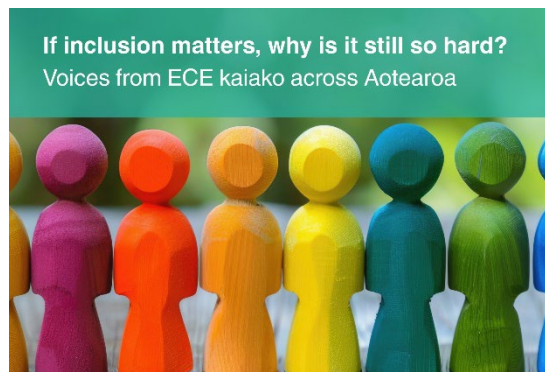


If inclusion matters, why is it still so hard? Voices from ECE kaiako across Aotearoa

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Kaiako diversity in ECE matters. Diverse kaiako strengthen teams by challenging assumptions, broadening perspectives and fostering cultures where difference is normalised, valued, and expected. This is the foundation on which inclusive and equitable teaching and learning environments are built.

Our research team of ECE academic staff members (Dr Kerry Purdue (research leader), Veronica Griffiths, Derek Hartley, Jenny Malcolm, Jackie Solomon, Dr Donna Williamson-Garner - Open Polytechnic; Erin Hall, Alice Tate - UCOL) and I have been listening closely to the voices of diverse kaiako, disabled kaiako and student kaiako across Aotearoa. Their perspectives and insights paint a clear picture that inclusion requires intentional effort, systems that uphold rights, workplace cultures that value difference, and environments where kaiako feel safe to bring their full selves to their teaching.

Across three connected research projects, we explored *diversity, disability, inclusion, equity, and belonging* in both ECE workplaces and *ITE learning environments*. While each project had a distinct purpose, together they reveal a powerful story about what supports, and what undermines diverse kaiako, and disabled kaiako and student kaiako rights, mana and wellbeing. This blog post offers a snapshot of what we found, what matters most, and what needs to change.

What we found

Our first study explored diverse kaiako experiences of support and inclusion in the workplace. They told us that belonging comes from being seen, through relationships with others, attitudes, policies and everyday practices that surround them. Diversity itself is not the issue, attitudes toward diversity are. Kaiako told us that bias and discrimination still occur, often quietly, sometimes openly. However, when team cultures value the richness that diverse identities bring, everything changes, relationships strengthen, collaboration improves, and the quality of teaching and learning grows.

What diverse kaiako want is:

- Leadership that reflects on its own assumptions

- Workplaces that normalise difference
- Policies that back this up
- Environments that choose inclusion, not exclusion

The next phase of our research explored the experiences of disabled kaiako and student kaiako in both ECE and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) contexts. Participants shared their experiences of navigating programmes, practicum placements, and workplaces largely designed with non-disabled people in mind. In this study, disabled kaiako and student kaiako highlighted the emotional and professional weight of *disclosure*, decisions. Deciding whether to disclose a disability was rarely straightforward. Many described disclosure as a risk, fear of judgement and uncertainty about access to support. For some, this extended to concerns about enrolment, practicum placements, certification, employment opportunities, job security and relationships with colleagues.

When systems within ECE workplaces and ITE settings are unprepared to respond to disability disclosures, kaiako absorb that cost impacting well-being. But we also heard what helps:

- Leadership that is proactive rather than reactive
- Transparent processes that make supports clear and accessible
- Team cultures where disability is understood as part of human diversity
- Inclusive frameworks like Tātaiako and Tapasā can help guide inclusive practice
- Universal Design for Learning approaches that reduce barriers before they arise

Our most recent study showed that inclusion is far more than access, it is about belonging, agency, identity and rights. When systems are flexible, respectful and rights based, kaiako feel valued. When systems are rigid or deficit framed, they feel excluded. This research pushes the conversation beyond awareness toward action, and raises a critical question:

How do we design ECE and ITE systems that honour the rights and identities of disabled kaiako, not reluctantly accommodate them?

What matters most

Across all three studies, several themes were consistent:

- Belonging is a rights issue, not a preference
- Workplace culture is everything
- Disclosure shouldn't feel dangerous
- Inclusion must be proactive

- When kaiako thrive, children thrive
- Inclusion is not the responsibility of individual kaiako, but of the systems and environments they work and learn within

These findings challenge us to understand that inclusive practice cannot depend on individual resilience or goodwill. What matters most is the environment, the policies, the leadership, team culture, and the systems that shape what kaiako experience every day.

What needs to change

Our findings challenge ECE services and ITE providers to move beyond expecting kaiako to “fit” into existing structures. Instead, we need:

- Systems built for the full range of human diversity
- Team cultures that uphold kaiako rights, mana and wellbeing
- Leadership that is reflective and rightsbased
- Transparent processes that make supports easy to navigate
- Frameworks, tools and approaches (like UDFL, Tātaiako and Tapasā) be utilised to reduce barriers before they arise
- Environments where belonging isn’t earned or negotiated, but guaranteed,

What needs to change is not kaiako, it is the systems around them.



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About the author of this blog:

Fleur Hohaia-Rollinson is a Senior Lecturer | Pūkenga Matua at Te Rito Maioha ECNZ. Her background is in early childhood education with 20 years’ experience in ITE. Through her work in ITE, Fleur’s focus has centred on children’s rights to high quality education by supporting the development of a bicultural, inclusive and highly skilled ECE workforce. She is a committed advocate in upholding children, kaiako and indigenous rights, and socially just, culturally responsive practice. Her research spans inclusion, equity, kaiako diversity, the lived experiences of disabled kaiako and student kaiako, and more recently, education for sustainability in ECE and Gen-AI in education. Fleur also serves as CoPresident (Tangata Whenua) of OMEP Aotearoa. She was the recipient of the Te Rito Maioha 2025 Outstanding Researcher award.