

Becoming a qualified teacher in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand: Challenges for student teachers with disabilities

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Abstract

Equity of access to education is an important focus of educational provision in Aotearoa New Zealand, and especially so for priority groups, among them student teachers with disabilities. In this article, we begin by looking at the current requirements for qualifying as an early childhood education (ECE) teacher, and what tertiary education providers need to do to support student teachers with disabilities. We then present findings from our disability survey in ECE and report on the training experiences of student teachers with disabilities. Findings identified, among other challenges, whether, how and why these students choose to disclose or minimise their disability to initial teacher education (ITE) providers, their home ECE setting, and within the demanding context of professional experience [thereafter referred to as practicum] placements. However, respondents also described positive experiences that point to ways of supporting student teachers with disabilities to qualify as ECE teachers. The findings in this regard emphasise the importance of ITE providers and ECE services being fully aware of their legislative and policy obligations to ensure people with disabilities can enter ITE programmes and fully engage in them once there. We conclude with recommendations aimed at addressing the identified challenges.

Keywords : *student teachers with disabilities, inclusion, equity, initial teacher education*

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Introduction

ECE teachers have the crucial role of helping lay the foundations of children's lifelong learning, curiosity, and essential skills during their formative years. ITE ECE providers are required to develop their programmes in accordance with ITE (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019) and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA, 2016) guidelines. The guidelines specifically require ITE programmes to ensure graduating ECE students can meet the diverse needs of children, families and local communities they serve through high-quality provision (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019, 2022a).

According to New Zealand's Ministry of Education (MoE), Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, this requirement calls on teachers to engage with other worldviews, promote respect for diversity, and challenge dominant discourses in society that prevent equitable participation in education for all, including priority learners (MoE, 2017; TEC, 2022a; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). Whilst having an ECE teaching workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities they serve is acknowledged in policy as important, it is yet to be reflected in practice (Education Counts, 2025; MoE, n.d.). The most recent census of the ECE workforce (Education Counts, 2025) lacks information on teachers with disabilities. Information from Education Counts on ITE statistics also lacks this information (Education Counts, 2024a). Data obtained under the Official Information Act (through the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission) shows that in 2022, 567 of the 9344 students enrolled in an ECE qualification said they had a disability. For the year 2023, 502 of the 7464 students enrolled in an ECE qualification programme said they had a disability (TEC, personal communication, January 15, 2024).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006, p. 4) 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." Aotearoa New Zealand has implemented legislative and policy directives relating to the education and work rights of people with disabilities including the *Education and Training Act, 2020*, *Human*

Rights Act 1993, the *Employment Relations Act 2000*, the *New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016–2026* (Office for Disability Issues, 2016) and others (see Employment New Zealand, n.d.). However, despite this equity and rights based legislative and policy environment, student teachers with disabilities still face various challenges within ITE and the ECE workplace environment.

Training and working in ECE

For people wanting to qualify as teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, inclusive ITE programmes provide them with equitable opportunities to access, participate and succeed in this form of tertiary education (Gould et al., 2023; Griffiths et al., 2022; New Zealand Government, 2019). The New Zealand Government’s commitment to a world-class inclusive education system is evident through its *National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) and *Tertiary Education Strategy* (TES) (New Zealand Government, 2019), while its *Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029* (MoE, 2019, p. 22) sets down objectives for attracting, retaining, and supporting “teaching staff and leaders that are well qualified, diverse, culturally competent and valued”. These policy objectives overall include reducing the barriers that deter people with disabilities from entering the teaching workforce.

Benefits of inclusive ITE with respect to disability include acceptance of difference, challenging stereotypical discourses about disability, and shifting perceptions of disability from a deficit view to a more positive perspective (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Keane et al., 2018; Morton et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2018). In an ever-changing profession, ITE plays a vital role in supporting and providing student teachers with the latest research and effective teaching practices, thus preparing them to be responsive to change and to bring new ideas and perspectives to educational settings (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022a). The practical aspect of this learning occurs during practicum placements, where student teachers engage in hands-on teaching experiences and apply theory to practice. Students enrolled in one- and two-year ITE programmes must spend a minimum of 80 days on practicum; those in programmes of three or more years must complete a minimum of 120 days (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019). These

placements for student teachers occur in a range of approved licenced ECE services.

While ITE programmes focus on ensuring student teachers develop the knowledge and skills to promote inclusive learning environments, it is important that these programmes also include diverse students. This requirement with respect to disability aligns with the New Zealand Disability Strategy's objective of promoting a non-disabling society wherein the education system welcomes learners with disabilities (Office for Disability Issues, 2016). Tertiary providers must therefore have in place a disability action plan (DAP) that outline the support services available to student teachers with disabilities and which ensure the academic staff educating them, value and support these students' participation and progress (Achieve, n.d.; Tertiary Education Commission, 2023).

On completing an ITE programme, graduates apply to be provisionally registered and undertake a teacher registration process over two years and after completion, receive a practising certificate issued by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. The practising certificate confirms that teachers are competent and fit to teach, meaning they are physically and mentally able to carry out a teaching role safely and satisfactorily. The Teaching Council values diversity and acknowledges their obligations under the *Human Rights Act 1993* when considering fitness to teach (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022b).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, ECE settings employ qualified teachers holding a minimum of a graduate diploma or a three-year degree or diploma in ECE at Level 7 or equivalent, as well as unqualified teachers. In 2024, the proportion of qualified teachers was 71 percent (Education Counts, 2025). However, the government's objective set down in its early learning action plan (MoE, 2019) is to increase the qualified workforce to 100 percent in the long term.

ITE statistics collected by the Ministry of Education for 2023 (Education Counts, 2024a) indicate a fluctuating pattern in first-time enrolments of domestic students into ECE ITE qualifications over the years, with a more noticeable decline in recent years. From 2005 to 2010, there was considerable growth, peaking at 2985 in 2010 (up from 2025 in 2005). However, this trend has since reversed, with the latest data from 2023 reporting a decline to 1425 first-time enrolments in 2022 to 1140 students in 2023 (Education Counts, 2024a). The

downward trend also extends to primary ITE and secondary ITE (Education Counts, 2024a), indicative of the reduced interest in teaching across the education sector, necessitating urgent attention to attract prospective teachers to the teaching profession. Earlier recommendations (Griffiths et al., 2022) in this regard emphasise the need for barrier-free access to ITE.

Challenges for student teachers with disabilities: Insights from the research

Research (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Education Counts, 2024b; Keane et al., 2018; Neca et al., 2020, Saltes, 2022; Ware et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2018) shows that accessing and fully participating in tertiary education and ITE programmes can be challenging for students with disabilities. Barriers, according to this research, include the following:

- *The cost of ITE programmes:* the financial burden associated with enrolling in ITE programmes, which can be a barrier in itself, is exacerbated if the student needs to pay for assistive technologies and support services.
- *Inaccessible environments and programmes:* not all in-person and online learning environments are designed with accessibility for all in mind.
- *Negative attitudes and subjective decision making:* these can manifest as early as the selection interview process. Preconceived ideas about disabilities can lead to biased evaluations that result in non-selection or failed practicum placements. They can also be the reason why some candidates do not disclose their disability or minimise it.
- *Programme requirements, inflexible policies, and entry requirements:* meeting programme qualification timeframes (for example, maximum six years for the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE)) can be difficult for students with disabilities, while inflexible policies within institutions can sometimes disadvantage them. Fulfilling entry criteria, completing the entry process from enrolment to interview, showing proficiency in the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand numeracy and literacy requirements, and just being accepted can all present challenges.
- *Programme delivery:* Mode of course content delivery can also create barriers for

students with disabilities. Providing flexible delivery options such as blended learning approaches can enhance accessibility for these students.

Careful examination and acknowledgement of these challenges is crucial for the development of inclusive education policies that ensure equitable opportunities for all student teachers with disabilities. Other research shows that practicum placements are not always disability friendly (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Purdue et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2018). Barriers here present as physical or attitudinal. Currently, the research shows few accommodations are made for student teachers with disabilities needing to complete practicum requirements.

Research furthermore shows that ITE providers may unfairly interpret and apply “fit to teach” criteria (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022) to ITE applicants, student teachers and graduates with disabilities due to societal constructions of disability and the subjective interpretations of fitness to teach (Purdue et al., 2024). Ware et al. (2020) and Sokal et al. (2017) in their research concluded that the standards associated with capability can be too idealised to accommodate students with disabilities, presenting a key reason as to why ITE applicants and students avoid disclosure of or minimise their disability. A review of international literature on this matter was conducted by Bellacicco and Demo (2023) who concluded that standards across countries can discriminate against student teachers with disabilities when they are too rigidly defined and applied.

Equity funding and how tertiary education providers use it

Equity funding in Aotearoa New Zealand, as outlined in the *Education and Training Act 2020*, is essential to supporting learners with disabilities’ participation and achievement in tertiary education (TEC, 2024). Tertiary education organisations (TEOs) eligible for equity funding must be a university, polytechnic or wānanga¹ or registered private provider, and receive government funding under specific funding mechanisms related to Level 1-7 qualifications on the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework. TEOs

¹ Māori tertiary institution or university that provides education in a Kaupapa Māori context

receiving equity funding for learners with disabilities must meet TEC reporting requirements mandated in the *Education and Training Act 2020* and collect data on how they have used the funds (TEC, 2024). Allocation of funds is based on the number of equivalent fulltime students (EFTS) with disabilities (TEC, 2023) and relies on learners self-reporting a disability.

The data-collection process began in 2018. TEC has since emphasised the clearer understanding of supports and constraints for learners with disabilities this information is providing (TEC, 2022b). Over 90 percent of the TEOs said they had provided learners with disabilities with services designed to enhance their participation and success. Examples of these services are:

- Enrolment support
- Alternative exam/test supervisors, reader/writers, advocacy with academics and departments
- Prospective student support, study support, and learning access/support plans
- Assistive technologies
- Accessible carparks
- Document conversion to accessible formats (TEC, 2022b, 2023).

Other examples of support the TEOs reported include targeted support from academic and administrative staff, disability awareness training, paid notetakers, mentors, New Zealand sign language interpreters, laboratory/library assistants, help with accessing Workbridge and other relevant sources of funding, aiding transition with external organisations, special social events and networks, in-class support and “navigator support”. Also listed are early provision of course syllabuses, modifications to programmes and courses, advance notice of assessments, referrals to professionals able to screen for learning or neurocognitive issues, screening for dyslexia, equipment loans, transport support, disability parking permits, dedicated resource spaces, accessible journey-access plans, open/closed captioned videos and films, and career counselling (TEC, 2022b).

Our study

Methodology

We used a qualitative approach to learn more about the inclusion, exclusion, and equity experiences of teachers with disabilities. According to Hughes (2010), qualitative research allows researchers to explore a particular issue or phenomenon from the perspective of those who directly experience it. It is therefore contextualised and interpretive (Clandinin, 2015; Whitburn & Goodley, 2022). Our research approach was reviewed and approved by the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand/Te Pūkenga research ethics committee.

We used an online questionnaire administered via Survey Monkey to collect our data. We chose this research tool because it can reach potential respondents over a wide geographic area and because it is usually easier and less intrusive than other forms of data collection (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). The questionnaire began with questions designed to collect background/demographic information. Five open-ended questions followed. These provided prompts to encourage respondents to tell their own stories using their own words and in their own ways about their positive or negative experiences of disability in ITE and/or ECE settings.

We initially sent invitations and an accompanying information sheet to (1) ECE services via a publicly available database of email addresses of early childhood services; and (2) student teachers from our ITE programme. The subsequent low response rate prompted us to email invitations and the information sheet to all student teachers in our programme who identified with a disability and to all ECE associate teachers associated with our ITE organisation. We encouraged student teachers and teachers to share the survey link through their own networks. We kept access to the questionnaire open for two months and sent out reminder emails shortly before the survey closed. We received 56 responses from student teachers and teachers with disabilities.

Two of the background questions asked respondents to identify from lists their type of disability and which type of ECE service they worked in. The disabilities identified included neurodiversity (e.g., ADHD, autism), learning (e.g., dyslexia), mental health (e.g., depression,

anxiety), physical (e.g., injury), sensory (e.g., vision impairment), and health (e.g., pain conditions), while the settings included childcare centres, kindergartens, playcentres, puna reo/Māori immersion early childhood services, and home-based care.

All members of our research team analysed and interpreted the data collaboratively. This process allowed us to consider different perspectives within the team to analyse and make sense of the data. Iterative readings and manual coding of the data made it possible to identify patterns, discourses, and themes (Edwards, 2010; Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Coding reflected the aims and questions that guided the project and identified themes relating to student teachers with disabilities experiences in ITE and ECE settings.

Study limitations

How we disseminated information to potential respondents about our study possibly contributed to the low number of responses. Our reliance on those who received the initial email to pass the information on to student teachers and teachers in their services probably limited the survey's reach. Another limiting factor may have been due to teachers with disabilities feeling unsafe about divulging their disability/ies if they requested that the survey information be forwarded to them in their services. Those in training, particularly those who had yet to secure a permanent teaching position, may have felt especially vulnerable. Our qualitative methodology also imposes limitations on generalisability. Because storied experiences are understood in terms of what happened for a student respondent or participant at a particular point in time, we needed to be cautious about making generalisations or predictions based upon the accounts of the survey respondents. Future research undertaken in this area needs to take these and other factors (such as mixed method approaches) into consideration to strengthen research reliability and generalisability.

Findings and discussion

The issue of disclosure

Findings from this research suggest that ITE institutions are aware of their obligations to

student teachers with disabilities because most of the survey respondents were able to provide examples of how their ITE institutions were supporting them.

They have been amazing at [institution name] with supporting me. They pay for a study helper for four hours every week and one of their disability support mentors reached out to me to help with my anxiety around my first noho marae. (Respondent 32)

Library learning services helping in my learning together with my feedback mentor in assignments ... I feel proud with the support being given to me; makes me happy and emotionally stable. (Respondent 20)

The lecturers have been very good and very helpful ... they have encouraged me and guided me ... they also break down the questions to help me understand ... as at times I am on strong medication and can't do what is required or I forget from the medication. (Respondent 14)

However, the practicum component of programmes seemed less supportive.

If ... I'm struggling they (ITE institution) give me extra time to get an assignment done ... [But] I don't tell anyone about my mental health in ECE placements because I [earlier] got judged and assumptions were made about me. (Respondent 15)

... practicums are very daunting (speaking as an autistic person); the routine disruption and new places and people. Not sure how to fix it though. (Respondent 50)

Sokal et al. (2017) have identified a disconnect between student disclosure and accommodations in ITE institutions and what is communicated and accommodated during practicum placements. Research suggests that tension between the rights of student teachers with disabilities for reasonable accommodations and the requirement of the ITE institution to assess learners against a defined, standardised profile is most evident during practicums

(Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Sokal et al., 2017).

Consistent with wider research (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Neca et al., 2020; Sokal et al., 2017; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019), the respondents in this study faced the difficult decision of whether to disclose their disability during their practicum. Many of our respondents said they hid or downplayed their disability during practicums. Fear of being judged and/or stigmatised and the possibility of not being seen as competent capable teachers were the two main reasons why they chose not to disclose. These two comments were typical:

I have hidden my disability recently in order to go on placement. They would have rejected my application otherwise. Feel like I have to go above and beyond to prove myself or be worthy. (Respondent 5)

... practicums are challenging for someone with anxiety. And because mental health still has a stigma, it is not something I am comfortable disclaiming to people before I know them well, for fear of it affecting my employment opportunities or how people view me as a person. (Respondent 27)

These responses highlight what Bellacicco and Demo (2023) refer to as the personal dilemma of professional competence. Learners with disabilities need to disclose a disability in order to receive support but fear they will be stigmatised for doing so (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Sokal et al., 2017; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019; Wilson et al., 2018). One respondent who disclosed her visual disability during practicum found that doing this led to her receiving some of the assistance she needed.

Constant support from peers about visibility; for example, they have painted bumps, cracks, and exposed roots. They have enough awareness to ask, "Can you see that?" And {they} take the time to physically show [me] something as well as describe it. (Respondent 21)

However, this respondent was also conflicted over what she saw as the need to demonstrate competence that aligned with ableist assumptions during practicum assessments:

There are still times I have to downplay the severity of my disability in order to succeed. For example, I have to show I am capable of outdoor play and expeditions. However, I am required to do these without my walking stick. (Respondent 21)

Bellacicco and Demo (2023) argue that “if students with disabilities openly represent their disability, they are more likely to receive reasonable accommodations and to be able to integrate their experience of disability in their own professional identity” (p. 27). However, inflexible assessment approaches, ableist assumptions and discrimination may still see student teachers with disabilities not divulging or minimising their disability. Respondent 39 made this point when she wrote: “Disclosing a disability ... takes some bravery when you don’t know how that person/organisation is going to react.”

In accordance with Bellacicco and Demo’s (2023) recommendations, ITE institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand need to view teachers competencies holistically so they can make the physical environment, learning and practicum accommodations teachers with disabilities require. This approach will help prospective students and student teachers feel sufficiently safe to disclose their disability and what they need ITE and practicum providers to do to ensure they can fully access and participate as student teachers and teachers.

Barriers

Ware et al. (2022) emphasise that the pathway for inclusion into teaching begins with supporting student teachers through ITE and their early career as teachers. Respondents in our study shared experiences of barriers throughout their teacher training. Bellacicco and Demo (2023) and Derman-Sparks et al. (2020) show that barriers can begin as early as the access point to ITE, potentially preventing people with disabilities from even applying to train for the profession. One respondent shared her frustration when trying to enrol in an ITE programme:

I remember going to multiple training providers asking ... [if they could provide] support regarding my OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder]. I knew some places have additional

support in place. However, I was told I was a “trail blazer” (like that was meant to help?) and no support was offered beyond the general learning support for assignments etc. I did not feel like anyone tried to understand any barriers and possible solutions. (Respondent 30)

Another respondent identified unfavourable funding systems as a barrier:

Sadly, Studylink² doesn't provide student loans for living costs to students who do parttime study. To work around this, every semester I have to apply for limited fulltime study, meaning I have to get a Dr's note, talk to [institution] adviser and then wait for Studylink to accept it to be able to get living costs. (Respondent 18)

Of the barriers the respondents identified while training and working in ECE, the main one was the seeming inability of some ECE settings to provide accommodations to support teachers with disabilities, as this respondent explained:

My ECE service does struggle to support me appropriately, not due to not wanting to but just as a whole sector. We are expecting more from teachers (usually in documentation), which simply means more work for me outside of work. (Respondent 12)

Another of the respondents (Respondent 43) said she had downplayed her disability or hidden it because there is “always talk at work ... It's better to just be quiet, then you get less judgement.”

Researchers, among them Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019) and Ware et al. (2022) have identified teaching as particularly susceptible to ableist assumptions and judgements because teachers are expected to be in control and to display knowledge and competence within their environments. Our survey respondents reflected these assumptions when they spoke of the pressure ECE staff are under because of their high workloads. The respondents felt they should be capable and not burden others.

Respondents also spoke of being excluded from certain activities and inappropriate remarks or questions relating to their disability. Bellacicco and Demo (2023) concluded from

² For information on Studylink, please see <https://www.studylink.govt.nz/>

their review of the literature that there is strong potential for student teachers with disabilities to be excluded and/or marginalised once enrolled in an ITE programme.

Supports

Positive experiences in ITE and ECE settings identified by respondents highlighted important ways that these organisations can support student teachers with disabilities. One emphasised the practical support she had received:

My previous early learning centre, which I had a permanent position at for three years, and the current ones I relieve [at] have enabled me to be able to work just four days a week instead of five. The two centres I have worked in previously also checked my learning stories. (Respondent 29)

A student teacher spoke of the support she had experienced during her studies and in her ECE setting.

I believe where I work, I am so lucky and grateful that the team is very open and supportive. My mentor is so supportive, and I find that my studies, communications, are very good and seem to be very prompt and I do have support there if I need it. (Respondent 16)

Many studies of the lived experiences of teachers with disabilities identify their explicit desire to use their experiences to make a difference (Neca et al., 2020). One respondent in training said that her experiences as a person with a disability had influenced her own inclusive teaching practice.

I find I am able to observe behaviours of what I have struggled with in the past in young children and see different things to [what] others [see] that might need support ... [I can see how] to support children with the same disabilities more than a teachers without [a disability]. (Respondent 41)

Respondents also implicitly identified supportive measures when they suggested how to

remove barriers. Funding for added support was a common one.

Funding for students with disabilities to alleviate the financial burden on top of the physical/mental/emotional one. Flexibility and openness to accommodate diverse needs eg. working collaboratively and offering options such as a shorter work week/day for teachers or adapting their role to accommodate their disability. (Respondent 42)

Support and awareness for those with mental disabilities, as I'm sure many hide them like I do ... They probably don't feel like they could be a teacher or obtain the qualification needed. (Respondent 25)

Include disability support in advertising to those entering the field. Make discussions of adult disability and inclusion a normal part of learning to teach. (Respondent 24)

One respondent emphasised the importance of feeling safe in ITE and ECE settings:

I think if there were more openness without fear of discrimination, the person affected could tell others what might help support them, and management would have a support network to turn to for ideas to implement and help. (Respondent 30)

According to research evidence, the need for openness without fear of discrimination goes beyond making accommodations to support teachers with disabilities. ITE institutions and professional bodies also need to critically rethink the development and assessment of teachers' professional profiles to ensure a diverse teaching workforce representative of the communities from which educational settings draw their students (Bellacicco & Demo, 2023; Ware et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2018). As Bellacicco and Demo (2023, p. 43) point out, students with disabilities are not passive consumers of accommodations but need to be involved in the "joint construction of coping strategies" with ITE institutions and where they gain work experience.

While respondents provided positive examples of inclusion, none of them reported their ITE or ECE settings making explicit reference to the rights of people with disabilities. New

Zealand's independent monitoring mechanism in relation to the country's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Independent Monitoring Mechanism, 2020) makes clear that employers must provide reasonable accommodations for such people. Disability research suggests that information about rights increases employers' confidence in accommodating people with disabilities in their workplaces. The comments from our survey respondents suggest that ITE and ECE settings need to make these rights explicit and transparent, a consideration summed up nicely by this respondent: "I think it depends on the centre itself and management being accepting. Also, teachers need to be accepting and not seeing others as a problem" (Respondent 44).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The experiences of student teachers who responded to our survey highlighted both the positive and negative constructions of disability evident in ITE institutions and ECE workplaces. Exclusionary experiences appear to be dominated by a sameness approach that expects all student teachers to learn and teach under the same conditions and environments. Respondents' experiences indicate that there are still ITE and ECE settings that equate disability with individual flaw and inability and therefore fail to support the rights and needs of teachers with disabilities. Consequently, when these teachers cannot, because of ableist barriers, meet the standard or level of competence expected, the institution or setting views them as unable to fulfil their roles and responsibilities and therefore as problematic.

The survey responses also provided examples of positive constructions and understandings of disability within ITE and ECE settings that manifested in friendly, inclusive, and supportive learning and teaching environments for student teachers with disabilities. Those survey respondents who worked alongside people supportive of their rights and goals reported a sense of wellbeing and belonging and the knowledge that their skills as learners and teachers were valued.

To reduce barriers and challenges for individuals with disabilities wanting to become a qualified early childhood teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand, we offer the following

recommendations:

- *Collaborate with the Teaching Council and build on the “fit to teach” requirements:* We think the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand needs to provide ITE providers and the education sector in general with more detailed information about the fitness to teach criteria (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022b). Clear information is needed so that ITE and ECE providers know how to uphold Aotearoa New Zealand’s employment and human rights laws in practice and thus provide reasonable accommodations for teachers, both pre-service and in-service (see, for example, Independent Monitoring Mechanism, 2023; National Education Union, 2025).
- *Promote disability responsiveness training for associate teachers:* During their practicum student teachers with disabilities need to work alongside supportive and understanding associate teachers as well as other teachers. ITE providers need to offer associate teachers professional learning opportunities that fully prepare them for their role in supporting student teachers during their practicums. We recommend that these experiences include disability responsiveness training (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019). As Derman-Sparks et al. (2020) emphasise, such training is an important facet of challenging stereotypes of and negative attitudes towards disability, thereby aiding the development of a culture of inclusion.
- *Ensure appropriate support during professional experience placements:* The survey findings suggest that student teachers with disabilities find the practicum component of their qualification particularly challenging. Early learning services where students carry out these placements need to be accessible and inclusive (New Zealand Government, 2019). Supports and accommodations at such times might include additional lecturer support, reader/writers, interpreters, IT and other equipment. We also recommend adapting policy in consultation with the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand to meet student teachers’ with disabilities diverse needs by, for example, bringing in flexible practicum arrangements and hours, adequate sick leave, and more breaks.
- *Develop cultural competencies for learners with disabilities:* The findings suggest that ITE and ECE providers need more guidance on how to prevent and reduce training and workplace disability discrimination. We have stated elsewhere that cultural

competencies similar to *Tātaiako* (MoE, 2011) and *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) would be highly beneficial (Griffiths et al., 2023; Purdue et al., 2024). Disability-responsiveness guidelines and competencies for the education sector could provide a tool whereby providers can determine if their places of learning are safe, inclusive and free from racism, discrimination and bullying (New Zealand Government, 2019).

- *Ensure “working in diverse teams” is covered in ITE and ECE professional learning:* Negative experiences in ITE and ECE due to “isms”, phobias, stereotypical beliefs and non-inclusive behaviours limit teachers with disabilities and other diverse teachers to establish the effective working relationships that ultimately benefit the children they educate. ITE and ECE leaders and managers need to ensure that everyone openly discusses teacher diversity and how to accommodate and support that diversity from the time teachers enter ITE until the time they leave the teaching profession. Providing opportunities for people to reflect on their own understandings of difference and diversity and how their beliefs can affect, either positively or negatively, professional relationships is vital (Griffiths et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., in press).
- *Ensure barrier-free access to and participation in ITE:* While all tertiary education providers in Aotearoa New Zealand must have initiatives in place to support student teachers with disabilities, some seem better able than others to implement those initiatives, with attitudinal, funding and resourcing constraints factoring into that ability (TEC, 2022b). Most of the student teachers who responded to our survey reported mainly positive experiences with their training providers. Nevertheless, it is important that potential and enrolling student teachers with disabilities can readily ascertain the supports providers can make available to them, including learning support and pastoral care, so they can make an informed decision about where to study. The TEC and TEOs need to continue to investigate successes and challenges for learners with disabilities and to implement barrier-free access to and participation in ITE (TEC, 2022b). This might include provisions by TEC (e.g., scholarships, study grants, paid practicums) and ITE providers (e.g., enrolment support, free wellbeing and mental health support, and testing and diagnosis support).
- *Gather data at a national level and use this information to support ECE funding and*

policy initiatives: The New Zealand Qualifications Authority collects data on learners with disabilities in ITE who have self-reported a disability. However, we currently have no national statistics on the number of teachers with disabilities in the ECE workforce. Collecting this information could be easily done through the Ministry of Education's annual census of early childhood services (Education Counts, 2025). The current census asks for information on staff members' ethnicity, age, qualifications, and certification status but not information related to disability. Such information is needed to ensure the formulation and implementation of targeted policies and funding that will help this group of teachers fully participate in and offer their skills as ECE teachers. For example, teacher equity funding could be used for disability awareness training, environmental adaptations, additional sick leave for teachers who need it, helping ECE teams learn sign language, and access to free mental health services and counselling (Purdue et al., 2024).

- *Uphold our legislative and policy obligations and responsibilities:* Everyone working in ITE and ECE needs to know of and understand what their mandated responsibilities and obligations to ensure non-discriminatory, inclusive places of learning and teaching mean in practice (Education and Training Act 2020; New Zealand Government, 2019). Both individually and collectively, those involved in ITE and ECE must take responsibility for developing and maintaining inclusive environments by engaging in ongoing critical appraisals of our understandings about disability, diversity, and inclusion. As highlighted by our research, listening to the voices of student teachers and teachers with disabilities can help ITE and ECE providers reflect on their attitudes, policies, and practices and from there make the changes that see those with disabilities able to gain ECE qualifications, use their teaching and other skills to the benefit of children, and contribute to a workforce representative of societal diversity (Purdue et al., 2024).

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