of visual cues, and require much mental preparation or the development of an appropriate script, adding to workload and anxiety.

Identity

A well-developed sense of neurodivergent identity, and the sense of community that it often brings, can be protective of the risk of burnout. It is important to recognise that some neurodivergent adults may prefer not to identify as neurodivergent or a person with a disability, due to a personal choice to focus on strengths rather than difficulties or limitations. Others may fear stigmatisation, or a threat to their professional identity and career, which can be experienced more keenly in competitive or high-pressure environments. These difficulties can be further accentuated if teachers have other marginalised identities. 'Masking' neurodivergent traits is a strategy used by many neurodivergent people to compensate for social differences, and is extensively used when environments are experienced as unsafe for revealing neurodivergence, and where professional norms are seen as inflexible. Masking is recognised as taking a significant toll on an individual, with detrimental effects for wellbeing. Masking can also serve to make the need for supports or changes less visible.

Accessing support as a neurodivergent adult in schools and early childhood settings

If teachers hear neurodivergence discussed in a stigmatising way, or believe that there are negative attitudes held towards neurodivergence, they are likely to feel unsafe to be open about their own neurodivergence or to be able to ask for the support they need. In addition, many neurodivergent adults may have had a late diagnosis, meaning that they have learned strategies to manage without specific supports and adjustments. Note that the need for disclosing a neurodivergent identity is not an isolated event, but is likely to be required on many occasions, with different staff and in different environments.

Working with neurodivergent colleagues

For working productively in a diverse workplace, the following principles are valuable:

- Developing **social relationships and a positive culture** between staff, and aiming for an atmosphere of open dialogue to achieve not only a sense of solidarity and inclusion, but also values such as belonging and authenticity. Care and connection are essential for productive relationships, and are built upon openness and acceptance.
- Approaching neurodivergent colleagues with **respectful curiosity**, seeking to explore their valuable skills and assets, and the unique contributions they can make, without assuming that neurodivergence means they will require assistance.
- Asking about **stresses present in their environment** and exploring how they might be eliminated. Don't assume that solutions for neurodivergent children can be transferred to neurodivergent adults.
- **Building trust** rather than attempting to influence or provide feedback to neurodivergent colleagues. One way to achieve this is through 'attentive facilitation'. This involves being attentive, rather than prescriptive, and 'allowing' or facilitating what arises in an experience or interaction to be expressed without expectation. This practice encourages authenticity which can lower the need for, and impact of, neurodivergent masking, and offers mutual learning that drives all parties towards deeper understandings of each other. Attentive facilitation can also involve paying attention to the cognitive load or sensory stimulation that an individual is experiencing during an interaction, and responding appropriately to make opportunities to learn from each other more equitable.

Implications for leaders

Leaders of schools and early childhood settings should create an atmosphere in which staff feel comfortable to disclose and support neurodivergence and disability. This might involve:

- Providing **professional development** focused on encouraging teachers to embrace difference, and on developing concepts of professional identity that are inclusive of a range of neurotypes. It is important to recognise that the models of disability and neurodiversity that staff hold have a profound effect on how neurodivergent teachers and staff construct their identity, and how other staff perceive and interact with them. Careful use of language that avoids potentially offensive terms such as 'disorder', for example, is important. A neurodiversity and rights-informed understanding of neurodivergence, rather than a charity and deficit-fixing model, is important for facilitating the skills of neurodivergent staff.
- Looking for and **capitalising on strengths**, identifying roles that suit staff members wherever possible, rather than requiring them to take on roles that do not fit them. This will be a continual and evolving process, but every staff member can be supported to have a voice in and manage change when agency and a culture of collaboration and mutual support are promoted.
- **Prioritising essential adjustments** by tailoring teaching activities and adapting environments to demonstrate the value placed on inclusion and the participation of neurodivergent staff. Leaders should explore the perspectives and ideas of neurodivergent staff and offer them opportunities to lead the design of resources and supports, both for themselves and for other neurodivergent staff and students. Where appropriate, neurodivergent staff can be paired with and mentored by other neurodivergent staff with similar strengths and challenges, to provide emotional and social support.

Schools and early childhood settings that provide an inclusive environment for all their members offer a model for an inclusive society. The benefits of relationships that demonstrate respect for diversity and difference and are focused in concepts such as attentive facilitation can have an ongoing and pervasive

influence on all interactions in a school or early childhood community. An environment that supports all staff to be their authentic selves can enable the strengths of neurodivergent teachers and staff to be shared with the whole school or early childhood community.

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